

*Handwritten notes in Hebrew, including the name 'Salomon H. Finkelman' and dates.*

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Nr. 32, poz. 309).



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# OUT OF THE SHOEBOX

## Yaron Reshef

*Handwritten notes at the bottom of the page, including the phrase 'Z poważaniem' (Sincerely).*

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# **Out of the Shoebox**

by

**Yaron Reshef**

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of: my father, whose image I succeeded in reviving through this book; my mother, who passed away while this book was being written; my father's friend Mordechai Liebman; my aunt Dr. Sima Finkelman; and the rest of my family members who perished in the Holocaust.*

*This book is dedicated to my family, so that they may pass the story on to future generations and keep these cherished memories alive.*

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## From Past to Present

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I am certain that I never invited the past to walk into my life. Not that I didn't take an interest in our family's history. On the contrary – in my youth, as well as in later years, I did try to trace my family roots and its history. Unlike my sister, who showed no interest in such matters, I eagerly absorbed any information relevant to my family. But no, I did not invite the ghosts of people long gone, nor the memories or emotions attached to them, to come visit me in Israel of 2012. It was as if some hidden hand orchestrated the perfect plot to pull me into the cauldron of family affairs.

It was as if this plot was produced especially in order to motivate me to embark on a year-and-a-half worth of obsessive searching for long-lost details covered in the dust of history, memories erased by generations of silence. As if the invisible entity directing the action knew me intimately and knew full well that I could not rest when confronted with an open case, especially a mystery involving my relatives both near and far, and a considerable amount of money. So perhaps it was chance or fate that colluded to pull the strings of quite a number of people and circumstances, who jointly presented me with an impossible riddle. It was the ultimate tool to create an emotional trap that would not let me push the subject aside, not even for a single day.

If you were to ask me what would be the best way to evoke in me the strongest motivation to explore the saga of my parents' emigration to Israel and the fate of their families, I could not have come up with a more perfect puzzle; an attraction so aggressive in its pull as Life has presented me, in the form of a chain of chance events, during the past two years.

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# The Lot, Part I

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I had no intention of writing a book. I had no need to write a story in general nor a story about my family and the Holocaust in particular. But life being what it is, sometimes things happen in mysterious, even surprising ways. Stuff that used to take center stage moves to the background, and background stuff moves downstage and center. That's what happened in my case.

I began putting things down in writing because people close to me – family, friends, colleagues – told me repeatedly that I simply must write the story of “finding the lot” – a plot of land purchased by my father in 1935 and discovered seventy-seven years later.

The story begins in early July 2011, while I was in the US for work. My wife, Raya, received an unexpected phone call. The caller wished to speak to Yaron, son of Shlomo Zvi Finkelman. The speaker was attorney-at-law Elinor Kroitoru, head of Location & Information at Hashava, The Company for Location and Restitution of Holocaust Victims' Assets. After introducing herself, Elinor asked Raya whether she had any information about a lot owned by my father in the country's north. Raya said that she knows my parents came from Poland, but knew nothing of a lot or any other property they may have owned there. Raya naturally assumed that Elinor's question had to do with property during the Holocaust, ergo in Poland, never suspecting that the lot in question was in Israel. At Raya's suggestion, Elinor contacted my sister Ilana, who said she knew nothing of a lot owned by my father in Israel. Elinor told her that her office had located a lot near Haifa, purchased in 1935 by one Shlomo Zvi Finkelman who lived in Haifa, and that she was trying to trace that person or his beneficiaries. Apparently, her office was quite surprised to find, among the lands purchased by Jews who perished in the Holocaust, one bought by a resident of Haifa. Elinor was asking for my father's address in 1935, hoping to connect between the buyer, whose address appears on the bill of sale, and our father. My sister replied that our father had lived at several addresses in Haifa after reaching Mandatory Palestine in 1932, among them Massada, Nordau, Hillel and Achad Ha'am streets. Elinor wanted to know the house numbers, of which my sister knew only two – 6 Nordau and 4 Achad Ha'am. Ilana suggested that as soon as I got back from the States I'd contact Elinor, because I may have further details.

A week later, when I got home, Raya told me about this unexpected phone call and how she had thought it was about a lot in Poland. “Talk to your sister,” she urged, “she'll probably have much to tell you.” Ilana mainly repeated the story, adding that, meanwhile, she received a letter from Elinor recommending that we contact the office of the Custodian General at the Ministry of Justice to find out whether we had a legal right to the property in question. “You need to find proof that the Shlomo Zvi Finkelman appearing in the bill of sale is indeed your father,” said Elinor when I called her the next day. “I can't help you any further, it's out of my hands. But it would help considerably if you knew exactly where your father lived in 1935, who this Mordechai Liebman guy was, and what was his connection to your father.” I was quite surprised at that, since I didn't understand how a Mordechai Liebman fit into the story.

My father died in 1958, when I was seven. Any memories I have of him are vague -- mostly a few images of going fishing together, when I joined him and his friends on the navy pier at Haifa Port. These pictures are engraved in my memory, thanks to the joint experience and because of a small but impressive number of fishing successes, attributed by my dad and his friends to beginners' luck. I also have some mental images of his work as a philatelist: hosting an American stamp merchant named

Fogel in our living room, or sitting for hours sorting his stamps and trying to clean or fix damaged stamp perforations. I don't remember spending "quality time" with my dad, or any father-son talk. For all I know, I may have erased memories through years of suppression. His sudden death from a heart attack one winter night weighed heavily on me for years.

