

FROM BUCHENWALD TO BROOKLYN

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to The College Commons Podcast passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers brought to you by HUC Connect the Hebrew Union Colleges online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo Dean of HUC's Skirball Campus and your host. Welcome to this episode of The College Commons Podcast and our conversation with Oren Schneider.

JH: Oren Schneider was born in Israel a third-generation to Holocaust survivors and Seventh-Generation to farmers in the Galilee. He's an entrepreneur and business owner who enjoys music, cooking, travel, people, and as he puts it especially the combination of all four. He lives with his family in Brooklyn and he's the author of the subject of today's conversation The Apprentice of Buchenwald: The true story of the teenage boy who sabotaged Hitler's war machine. Oren Schneider thank you so much for joining us on The College Commons Podcast.

Oren Schneider: Thank you for having me Joshua. Glad to be here.

JH: Let's begin with your relationship with the protagonist of your story Alexander who is your grandfather. Tell us the context in which you got to know your grandfather and how he grew to occupy such an important place in your own experience in the world.

OS: My late grandfather Alexander, he passed away in 2020 at the age of 92. He practically raised me. I was orphaned at a young age, my father was a combat pilot for the IDF. I was a young baby when his plane went down and my grandfather stepped into an educator and parent role. My mom was a doctor at the hospital and I ended up spending most of my childhood years with my grandparents. He was a Holocaust survivor at the time. He started talking to me about his experiences when I was very very young and I assumed that everyone had a Holocaust survivor in their family so it sounded very very natural and seamless to me only later on in life I understood how unique and special that was for me. He was also an entrepreneur, a businessman, a fearless head of family who built a small business empire in Israel and he taught me a lot of what I know and made me who I am today.

JH: A lot of the story depends on its beginning as is often the case and Alexander, your grandfather's story begins in Slovakia. Explain your grandfather's family, their status both in relation to the Jewish community and the non-Jewish community during the 1930s.

OS: So our family has lived in Europe for many many generations. Most of them in the area of Germany and then during the early 19th century they migrated to the area of Eastern Slovakia and the Hungarian border, Ukrainian border. They've established themselves there. They were a family of traders and scholars. My great-great-grandfather was the oldest of his siblings and he was the son of a very famous ultra-orthodox rabbi, the rabbi of Tashnad rabbi Rosenberg. He became secular and he started a very successful business, helped his siblings go to school and university. His son, my great grandfather Solomon, who's an important character in the book, was the youngest who was the one that stayed behind in town and he basically inherited the family business, the specialty department store. Think of a small Bergdorf Goodman in a small Slovak town of 3,000 out of which a third were probably Jewish. So they were a well-to-do affluent family that were an anchor and played a central role in the Jewish community in town and owned one of the main businesses on Main Street. They had a very rich social community of both Jews and non-Jews and so when things started going south in the 1930s they were caught completely off guard.

JH: I wanna pick up on a quote that really touched me in the book. It's from Erana Alexander's mother who is your great-grandma and it comes from something she said to Alexander she says "There's nothing more important than friends. Friendships elevate the soul." And then when as you say things go south, and your family was forced to leave for Bratislava, Alexander asked her about her non-Jewish friends, sort of following up saying Mom tell me how are your friends? And she replied the following, "Having friends is the most wonderful thing we did have good times together for many years but it turned out they were not true friends." I'm moved by these two quotes because the theme of friendship starts off as elevating the soul and then it gets betrayed and reduced to the failure to help a friend in need. Is the very idea of friendship one of the victims of ethnic persecution not just in the Holocaust but in Europe and the world in general?

OS: I think it's a wonderful observation Joshua in the book .It's yet another manifestation of the total failure of the secular integration of Jews in society. That integration was never truly tested in the most radical sense of the word. Who could have imagined the rise of fascism in Europe who could have imagined that people would have to choose between their personal safety and their relationships with people from other races or other religions. So I would definitely agree with your definition that one of the unsung victims of that period is that whole notion of interracial inter-religious friendship and the pretty incredible relationships that were built over generations between Jews and Christians in Europe.

JH: Moving along the chronology of your family. As the pressure mounts, your grandfather's parents move him from the liberal arts education of languages and sciences at the Jewish school that he attended. And when it became untenable they sent him to continue to be educated but this time as an apprentice with a locksmith. And ultimately one of the themes of survival in your book is practical training. Alexander's father managed to delay deportation by

virtue of being skilled in trade. But central to the story Alexander he himself survived the camps by building on the skills he learned as a locksmith, practical hands-on skills. Did this lesson shape your grandparents and then maybe even your parents' educational choices after liberation?

