Preface

I would like to offer my deepest thanks to my cousin, Dr. Mordecai Paldiel, the former director of the Righteous among the Nations section at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem. He checked every word of my manuscript for accuracy, making sure that my dealing with this most intricate subject was as close to the facts as possible. He also wrote a heartfelt foreword, which I greatly appreciate. My cousin and I represent the two absolute extremes of the Jewish world. He was born to a Hasidic family in Poland that miraculously managed to survive the Holocaust in Belgium, France, and Switzerland. I was born to a secular Zionist family in Palestine under the British Mandate and was raised as a secular Israeli in Haifa, a city of highly secular labor Zionist working-class Jews and moderately or nominally religious Muslim and Christian Arabs. As a child, I remember how we all lived in harmony and respected one another.

In 1949, when I was ten and the new State of Israel was only one year old, a bearded man wearing black Hasidic garb and his twelve-year-old son showed up at our apartment in Haifa. My mother explained to me that the boy's mother was her cousin, and that he and his father came to Israel from America, having survived the Holocaust in Europe, to receive a blessing from their Hasidic rabbi, the Belzer Rebbe. I instantly made friends with my new cousin, and we remain friends to this day. Over the years, however, there were times when we were in close touch, and times when we lost track of each other. This was due to the fact that we both have had very eventful lives. We lived in different parts of the world, and we pursued different careers. But looking back, we had one essential thing in common. We both found our way to graduate schools in the United States—I to the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio, where I was ordained as a rabbi; and my cousin to Temple University in Philadelphia, where he received his doctorate in Holocaust studies. By doing so we both traveled quite a distance from

our early life—he from the closed world of the Hasidim in Brooklyn (who do not attend secular universities), and I from the highly secular world of the Jews of Haifa, who hardly ever set a foot inside a synagogue. It is safe to say that we both reinvented ourselves, as we both shared a passion for the Jewish people, or *klal yisrael*. By that I mean, not only one segment of the Jewish people, such as a Hasidic sect or secular Israelis, but for all Jews everywhere. Paldiel's career focused on discovering Righteous Gentiles who rescued Jews during the Shoah, and mine focused on bringing Jews back to their Jewish heritage, and later on biblical scholarship, where I have done research and written books about the Hebrew prophets.

While one could argue that neither one of us followed in our parents' footsteps, in reality we were both deeply rooted in the long history and the peculiar fate of our people, and we both felt the need to find meaning and purpose in the glorious albeit tragic saga of the Jews. As for myself, I remember as a child listening avidly to my parents' stories about their families in Europe. I never knew any of my grandparents, any of my aunts and uncles (except for one), or any other relatives whom my parents had left behind when they went to Palestine as pioneers at a very young age. Looking back, it did not feel peculiar to me not to have an extended family, because most children my age in Haifa in those days did not have one either. Ironically, it felt peculiar to meet someone my age who did have an extended family, because, in the final analysis, after the Holocaust we were an orphaned community. Instead of relying on an extended family, Jews in Haifa in the '40s and '50s made close friends with two or three other families that consisted of a father, a mother, and two or three young children, and this was our extended family.

In the years immediately before and after the establishment of the state, boatloads of Holocaust survivors began to arrive at the Haifa harbor. One distant cousin named Mordecai Abrabanel, who survived the camps, became a frequent visitor in our home. Like many other survivors who could not find a job, he peddled black-market food products. After the war food was scarce, and the only way to get some coffee or a piece of chocolate was through the black market. As a child I instinctively felt the difference between him and us. He was small and frail, and it was clear he had been through hell. As time went on, I kept running into other survivors, and I remember some of them had a number tattooed on their arm, and they were different from us who grew up under the blazing sun of the Promised Land. Unfortunately, our parents' generation did not know how to deal with them. They remained outsiders for a long time. That so many of them were exterminated with impunity in Nazi-occupied Europe was an embarrassment to our parents. We were the few who had to take on the many and prevail. They

were the many who were killed en masse by relatively few. So as a child I had a skewed view of them, which I regret to this day.

In the late '50s my family went to Uruguay, where we had several relatives, to start a business. It was the first time I came face-to-face with anti-Semitism. For the most part, Uruguay was a progressive democracy where people enjoyed freedom and had many opportunities. But there was no lack of prejudice, particularly against Jews. In neighboring Argentina it was much worse, and we heard about top Nazis such as Eichmann and Mengele hiding there. Eventually my family returned to Israel, but in 1959 I enrolled in the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and when I came back in the summer of 1960 to visit my family in Montevideo, Eichmann was captured in Argentina. Looking back, I remember it was a defining moment for me in regard to the grim reality of the Holocaust, as I believe it was for the rest of the world.

After I was ordained as a rabbi, I kept pursuing a side career as a writer. I often wrote and lectured about the Holocaust. When I took a pulpit in the New York area in 1970, I took a side job as an editor and translator for a Jewish publisher in New York City, which published quite a few memoirs of Holocaust survivors. I edited or translated or even ghostwrote many of those memoirs. Most of them sounded like carbon copies of all the others. Descriptions of the same atrocities were repeated over and over again until you could not tell them apart. But then again, this was the nature of the Holocaust. Yet once in a while a story stood out. Such a story was Sandra Brand's book *I Dared to Live*, in which a young blonde Jewish girl who easily passed for a Polish Catholic was hidden in Warsaw by a German policeman, who later paid with his life for his crime. Another was the story of Naftali Salsitz and his wife. He fought as a partisan in the forests of southeast Poland, and she was disguised as a German girl and worked for the Nazi high command in Krákow. Between them, they saved Krákow, the historical capital of Poland, from being blown up by the Nazis.

In the late '70s I moved my family to the Washington DC area where I started a translation company providing services for the U.S. government. My first government contract was with the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Special Investigations, which looked for former Nazis who found their way illegally into the United States. For the next six years I was involved in translating thousands of World War II documents. Those included Nazi documents such as concentration camp records, Gestapo interrogations, Wehrmacht military documents, survivors' testimonies, and more, from all the European languages. I was also sent to interpret at trials of former Nazis who had entered the United States with false documents. This was perhaps

my most in-depth involvement in the Shoah, and some of those documents continue to haunt me to this day.

I have one confession to make: I have never visited Auschwitz. Nor, for that matter, have I visited my parents' old home in eastern Poland (now Ukraine). I have always been afraid that it would be more than I can bear. I am still working on getting up the courage to do it, and I believe someday I will. Perhaps now that I have written this book, I will finally find closure. I have written this book because the Holocaust has been haunting me all my life. I cannot understand why it happened to them and not to me. I look back and I wish I would have been there to share their suffering, and to be able to do something for them. So I finally decided that the least I could do is tell their story as best I could, to try to look at it from all sides, and to make sure that the world at long last has learned the lesson of their martyrdom, so that they would not have died in vain.