On the other hand, I knew quite a lot about him, because my "aunts" (all relatives other than the immediate family were typically called "aunt" and "uncle", as Polish Jews do), after the first affectionate cheek-pinching, would exclaim: "Gosh, the little one looks just like Junio!" My father, being the youngest child, was nicknamed Junio, probably the Polish version of Junior. Then they would continue with tidbits of information about my dad's personality, or some other family-related lore. I assume I collected these crumbs and stored them in my memory.

I suppose storing information in one's memory is easier than retrieving it when needed. But sometimes, when I have to recall things relating to my family history, I'm awed at the stuff that suddenly pops up, not quite sure whether these are true memories or the product of my imagination. Only after receiving proof or external corroboration am I convinced that it was true memory, actual knowledge. Therefore, I was not wholly surprised when I heard myself answering automatically: "Mordechai Liebman was a good friend of my father's in his home town, Chortkow; I think he perished in the Holocaust..."

"If you can find proof of that, it'll help when you have to provide the Custodian General with information and documentation," said Elinor.

So it came to pass that, in one day, my life took on a new focus: my father's lot, and with it the questions: Who is Mordechai Liebman? What was his connection to my father? What was his connection to the lot? And where did that kneejerk response to Elinor's question come from? I had some very vague childhood memories of tales of a lost lot, fragments of memories that must have come from two separate stories. The first was about a lot on Mt. Carmel that my father purchased. For some reason the name Shoshanat HaCarmel (literally "Rose of Carmel") stuck in my mind. The story was that my father bought the lot from a local crook who conned him, and my family never actually received ownership. The other lot-related story is even more complex. In my childhood, years after my father's death, while rummaging through forbidden cupboards, I came across drawings of what looked like an industrial building. Obviously, identifying it as an industrial structure came years later when I learned to differentiate between types of buildings. To this day I clearly remember the drawing: flat, featureless façades, a perfect rectangular block with a saw-tooth roof; a sequence of right-angle triangles. Later, I learned at the Bezalel Academy of Arts & Design that this type of roof was very common in industrial and commercial buildings in the 1930s and '40s, meant to let in northern light while blocking direct sunlight. I vaguely remember a conversation with my mother after she caught me snooping in the cupboard and looking at the drawings. "This was Daddy's dream," she said, "They wanted to build a kind of textile factory, similar to the ones in Poland... but it didn't work out because of the pogroms..." I recall that she referred to the location as Yishuv Haroshet (literally: industrial settlement) or Mif'al Haroshet (literally: industrial plant). "They bought the plot from a rabbi who was a swindler who then disappeared." I know it sounds a bit strange that both snippets of memory have to do with lots and crooks, but my memory could have played tricks on me by mixing up the facts of the two tales. As for Mordechai Liebman, I knew nothing except that I once heard that he was a friend of my father's, or at least that's what I thought.

Regarding my father's various addresses when he first came to Palestine, and my parents' last addresses as a married couple, I had only fragmented clues that did not add up to a clear picture. Though my mother was a hundred and one at this point, she hadn't been communicative for several years.

During the days that followed I began to get used to the idea that I was facing a new kind of challenge. According to Elinor's instructions, I was to formally apply to Ms Hanni Amor, head of the National Unit for Location and Management of Property, at the Custodian General's Bureau of the Ministry of Justice, attaching Elinor's letter and asking them to handle the matter. And so I did: in mid-August 2011 I applied to receive ownership of a lot which, a month earlier, I didn't even know existed.

Smiling, Raya said decisively: "This is a message from your Dad." "Okay," I replied, "but why now? Don't you think it's just a tad late, after fifty four years?" This was no innocent message; it handed me quite a challenge seeking information when there's no longer anyone to consult or interview. The generation is long gone, and even my mother, alive at the time, was not fit to communicate and provide information. No way of knowing exactly what I was getting myself into...

I decided to phone Hanni Amor, and was surprised when she explained to me, politely and patiently, that she couldn't help me. "It is up to you to find proof that your father is the Shlomo Zvi Finkelman who bought the lot. Unfortunately I cannot help you or give you any info about the lot and its location. You have to provide my office with proof of your father's residence in 1935 and his connection to Mordechai Liebman." By the end of that exchange I felt I'd reached a dead end. It seemed like a puzzle wherein I'm expected to join two pieces that didn't fit and place them precisely at an unknown address on an imaginary game board. Sounds surreal, right? That's just how it felt.

For the first few days I was at a loss, had no idea where to begin. I searched for the smallest lead that would point me to the missing facts, but couldn't come up with any creative idea. I tried to put myself in my father's shoes, tried to imagine what he did upon arriving in Palestine, what trail he left which would help me track down his address. The second task was even more complex. Intuitively, I began with the basics: Who are you, Mordechai Liebman, and what was your connection to my father and the lot? Reason told me that Liebman's name appears on the bill of sale as my father's partner. I tried to visualize a situation wherein my father purchased the lot with a friend, perhaps to bring to life a shared dream, or simply in order to split the cost. This theory agreed with the facts as I knew them. My father first came to Palestine in December 1932, then returned to Poland in July 1934 to marry my mother, Malia née Kramer, whom he brought back to Palestine with him three months later, in the October of that year. Had my father gone abroad with the purchase documents and recruited his friend as co-buyer? I couldn't know for sure, but it sounded plausible.