OS: Absolutely. But it's really more about never ceasing the push and the drive for self-development, for growth, for education, the curiosity that really defined him. He was definitely the most curious person I've ever known even as an 80-year-old grandfather. He always wanted to know more, he always wanted to learn more. And it was part of his compilation as the quintessential optimist his optimism was always interlaced with hard work and that curiosity at that time as a young teenager he spent that time with a locksmith and that ended up saving his life and his father's life but during his entire life, it was always something else. It was always that curiosity, always that will to learn, that modesty, learning to say that I don't know, I wanna learn more, can you teach me that? That was who he was.

JH: I think I sensed some cross-currents of the relationship between Alexander and his father, a certain kind of connection but maybe some in-resentments. You point out the fact that Alexander never really got a pat on the back from his parents. When your grandfather was raising you and telling you stories about his family, did the father-son relationship that he had... Did that come to life for you? Do you have some sense of that dynamic?

OS: So I was fortunate enough to know his parents well, they both passed away at a very old age. There was always tension between him and his father always, and I could always see that. I could always feel that. I think that growing up, his parents were extremely busy at work and they didn't give him a lot of attention. There was always a nanny, and a caretaker and a cook and help at home that spent time with the single child that they had. And they were all hard working successful entrepreneurs and owners of business, so there was always that sense of competition. Obviously they have this time that they spent in the camp and underground under false identity, escaping and playing cat and mouse games with the Gestapo, that basically built another level or layer of tension in their relationship. But it's very difficult for people who didn't live through that period to truly understand the psychological impact and other impact that those years had on the protagonists... On the survivors.

JH: One of the most common storytelling themes that you see in survival narratives especially of the Holocaust is this incredible pressure to make life-changing, life-defining decisions in the spur-of-the-moment. And there were two decisions that really struck me in the book. The first was when Alexander's father forces Alexander to come to the little square in Buchenwald against Alexander's wishes. He's afraid that it's just gonna backfire because Alexander himself was not called but his father insists. And ultimately that connects them to the person who protected them through much of their time in Buchenwald. That was one spur-of-the-moment decision that both of them had to negotiate in real time. And the second one was the decision that Alexander took to agree with the camp underground leader to begin to sabotage the German munitions production. So I wanted to know what it was like for you to hear these stories from your grandfather about his decision-making in these almost unimaginably pressured life and death moments.

OS: I think it's incredible that you linked these two points in the story... It makes a lot of sense to me. I also see that linkage. I think that the first one which is a pivotal point in the story goes back to their experience that at all costs whatever happens they need to stay together and that's why father tells son, assuming and knowing the risks associated and involved with that decision, that they have to stick together because their chances are infinitely better together than when they're separated. So he didn't have a doubt in his mind that they need to stay together even though at that moment it seemed like a risky decision.

OS: And I think that this leads to the second example that you've raised, also symbolically that's a decision that the son takes. And as the story goes there was a shift of power and shift of responsibility from parents to son as the years went by and Alex assumed the main responsibility for the well-being of the family and his parents. And you see that in the sense that the second big decision is taken by him and not by his father and he's a 17-year-old he's a young man he's less experienced. And you see that he's also seeking his father's confirmation and before he gives a definite yes to the Russian officer in the factory, he seeks to find his father at night in the sleeping barracks and he wants to get his blessing. And obviously his father gives him his blessing. But that is a symbolic shift of who calls the shots and who takes the ultimate responsibility to make sure that they make it out alive.

JH: Tell us briefly the crux of the story, especially the tagline of the book is The True Story of the Teenage Boy Who Sabotaged Hitler's War Machine. Tell us exactly what it was that Alexander did, on the basis of this decision that we've just discussed, to sabotage the munitions production in the concentration camp.

OS: To explain it at a high level a unique chain of events led from that round up in the small square that you mentioned earlier. Where father and son eventually found themselves being interviewed and picked to be taken from within Buchenwald to the armament factory Gustloff in Weimar just outside of the camp. And because of a unique relationship that began between the father and the son and the German civilian that was in charge of the factory, Alexander manages to create a unique position in the camp. Where he provides personal services to the head of the factory and the rest of his day he's the only utility player or free agent that roams around the factory and moves all sorts of armament pieces from one workstation to the other, and interacts with prisoners of war and you have French and Russian and Dane and others from all nations in Europe. All these POWs who are not allowed to speak to each other, are heavily guarded by the Wehrmacht soldiers inside the factory and Alex is the only one that can move between them.

