

WHEN WAR CAME: THE STORY OF ONE MAN'S  
ESCAPE FROM NAZI-OCCUPIED POLAND, HIS  
REMARKABLE SURVIVAL IN THE SOVIET UNION  
AND UZBEKISTAN, AND JOURNEY TO AUSTRALIA

by Mendel Matthew Factor, Sydney: LhR Press, Sydney 2005,  
pp.189, \$25.

There are many stories of survival in war torn Europe during the Second World War. In these days of fascination with family history, people are encouraged and even taught how to write down their experiences. Many of these efforts are praiseworthy, but sometimes turgid. Having come across this publication by Mendel Factor, I approached it with interest, but a little warily. In fact, it is a most readable story — exciting, and even enthralling. The book unfolds with dramatic appeal, starting with a prologue describing an incident which led Mendel and his wife, Frances to revisit Samarkand. Several almost throwaway comments are revisited throughout the book and tied in neatly at the end. The author places events in their historical context and includes appendices, endnotes and maps as well as illustrations with a separate list. This is a haunting and difficult story, but finally one of survival in the Soviet Union during the war years against incredible odds.

Mendel is related to the famous Max Factor, an uncle, but it is also Davis Factor, one of Max's sons, to whom he owes an undying debt of gratitude for much needed financial help during the darkest days of his life. Mendel's father, Izhak Leib, had apprenticed young Max to a barber in the 1880s after his mother had died and Max had eventually opened his own shop. At the end of the nineteenth century he left Poland for America. Mendel believes that these beginnings, where barbers also sold creams and unguents, probably led to Max Factor entering the cosmetic business.

Mendel was born in Lodz, Poland in 1921, the child of Izhak and his second wife, Tovah Ruth (Goldberg). His first wife, Tovah's sister, had died leaving three children and Mendel was the youngest of the five children from the second marriage. Unfortunately, because of the large age gap between him and his older siblings, Mendel does not know the name of his mother's sister. In fact, he did not even meet his brother, Charles until he reached Australia, because Charles had migrated before Mendel was born.

His father ran a successful curtain manufacturing business until World War I when a German bomb destroyed the block of flats

he owned and he never worked again. Izhak was a very religious, Hasidic Jew and his children were also pressured to remain within the Hasidic fold. As circumstances impoverished the family, they came to rely on the financial help provided by their uncle, Max Factor, in Hollywood. Mendel's brother Saul supported the family for some years as a weaver before he emigrated to Australia. Eventually the siblings learned the workings of the furrier trade and earned money to support their mother. Another uncle, John, from Los Angeles, visited the family and gave generous amounts of money while Max's son, Davis, was their 'guardian angel' during the dark days of World War II.

In his spare time, young Mendel haunted the Socialist Party library and became well read and a supporter of socialism. After his mother died, he and his brother Sam with wife Adzia, left for the USSR, anxious to build a new life in the socialist state. He picked up languages with amazing ease and was soon able to communicate in Russian and Ukrainian. He went to Magnitogorsk and found employment in the steel works, where everyone welcomed him as a liberated Western Ukrainian. After some months, he left to join his brother Sam in Stavropol where again they enjoyed a special welcome as 'Western Ukrainians'. However, life was hard and the famine bit deeply, but Davis Factor again came to their rescue.

In 1941 Mendel, now a Soviet citizen, moved on to the Ukrainian town, Berdychiv, nearer to the Polish border, where there was a Jewish population. An industrial accident was the reason for his returning to Stavropol and thus escaping the massacre that followed the German occupation of Berdychiv. After several weeks of travelling in an attempt to join the Polish army, Mendel, Sam and Adzia arrived in Samarkand in 1942, the hardest year of Mendel's life. He developed infected ulcers on his legs, was weakened and unable to work for any length of time. A lengthy stay in hospital provided some respite and much needed food for a bare-footed, ragged, sick and hungry man. On a collective farm, he was able to get *lepioska* (Uzbek bread), which was stale, but it had an amazing effect. Later in the year his condition worsened and he spent time in another hospital until his health improved and he was discharged.