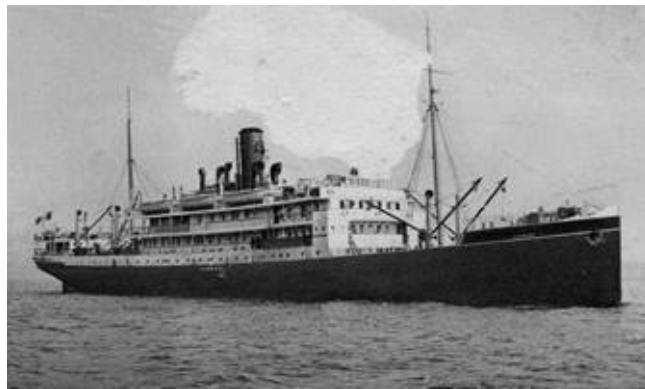
Or perhaps my father had made Liebman's acquaintance in Palestine, and they'd bought the lot together. But after careful consideration I discarded that possibility. Logic said that the only reason Hashava, the company engaged in locating Holocaust victims' assets, would contact me about the lot was if one of the lot owners had perished in the Holocaust. Since Father lived in Palestine during the years in question, and also died there, then obviously his partner – apparently Mordechai Liebman – died in the Holocaust. Based on this speculative premise, I embarked on my search for Mordechai Liebman.

I began my quest with Yad Vashem archives. I searched for pages of testimony under the name Mordechai Liebman from Chortkow, my parents' home town in Poland, currently in the Ukraine.

Nothing. I searched for testimonials about Holocaust victims from the Liebman family in Chortkovo and found nine testimonials, none of which had any mention of Mordechai. Most of the testimonials were from the early '50s, and I assumed it would be impossible to locate the persons in question; the addresses were old, and the people probably long dead. Having found nothing in the Yad Vashem archives, I began searching the Internet.



*My parents on board the Carnaro, on their way to Palestine, 1934*



*The Italian passenger ship Carnaro*

No sooner had I typed into Google (in Hebrew) the key words Mordechai, Liebman, Chortkovo, than I apparently found Mordechai, right there in the second link displayed, which was “Meiselman, Gette, Cheled, Arbel, David – Chortkovo.” That was a total surprise. I knew the Meiselmans, who later Hebraicized their name to Cheled. Asher Meiselman Cheled was a close friend of my parents’. As a child, after Father’s death, I spent many school vacations at their place in Yad Eliyahu in south-Tel Aviv. Their younger daughter, Varda, was my age; she taught me to fly little kites made of paper and tied with thread. You could say it was similar to origami, long before that concept made it to Israel. Tel Avivians called this type of kite “kifka”. In my home town of Haifa the kites were made of reeds and called by the name “tyara”. Within minutes I realized that the web page I landed on was set up by Miri Gershoni, to commemorate the Jewish community of Chortkovo.

The page showed family photos from Asher Meiselman’s albums: his parents and his brother; my father as the head of Betar youth movement in Chortkovo, surrounded by his girl troop who were members in the movement; and a photo of my parents and my sister Ilana, with Asher himself standing next to them in his British soldier’s uniform.

But the real surprise was finding the photo of Mordechai Liebman. The bigger picture was beginning to emerge.



*Mordechai Liebman, 1930*

They were friends, apparently; Betar troop members and my father their leader. I knew that my father was older than the Meiselman brothers: Asher was six years younger, Shmuel – five, and the other brothers even younger.



*My father as Betar Leader in Chortkow, 1928*

When I was a child Asher told me that, when my father left for Vienna to study architecture and building engineering, it was he – Asher – who replaced him as Betar leader. Though the photo of Mordechai next to my father and the Meiselman brothers attested to the latter's friendship, it was not sufficient proof of the connection between Mordechai and my father. I had to provide a document or some other evidence of their relationship. And so, unexpectedly, I had a photo of Mordechai from 1930, which I could look at to my heart's content, but I still couldn't talk to him, nor hear his version of the story of the lot.

So I continued to search memorial books and other Holocaust literature mentioning Chortkow, but in vain. No sign of Mordechai Liebman, save for the photo in my hand.

How am I to track down my father's address in 1935? Where did he live after his arrival in Palestine in December 1932?

I had no knowledge about his first years in the country, so had no choice but to write down all I knew

from family stories I'd heard in childhood, and from my mother's memoirs as told to my sister and written down by her some 15 years ago.

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My father's address appeared on the love letters he sent to my mother, from Haifa to Chortkow. In these letters he described his search for work and the tension between the different Zionist movements, and the way he, as a young revisionist in "red" Haifa, felt discriminated against. But most of all, these letters were full of love and longing, and plans for their joint future in their new homeland. These letters, which I'd read as a youngster, were eventually lost. I still remember them on the shelf next to the bed in my mother's bedroom, stashed in a carved wooden box made by my father along with photos and postcards from family members who perished in the Holocaust. Years later, I arranged the photos in an album, but the letters themselves were gone.



*Asher Meiselman, Ilana, my mother, and my father Haifa, 1940*

My mother said, in her memoirs:

"... Even before his return to Chortkow to marry me, my husband opened an office in Palestine with a partner. My husband was an architect while the partner, named Wolf, was an engineer. They had plenty of work, because Hadar Hacarmel neighborhood was being built at the time. There was a shortage of housing in Haifa back then..."

We bought an apartment under construction on Hillel street in Haifa. It was a 2 bedroom apartment, one room of which was always rented out, because no one at the time enjoyed the luxury of two rooms. We all lived modestly in those days. Until the building was complete, we lived at Uncle Herman's on Nordau street. That was a very difficult period for me, because Herman's wife, Heidi, was used to having maids and couldn't cook at all, while Herman loved such Jewish-Polish dishes as gefilte fish, stuffed cabbage, etc. So I was their unpaid cook (even though my family used to have a cook too, I had taken an interest and learned to cook.) Aunt Heidi started learning Hebrew, which she had been totally unfamiliar with. She spoke many languages: German, French, English; and decided to learn Hebrew. When half a year had gone by without her managing to grasp any Hebrew, she gave up, deciding it simply wasn't for her..."