OS: This is immediately identified by the most senior Soviet POW who basically demands that Alex becomes the person who relays orders and instructions on armament sabotage. And Alex immediately understands that this is extremely risky because if he's caught that means that both he and his father are gonna be executed so that's a big decision that he has to make and he seeks his father's blessing and when he gets that then he basically becomes the center of a very elaborate very sophisticated plot to basically sabotaging many thousands if not tens of

thousands of Mauser rifles the main rifle used by the German army that are manufactured by the factory.

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JH: I wanna zoom forward now to the post war period. The family remarkably survives and the next major stage is the stage of Israel. But getting to Israel is a delightful story because it's a love story as much as it is any kind of redemptive Zionism or political story. So tell us a little bit about that journey to Israel not literally across the globe but internally for your grandfather and his parents. And how was that transmitted to you? What did Israel mean to you as a result of these stories?

OS: I purposely wrote about my grandfather's story, but there were many stories that were not written, and many books that were not written about these family members during that time. One story that wasn't written is a story of my grandmother who married my grandfather after the war and when the Rosenbergs, my grandfather's family spent years hiding and later in camp my grandmother was hid by their servants inside their estate in Eastern Slovakia. And she lost her young sister and went through a very traumatic time but also managed to survive together with her parents. And post-war the Rosenbergs who survived Buchenwald are reunited with Mother Erana who survives her concentration camp in Germany Ravensbrück and they travel back to Coshetsa they meet with friends, they have some open business that they need to deal with, and this is where my grandfather Alex meets his future wife Judith who was also a survivor and they're both very traumatized but they find love in 1948 at Coshetsa. And Alex doesn't know what he wants to do. He sort of thinks about his future, he wants to go back to school, they all missed their school years, he wants his technical diploma and he starts studying...

OS: Judith is a diehard Zionist she is determined to make Elia go to Israel and help the young state fight its war of independence. And she basically gives Alex an ultimatum. If you wanna be with me come for some military training in Northwestern Slovakia, and let's move there. And he basically understands that he has no choice, she's magical and he knows that love is gonna lead him to Israel. And any plans or thoughts he had about migrating to the United States or going elsewhere were no longer relevant. So they go and undergo Basic military training and they board a ship in Italy and they make it to the young state of Israel and immediately get posted into their military units both of them to support the war effort. Obviously growing up in Israel in the '70s or '80s we all grew heavily indoctrinated into the ethos of the formation of the

State of Israel. I think that the leaders of the young state did exactly as they needed to do, which is basically to explain to the residents of the young country that it's really up to them to protect and maintain the young state.

OS: Also because there's nowhere else to go. We were not fully educated or fully informed about what other Jews did in other places in the world for us and the way we were raised. This was the one place and if we didn't protect it if we didn't fight for it there would be no place for us to go. I live in the States today with my family. Obviously I know more than I knew growing up in Israel but I think that we grew up knowing what we needed to know at the time to make sure that Israel survives.

JH: You chose to write Alex's story in the first person and it seems that you inhabited his story very personally as a result or as a reflection of that. And there's a whole section of the book dedicated to your research which was a journey of its own both I guess literal and figurative. What was the most important or compelling story or piece of information that you learned in the course of your research that defined the story of your grandfather but that defined it in relation to you and how you see yourself in the world?

OS: I think that it was a life-altering experience for me working on the book, working on the research, listening again to the many hours of recordings that I made of him when he was still alive, the ones that I made for his mother when she was still alive. But I think that with technology with data, with the science of genealogy today, it's possible to actually build back your family story even when your loved ones are no longer with you. So what I managed to do is to really understand where they came from just using data that has been captured around the world over the last 100 plus years which also enabled me to connect to family members that I never knew existed. Most of them live in the United States, most of them left Europe well before World War II. And some of them have been mentioned by the by my grandparents they lost touch many many generations ago but it's pretty incredible to connect with these long forgotten family members and basically complete those pieces of the puzzles and really think about those sliding doors and decisions that were made in 1905 or 1914 or 1918 that changed fates of families forever.

OS: You have brothers that came to LS Island in 1914 and built incredible families in Ohio, and in New York and California, and their other brothers left to Europe some of them perished in the camps in Poland some of them miraculously survived the camps and went on to fight another day in Israel. Some of them lost their lives protecting Israel, and others built their families in Israel and they all started in the same town in Eastern Slovakia. I always knew that factually but actually connecting with the stories getting to know those forgotten family members connecting filling the gaps for both sides has been very very special to me. It sort of completes the Jewish story that I was always privy to only a part of and I see a fuller picture of the last century in our people's history.

JH: Well thank you for sharing the story and thank you for the delightful conversation. It's really been a pleasure to talk with you Oren Schneider author of *The Apprentice of Buchenwald*. Thank you so much.

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OS: Thank you Joshua.

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