1943 found him working in Serabolak and living with Sam and Adzia when he heard of the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto where his sisters had been living. In October 1944 he was gaoled for a year in Kattakurgan because of a mistaken belief that he had stolen sugar. In gaol, he was able to indulge his passion for reading until he was sent to work at a cotton factory. An incident of defiance almost cost him another five years' gaol, until a new inmate from Serabolak informed him that he had in fact been freed some months



ago as a result of Sam's hiring a lawyer to argue his case. Finally in 1945, back in Serabolak, he was able to earn some money selling vodka.

With war's end, Mendel and Sam were able to return to Lodz in 1946, only to find that most of their family who had remained in Poland had perished in the camps, with only two nephews having survived. The poor Jewish suburb where his mother had lived was nothing but rubble as the Poles had destroyed it, looking for Jewish 'treasure'. The brothers decided to go to Israel and began the process of moving through various DP camps. At one, Mendel secured a job in the kitchen and, in an amusing line, he says he now tells his wife he can only cook for 2000 people!

From Austria, he contacted his brothers, Charles and Saul in Australia who told him that migration papers were being arranged. He finally sailed from Marseilles on the *Johann de Witt* in 1947. Almost all 700 passengers were Holocaust survivors and Mendel enjoyed the company and good food on his six-week journey, arriving in Sydney on 17 March 1947 to be welcomed by his brother Saul and Dr Alfred Cymerman of the Jewish Welfare Society. Davis Factor had financed the journey and another brother, Sidney, happened to be in town, so Mendel was delighted to meet him. Moving to Melbourne, Mendel secured a job as a furrier, but inspired by the Sidney Myer story, he applied for a peddler's licence and obtained dress fabrics and knitwear through friends of his brother Saul. After thirteen months of hawking his wares, he was able to buy a car.

He met his wife, Frances Smith, and they were married at the Great Synagogue on 31 May 1949. The coal strike that year put an end to his hawking, and as Frances was a milliner and he a furrier by trade, they decided to go into the millinery business, opening a shop on Bondi Road. They started manufacturing and soon branched out beyond New South Wales. Participating in charity parades became a very successful way of advertising their hats and led to television appearances and new customers.

The epilogue brings us back to the prologue and his visit to Samarkand with Frances in the mid 1980s. Mendel arranged to revisit the collective farm where he worked and some workers brought out fresh *Iepioska* bread, but it was different to the bread Mendel ate during the war — bread that was stale and mouldy, but had cured his terrible ulcers. The title, *When War Came*, refers to his disdain for his mother's chicken soup and her admonition: 'Mendela, wait until the war comes and you will eat everything.' She was right and he did just that.

The book ends with an appendix on political connections in Australia and an examination of his brother Saul's membership of

the Communist Party. Another appendix traces his mother's family and a third his father's. The end pages contain lovely family snapshots before you reach the very informative and detailed endnotes. Mendel thanks his daughter, Brenda, for her help in some research and also Sarah Napthali who is acknowledged on the title page verso for interviews, transcription and manuscript preparation, although the story is his alone. He also thanks Gerry Factor for the use of the family tree, but alas, it does not appear in the book.

One of the interesting facts for me in reading this story was how news travelled in the remote areas where Mendel lived and how he was able to hear news of his brother and sister-in-law, his sisters back in Poland and communicate with his brothers in Australia as well as Davis Factor in America. Was it a Jewish network in the Soviet Union or the efficiency of socialism?

I have known Mendel and his family for many years since he married my father's cousin, but did not know his story. It is fascinating to discover the details of his life that have made him the man he is today.

Helen Bersten

## A TIME TO KEEP, THE STORY OF TEMPLE BETH ISRAEL:1930 to 2005

*by Werner Graff, Malcolm J. Turnbull and Eliot J. Baskin,  
Melbourne: The Australian Jewish Historical Society -Victoria  
Inc. and The Progressive Jewish Cultural Fund, 2005, pp.294.*

As well as having three authors, this history of Temple Beth Israel in Melbourne had two editors, Hilary L. Rubinstein, the well-known historian of Jews in Victoria and Australia until 1945, and Howard A. Freeman, for ten years so far the president of the Australian Jewish Historical Society in Victoria. It also has a foreword by Rabbi Fred Morgan, the current chief rabbi of Temple Beth Israel and it was published on the seventy-fifth anniversary of Temple Beth Israel. As well the history is preceded by messages from the daughter of the late first author Werner Graff, the current president, the editors, as well as various acknowledgements.

One could have feared that too many cooks might have spoilt the broth, but this is not the case. The book starts with a concise his-