According to my mother's memoirs, my parents' first apartment upon arriving in Palestine in 1933 was 6 Nordau St. I know that place well, having spent much time there in my childhood. The building was designed and built by my father for relatives who came from Austria. With its Bauhaus design, the building stood out. Most of the raw materials and interior finishes were imported from Europe, and the apartments were rented out on a monthly basis or for key-money, constituting a source of income for my relatives, who kept the property till their dying day. I therefore knew that during 1933

they lived at 6 Nordau, then moved to Hillel St., house number unknown. Father, who worked as an architect at the time with an engineer named Wolf, rented an office at 4 Achad Ha'am St. Later, my parents moved to that place, where my sister was born and where I was born in 1951. But as far as I know, they moved there only in 1937.

Having reached a dead end, I decided to try and contact Hanni Amor at the Custodian General's office, figuring that, at worst, she'd refuse to advise me on how to proceed. I explained that according to my mother's memoirs my parents lived first at 6 Nordau and then on Hillel St., number unknown. Hanni confirmed that the street where my father lived when purchasing the land was indeed Hillel rather than Nordau, but stressed that I need to provide the house number and some legal proof that the person who had lived there was indeed my father. She further repeated the requirement to prove the connection between my father and one Mordechai Liebman.

How on earth was I to find that elusive house number? Days went by, and no creative idea came to me. True, the task now boiled down to locating one certain building on one street, but said street had some seventy-five houses. I was at a loss. Based on my mother's memoirs, the move to Hillel St. occurred after a short period on Nordau. I knew that the house on Hillel was probably built in 1934, so that my parents must have moved in either late 1934 or early 1935. I had one more early memory, in which my mother described to me the switch from the comfortable life in Chortkow to the modest living in Palestine. She'd say: "At first I was a cook at Herman and Heidi's place, then we moved to Mayer Fellmann's place that was very small, and we always rented out a room to another lodger, and there was no privacy... everyone lived very modestly." This was my mother's way of saying that they lived in deprivation. Did my parents buy the apartment from this Mayer Fellmann? Was he the owner, or the contractor who built it? At the time, in the early 1930s, most housing in Hadar Hacarmel was built for home owners who also owned the land. These people financed the construction of the buildings, usually lived in one of the apartments and sold or rented out the rest. Mayer Fellmann may have been the proprietor from whom my parents bought their home on Hillel St. I decided that, if push came to shove, I'd scour City Hall archives for the building permits for all buildings on Hillel St., until I found one in the name of Mayer Fellmann. I knew the city's archives were computerized, which would make the task easier, but thought that, since I couldn't trust my memory regarding the landlord's exact name, I should postpone this hunt, which took on Sisyphean proportions.

Another possibility was that my parents had bought an apartment in one of the buildings designed by my father, who had designed several apartment buildings in Haifa, including the one at 6 Nordau, and another at 7 Bar Giora St. I began by looking into the ownership of the house on Bar Giora, in the hope that this would reveal the same landlord for both buildings, thus leading to the sought-after address of the flat on Hillel St. Imagine my disappointment when a search of the computerized city archives showed that my father's design, from early March 1936, was for a woman named Sara Char Preminger – no connection to Mayer Fellmann nor to the address of a house on Hillel St.

I'd found out about the house at 7 Bar Giora St. thanks to an architecture student named Uri Zirlin who'd studied at the Technion over fifteen years ago. Zirlin called my sister one day to ask if she was the daughter of Shlomo Zvi Finkelman, who was a Haifa architect in the first half of the 20th century. He recounted how, while writing a seminar paper for a course given by architect Silvina Sosnovskaya and historian-cum-Israeli-architecture-researcher Prof Gilbert Herbert, he had to research a certain unnamed architect who'd designed a building on Geula St. in Haifa. The building assigned to Zirlin appeared in a study, commissioned by Haifa municipality, of conservation-worthy buildings. Zirlin



was to locate information about the building's architect and try to find additional buildings designed by him in order to create a portfolio that would ultimately be part of the archives of the Technion Department of Architecture. I thought that if I found this student's paper, I'd find additional facts about my father and other buildings he designed and built, and perhaps even hit on my objective, including his places of residence in the '30s. I pondered the strange coincidence that Prof Herbert, my professor at Bezalel, gave a Technion student the assignment of researching architect Shlomo Zvi Finkelstein and his contribution to architecture in Haifa, unaware that that the latter was my father.

Ilana prepared and sent Zirlin a summary of my father's biography that included: family background, architecture and engineering studies at Baugenwerbe Schule in Vienna, Austria; how he came to Palestine to study architecture at the Technion; info about several buildings he designed; how he worked as an architect for the British Mandate for two years during WWII; and later for the Israeli Ministry of Trade and Industry in Israel, when he worked on the planning and building of the Artist Colony in Safed. Zirlin promised to send my sister a copy of his seminar paper, but failed to keep his promise.

I decided to try and find out whether Uri Zirlin's seminar paper was on record at the Technion, so that I could see what information about my father it contained. I knew that seminar papers were submitted during the fourth year of studies, so assuming the student had completed his studies, he might be working as an architect today. The next step was searching the Internet for "Uri Zirlin". There were several people by that name in Haifa, but none seemed to have any connection to architecture. Still, I thought it worthwhile to call four persons by that name living in the Haifa area. The first three proved to be irrelevant – "wrong number", "don't know any Uri Zirlin", but the fourth did indeed answer to that name. When asked if he by any chance knew an architect who'd studied at the Technion, he wanted to know why I was asking. I explained that I was looking for a person who'd written a paper about my father, and he replied that, though he'd studied architecture and worked at it for a while, he'd dropped this occupation. Moreover, he claimed he'd never heard of my father and never wrote a seminar paper about architectural conservation in Haifa. I detected a kind of evasiveness in his voice, so I apologized for the intrusion and hung up.

About architect Silvina Sosnovsky, on the other hand, I found plenty of material. Apparently she was very active as an architecture researcher in Haifa, who focused on the location and conservation of buildings built in the 1920s-1940s. When trying to find her via the Technion, I learned that she was retired; and after explaining my reason for seeking her out, they agreed to give me her number so I could contact her directly. Ms Sosnovsky graciously listened, took down my father's details and suggested I call her back a few days later. I waited in suspense for a week before calling again. "I remember your father's name," she said, "and I'm familiar with the buildings on Nordau and Ben-Giora streets that you mentioned... they are indeed in a study of conservation-worthy buildings that was conducted for the City of Haifa in 2001... but I can't find any other material related to him... Nor can I find any mention of your father in my other published work... I'd advise you to apply to the Technion's Architectural Heritage Research Center... Maybe there's documentation of your father's work there, as well as copies of papers written by students whom I supervised."

What a let-down. I expected to garner some sort of new information, or a clue at the very least. But my high hopes were dashed. The very next day I tried to contact the Research Center, but though I found information on its activities on the Internet, it took a whole week of persistent attempts until I finally got through to them on the phone. The woman at the other end of the line, Hedva, listened

patiently to my story, took down some notes, asked me to email her a few more details about my father, and said she'd search the archives, warning me that it would take time. "However," she added, "if there is information about your father, it will turn up." Two weeks later, after intensive searching, nothing turned up. Apparently there was nothing about him in the archives.

As I was dialing Hedva's number to thank her for her efforts, it occurred to me that I hadn't mentioned that my father had been a Technion student for about two years before embarking on an architect's career in Haifa. "Then why don't you try to find out whether your father's student file still exists in the archives," Hedva suggested when I told her. Does the fact that my father was a student there change anything in the way her search was conducted? I wondered; it had never occurred to me I did not for one minute expect his student file to still be there, after seventy eight years. But, figuring I had nothing to lose, I proceeded that very day to call the office of the Technion's graduate program in architecture to ask if there's any chance of finding any record or information relating to my father. I spoke to Ms Ada Sales, graduate studies coordinator. "Look," she said, "there's not much chance that we'll find anything relevant, so don't expect too much. Many files were damaged over time. But if it's there, it will be found." She asked me to send her a copy of a will or any other document proving that I'm my father's beneficiary, to ensure I had the right to any information, should it be found.

I immediately wrote to Ada:

"Dear Ada, thank you for your time and your willingness to help. I am seeking information related to my father's studies at the Technion's Department of Architecture, his student registration file or any other relevant information. My father studied at the Technion in the early 1930s, between 1932-1935, I believe. His name was Salmon Hirsh Finkelman, though he Hebraicized his given names to Shlomo Zvi, and appears in some documents as Shlomo Hirsh Finkelman. My father died in 1958 when I was seven, so I don't have much to go on. I'm particularly interested in finding out facts about the period of his life before he married and started a family. At your request, I'm attaching a copy of the probate which states the date of his death and the fact that I am his son and one of his beneficiaries. In the document, my name appears as Yaron Menachem Finkelman. I later Hebraicized my surname to Reshef. I am also attaching photos of my father's first British ID, but I think it was issued a few years after his Technion days. My father arrived in Palestine on a student visa, without an ID. I can be reached by email or phone, see contact details below. Thank you in advance and have a good day, Yaron."

Nine days later, while I was in the States on business, I received Ada's reply:

"Hi, I've retrieved from the archives a few files that seemed to me similar to the information you supplied, and have them handy. You're welcome to come over and peruse the material. All the best, Ada."

I replied at record speed. I told her I was in the US for two weeks, and asked if I could call her for more details. Ada replied within minutes with a phone number, which I called immediately, very excited. It was enough for me to hear a few details about the retrieved files to realize that one of them was my father's enrollment record. "There's only one problem," said Ada, "contrary to what you said, your father didn't actually study at the Technion at all. He did apply and was accepted, but the file contains no record of actual studies." Ada continued to explain that the enrollment file contained several letters in my father's handwriting, and invited me to come and see the material. "Maybe we'll be able to give you the entire file, and keep copies for us... Your father's penmanship is beautiful and

his Hebrew is excellent. His entire file is preserved in perfect condition.”

I can't begin to describe my excitement. I'd finally found a lead connected to my father. I began imagining what might be in the file, shook up by the revelation that my father apparently did not study in the Technion at all. My time in the US stretched out infuriatingly slowly, as I counted the days till my return. Gradually it began to sink in that the Technion's information would probably not shed any light on my father's place of residence. If he never actually studied there, what were the chances that his student record contained his address in Palestine? On the other hand, I hoped the file would contain the address of my father and his family in Chortkow – something I lacked and would be thrilled to acquire.

As soon as I got back I called Ada and made an appointment for the following day. I didn't know what to expect, couldn't imagine what I'd soon see.

The trip to Haifa flew by... Ada pulled out a gray folder containing an assortment of letters and documents. I immediately recognized my father's handwriting, with which I was familiar from other documents found at my mother's many years earlier. His handwriting was legible and the style clear and fluent, as if written in the writer's mother tongue. The folder contained correspondence between a young man applying to study architecture and construction and an academic institution detailing the admission requirements.

This is my father's first letter to the Technion:

*Chortkow, 8 Aug 1932*

*To: The Office of the Registrar, the Technion, Haifa*

*a) I am writing to you with a request that you send me all information relating to admission to the Technion. I myself graduated from the construction school Baugenwerke Schule Wien in Vienna. I studied for three years (six semesters) and have practiced for three years. Therefore I would like to know which year I can be accepted into.*

*b) I would also like to ask you to give me information on how I can immigrate to the country. If you can send me a demand, if you have one. And what guarantee is required.*

*I kindly request that you reply as soon as possible, so that I can forthwith follow my desire to study in a Hebrew Technion.*

*With best wishes and shalom,*

*S. Zvi Finkelman*

*My address:*

*Salmon Hersz Finkelman*

*Czortkow*

*279 Szpitalna .nl*

*Polania*

I could tell immediately that my father went through the motions of applying to the Technion not because he truly wanted to study there, but with the intent of emigrating to Palestine, using studies at the Technion as a means to that end. The fact that my father refers to his studies of architecture in Vienna as though it was merely secondary school seemed a way to make double-sure that he'd be accepted. Anyone who looked carefully at the diplomas my father attached could easily see that he had attended an ordinary high school in Chortkow – referred to at the time as a gymnasium – then continued to study architecture in Vienna. Though my father sent the original diplomas from the Vienna institution of higher education, it seems that no one looked into them too closely, accepting my father's statements at face value. According to my father's letter to the Technion, he studied s

years in high-school plus another three years at a high-school for architecture in Vienna – a total of nine years, which is highly unlikely.

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My father was accepted into the first year. He did not dispute this decision, only urged the Technion to send him a letter of admission. The Technion sent a copy of the admission letter to the British Mandate authorities, which in turn granted my father the sought-after entrance permit to Palestine. The letters were arranged chronologically in the folder: a letter from my father followed by the Technion's reply, and so on, as if time stood still. It was easy to see that a letter between Haifa and Chortkow took about two weeks. I must say that the Technion had been amazingly efficient in its replies, generally answering on the following day. My father, who wished to make aliya (immigrate to Israel) as soon as possible, continued urging the Technion, saying he was very eager to begin his studies in early 1933.

As strange as it may sound, I was somewhat disappointed. Though I knew by now I would not find my Father's first Haifa address in this folder, I continued to pore over the folder with Ada, reading one letter after another and joking about my father's assertive way of pressing the Technion to speed up his acceptance. Later, when I continued to explore where Father got the idea of trying for a student visa, it turned out that Zionist activist Ze'ev Jabotinsky visited Chortkow in 1930 – the same year Father returned from Vienna and was appointed leader of Betar in his hometown, where the movement had some 150 members. In his talks, Jabotinsky used to enumerate the different ways of immigrating to Palestine, including student visas. Only in late February 1932 did Jabotinsky publish his article *Cultural Adventure*, in which he called for illegal aliya to Eretz Israel. I have no doubt that my father was influenced by these ideas. Ada and I continued perusing page after page, admiring the correspondence. Once my father sent his transcripts, the Technion's reply arrived on 28 Sept 1932, saying that my father was accepted into the program, but had to immediately send the deposit of 15 Israeli lira plus 500 mil for the visa expenses. Their letter stresses: "After the visa process which takes a few weeks we must point out that if your trip is delayed so that you arrive here after Jan 1st, 1933 you will not be able to begin studying this school year." It took the letter a week to reach my father, but he could not buy Israeli lira in Chortkow. He bought American dollars instead, sending the cash with the following letter:

*Chortkow, 11 Oct 1932*

*To: The Hebrew Technion, Haifa*

*Enclosed is the sum of IL 15 + 500 Israeli mil, guarantee and expenses as requested. It is impossible to get liras here so I am forced to send dollars at today's [exchange] rate of \$3.46. I shall gladly reimburse you for any unforeseen expenses upon my arrival.*

*Kindly expedite the issuance of my visa, so that I don't miss the 1.1.1933 deadline and don't miss a year's study.*

*Kindly confirm receipt of the money.*

*My name: Salmon Hersz Finkelman*

*Born: 24 March 1908*

*Parents' names: Izak Finkelman, Ryfka Finkelman, Drucker*

*Enclosed are a personal certificate and \$54*

*With greetings to Zion S.Z. Finkelman*

Father's letter with the cash got delayed in the mail, and on Oct 10, 1932 the Technion wrote: "This is to inform you that your letter of acceptance as a student has already been mailed. Since to date we have not received the deposit, we could not submit your papers for a visa and you will therefore not be able to study in the academic year 1932/33. As for your intent to come to Israel as a tourist, we cannot advise you." I can just imagine what went through my father's mind at the receipt of this letter. The drama at his home must have continued for about a week until, 8 days later, another letter from the

Technion arrived, confirming receipt of the money. Nonetheless, the Technion reiterates that time is short, and my father may not be able to start his studies as planned and may have to postpone his arrival by a year. That same day, Oct 28, 1932, the director of the Technion wrote to the British Mandate's head of the Department of Immigration & Travel in Haifa, with an urgent request to issue a student visa for my father.

A month later the longed-for visa confirmation reached the Technion, which in turn gave my father the good news by registered mail: "We hereby send you a certificate with which you can receive the visa to Palestine from the British Consul in Warsaw. Please inform us directly when you expect to leave, so that we may determine whether you'll be able to begin your studies this year or only in 1933-34.

My father arrived in Haifa on Dec 26th 1932, and the next morning presented himself at the Technion and signed all enrollment and declaration forms required by the British Mandate authorities. He completed his mission in time: immigrated legally in 1932, five days before the year's end.

Ada gave me my father's file, comprising all of two sheets of cardboard. One had my father's personal details, and the list of subjects and grades for the four years of study.

Clearly, nothing was ever entered on this page. Which – as Ada pointed out – indicated he never studied after being accepted. The other sheet showed the tuition and payments made, and is proof that my father made the first three payments, totaling 12 lira and 300 mil of the IL18 he was to pay for the first year. In other words, my father indeed did not study at the Technion, but used his enrollment as a legal way to make aliya.

The declaration my father signed at the Technion on 27 December 1932:

#### DECLARATION

I, Shlomo Zvi Finkelman, upon receiving permission to enter the country as a student of the Hebrew Technion in Haifa, herewith deposit with the Hebrew Technion in Haifa the sum of fifteen lira as a guarantee that should I wish to leave the country within four years of my arrival, I shall do so immediately at my own expense; otherwise the Hebrew Technion in Haifa shall be permitted to use the sum of 15 lira towards the expense of returning me to my country of origin. In such a case the Technion will not have to account for its expenses for my return, based on the permission hereby given to it.

In addition, I agree to leave Israel as soon as I remain without funds or should I become a burden on the public during those four years, and in case I fail to do so I agree that the Hebrew Technion of Haifa shall make all arrangements it deems fit to return me forthwith to my country of origin.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ [S. Zvi Finkelman]

Haifa, 27/12/32

Witness \_\_\_\_\_

Address: The Technion Business or Position

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Business or Position

There was one more envelope left. With two letters inside. An accompanying note and a declaration

the Technion demanded. For some reason my father had forgotten to mail it together with the deposit. When he realized, thirteen days later, he hastened to mail the declaration with the following note:

*"I attach the declaration which I forgot to mail previously. Please be informed that all my papers are now in order. Kindly try to send me the visa as soon as possible so that I may come before 1.1.1933. I remain, respectfully, S.Z. Finkelman."*

I carefully detached the declaration from the top page, looked at it, and must have gone pale. Ada asked me with concern: "What's wrong? What did you see?" My expression must have given me away. It took a few moments before I got my breathing under control. "Mordechai Liebman and Shmuel Meiselman signed this page," I mumbled. "I don't understand," she replied, "Who's Mordechai Liebman? Who's Shmuel Meiselman?" "Don't you see? I was looking for my father's address in Haifa, and found proof that Mordechai Liebman was his friend." Ada looked at me, still confused. "I'll explain. I know it sounds strange and maybe illogical, but I found what I was looking for. Weird thing is, I wasn't even looking here for proof of a connection between Mordechai and my father. There was no logical reason to look here. You know, when I came to see the documents you found, I prayed that they'd contain info on my father's places of residence. Only here did I find out that he never studied at the Technion, which is why there was no address on record. But I did find his parents' address in Chortkow; and even more significant was the discovery of proof that Mordechai Liebman was a close friend, since he wouldn't have signed that declaration otherwise." This was probably the last testimony a man named Mordechai Liebman left, before being murdered in the Holocaust. There isn't even a testimonial page for him at Yad Vashem; but here he exists. After calming down, I gave Ada a brief version of the story of the lot and the partnership between my father and Mordechai Liebman.

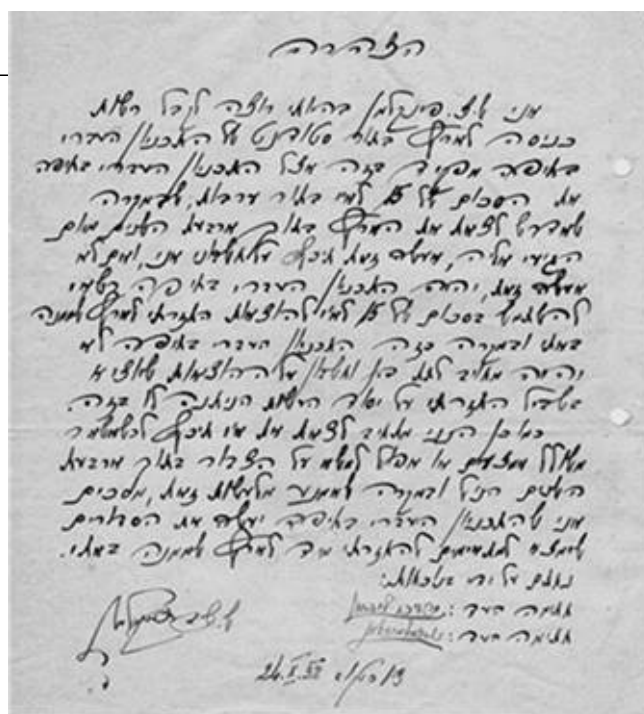
Stranger yet was the fact that the Technion apparently had no need for that declaration and didn't use it, which is why they didn't bother informing my father that he hadn't mailed it. Only when Father finally came to the Technion was he required to sign the original declaration. The enrollment form must have mentioned that he would be required to sign such a statement, and in his eagerness my father construed that to mean that it must be done immediately.

Thanks to that mistake I found proof of the connection between my father and Mordechai. The second witness, Shmuel Meiselman, brother of Asher Meiselman, was Father's friend from Betar – which I knew about. The connection between the three – Mordechai, Shmuel, and Shlomo Zvi – explained Mordechai's photo appearing on the Meiselman family memorial page on the Chortkow website. I felt that the pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fall into place.

I came back from the Technion holding a treasure; I'd received the folder with my father's original documents.

It was an amazing feeling. As soon as I reached the office I showed my partners the letters, so proud of my dad's beautiful Hebrew and penmanship. You couldn't tell from his handwriting that Hebrew wasn't his mother tongue; it looked well practiced, without any corrections or erasures. The writing done with a fountain pen, was fluent, without those typical dots which occur when a fountain-pen stops or hesitates.

With immense pride I showed my partners the school transcripts, as if the grades on those Vienna documents were my own, and the stylized handwriting was mine.



The declaration with the signature of witnesses Mordechai Liebman and Shmuel Meiselman

### DECLARATION

I, S. Z. Finkelman, wish to gain permission to enter the country as a student of the Hebrew Technion in Haifa, herewith deposit with the Hebrew Technion in Haifa the sum of fifteen IL as guarantee that should I wish to leave the country within four years of my arrival, I shall do so immediately at my own expense; otherwise the Hebrew Technion in Haifa shall be permitted to use the sum of 15 li towards the expense of returning me to my country of origin. In such a case the Technion will not have to account for its expenses for my return, based on the permission hereby given to it.

In addition, I agree to leave Israel as soon as I remain without funds or should I become a burden on the public during those four years, and in case I fail to do so I agree that the Hebrew Technion of Haifa shall make all arrangements it deems necessary to return me forthwith to my country of origin.

Signed by me in the presence of:

Witness signature: ( - ) [Mordechai Liebman]

Witness signature: ( - ) [Shmuel Meiselman]

( - ) S.Z. Finkelman

Chortkow, 24/X/32

“You’ve got to write this story... this is an unusual development and this is only the beginning,” said Hanan, my partner. “There’s potential here for a fascinating story.”

“I’m not sure it’s of interest to anyone but me, but I’ll think about it,” I answered out of politeness but I actually smiled to myself; the idea appealed to me. All that’s needed is for events to continue to unfold, so as to add volume to the story, I thought to myself, as I continued to elaborate on the fantasy.

That week I asked my sister to do a thorough search at her home to see if she could find any other

letters or documents relating to our parents that could shed light on their early years in Palestine. She didn't come up with anything new, but gave me the few documents she did have, including our mother's memoirs written over 15 years before I embarked on this quest.

It happened one Saturday morning, around 5:30 a.m. I woke up with a start, soaked in sweat, body and sheets. For a moment I thought I must've peed in my sleep, but within seconds it all came back to me with incredible clarity: my father appeared to me in my dream. I can't help chuckling as I write, the last sentence sounds to me like something out of a folk tale. But I actually did dream about my father.

I dreamed that I was lying in bed, and Father suddenly appeared. He stood by my bed, looking at me from above. He looked far younger than I remembered him – perhaps 35 or 40. A little like the photo in the family album I made many years ago, from the photos my mom had kept. I'd gotten used to the fact that Father kept looking younger over the years, particularly in the picture my mother had framed after his sudden death; a picture that hung on the wall over her bed all those years. As time went by and I got older, he became younger, like the picture of Dorian Gray. He stood there and looked at me and at Raya sleeping next to me, for a few moments. Then suddenly, before I even uttered a word, he took out a gray cardboard folder that contained architectural drafts and drawings, and began telling me about the design of the building: "See, we wanted to build an industrial plant. The structure was very simple, no decorative features. The main thing in the design was the north-facing windows. They gave the building its unique character. Like a box with saw-teeth over it. The windows were on the roof, you know – to let northern light into the building. Light rather than sun. Here in Israel the sun is very strong, too blinding; not like the soft sun in Europe. The windows were like a series of triangles on the roof; the triangle's slope facing south, its vertical side facing north, repeated thirty times. The vertical side is glass and the slope is metal. That was the way to catch the light but not the sun. Direct sun from the east and west; from the north we only get light. But you already know that we never built it, it didn't work out. The lot remained empty all these years, nothing was ever built on it."

The drawings and sketches were clear and sharp, the way I remembered them from childhood. There was no doubt that I'd seen them in the far past. They looked nothing like modern architectural drawings. There were no trees, people or cars. You could only figure out the scale based on the size of the windows in the roof and the height of the doors at the front. The proportions were pleasing and the structure looked aesthetic despite its simplicity.

Father's voice was faint but very clear, as if he was ensuring that I understood every detail. "Don't be surprised, that was my name: Salmon Hirsh Finkelman. That's the name on official papers. But on the drawings and plans I was always Shlomo Zvi Finkelman. That was my Israeli name, my name as an architect, my new name. I wanted to leave the old name behind."

Suddenly Father's voice changed, became much louder, sounding like a reprimand. And indeed, he was scolding me: "I don't understand how come all these years you neglected the money in the bank. You're irresponsible! It's unacceptable for the money to lie in the account unused, losing its value and you people don't care. Find it and take care of it." Father's voice continued to intensify, turning into unpleasant yelling, scolding me... and that's when I woke up with a start, drenched in sweat. I lay in bed, trying to get my breathing back to normal. My heart was beating fast and loud, an unpleasant buzzing sound in my ears. I was panicking. For fifty-four years I hadn't dreamt of my father. Not one dream. Some years I prayed that he'd appear to me in a dream, but it never happened. As a child



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