

FRIENDLY FIRE

EUGENIO CZIKK

CPL EDITIONS

Unpublished biographies
and correspondence

FRIENDLY FIRE

EUGENIO CZIKK

Copyright © Eugenio Czikk

CPL EDITIONS, New York
Centro Primo Levi, Inc.
www.centroprimolevi.org
Book design: designwajskol
Production: Sofia Quaglia

Translated by Alessandro Cassin

FOREWORD

By Alessandro Cassin

Eugenio Czikk's *Friendly Fire* is an outstanding and deeply rewarding read. Neither simply an account of his experiences during the Shoah, nor a comprehensive autobiography, Czikk uses writing—as well as omissions—as powerful tools to evoke events and emotional entanglements which constitute the fabric of his being.

At different moments in his life, confronted by tremendous adversities and uncertainties, the author reports feeling as if he were “deserting himself.” If self-desertion can ever be reversed, this book traces a pathway toward that intent.

We are offering here a glimpse of the manuscript that begins with a vivid, clear-eyed evocation of the lost world where Czikk's life began: a minuscule town in the Eastern Carpatians, an area inhabited by Jews, Ruthenians, Czechs and Hungarians, where national borders shifted like sliding doors. Curious about all the staggering diversity around him, the author was born into the fold of Eastern European Hassidic Judaism, materially poor yet rich in human relations and traditions.

Early in life, Eugenio recognizes the contrast between the hardships and indigence of that life, and its mystical, ecstatic dimensions. At six, he reads fluently Hebrew and recites prayers by heart. He attends a Ruthenian school

in the mornings, and a cheder (Jewish religious school) in the afternoons. After his mother's untimely death, he was raised by his grandmother and an often absent father. His father, (who would loom large throughout his life), remarried, pursued new opportunities, and his own exploration of a wider Jewish world. In 1934, for example, his warm and compelling baritone voice landed him a job as a cantor in Subotica, then in Yugoslavia, which meant they had to learn Serb. A few years later, the father was named oberkantor (principal cantor) in Leitmeritz in Boemia. The family, comprised of the young Eugenio, father, stepmother and two younger half-brothers, often moved across borders. Soon multilingualism was a fact of life. At home they would speak, Yiddish and German, at school a variety of different languages according to the location. Each time they moved, his father would repeat to him as if a magical invocation: "Nu, my son, now begins a new chapter."

With great emotional participation and a photographic memory, the author brings to life a number of vivid scenes the the last shimmers of a dying world. By 1937, mirroring what was happening in Germany, the Sudetendeutsche lead by Konrad Henlein were emboldened in their anti-Semitism. Life in Leitmeritz became increasingly difficult for Jews. In school, Czech, German and Jewish students began living parallel realities. Neighbors started avoiding the Czikk family, until they had to leave.

As Czechoslovakia disintegrated, the Czikks went rapidly from being Czech subjects to Ruthenian-Ukrainian to finally Hungarian ones.

The turmoil leading up to the Anschluss of 1938, is described through concrete societal transformations as perceived by an adolescent. These are years of continuous separations and reunions with his family. After moving all together to Vasvår, a town to the North West of Budapest, in 1941, Eugenio moved to Munkàs to enroll in a Jewish high school, which he attended for four years. His father main preoccupation, then and always, was to impart him a solid Jewish education and sense of belonging.

Eugenio's studies and life in Munkàs proved decisive in his later life. The town of Munkàs, with 33,000 inhabitants, almost half of them Jewish, There, he was spared the rampant anti-Semitism. The vast majority of the Jews of Munkàs were Chassidim, and even the modern Jews who practiced law or medicine, would attend synagogue. There were 30 synagogues in town. At school, many of his fellow students were Zionist, some had joined the Betår and many discussed the ideas of Jabotinsky and Trumpeldor. If on one hand, the young Zionist perceived Eugenio as too religious, on the other, he was beginning to explore his own way of thinking about Judaism.

One of his school mates, Walter Spiegel, came from a wealthy non-religious Jewish family of intellectuals. For two

years, he tutored him in Hebrew, which meant frequent visits to their home, meals, and exposure to Doctor Spiegel, Walter's father, a free thinker and highly cultured man. At the Spiegels' Eugenio got a glimpse of a different world of ideas and liberties, and began a profound transformation, as he moved away from religious practice.

His father had sent him to Munkàs, to deepen his Jewish education, so that on his visits home, Eugenio felt no alternative as to resume his former religious behavior, experiencing for the first time a double existence. Thus he "deserted" the delicate new identity he had begun to form while away from home.

Europe was being torn apart by the war. In the autumn of 1943, on Rosh Hashanah, the cantor of the Jewish Community of a small town near Vasvár fell ill. The local Jewish Community asked Eugenio's father for a recommendation. The father sent his son Eugenio, who had been leading the choir in the synagogue. Receiving reports of Eugenio's success at the task, the father congratulated his son, which remained the first and only instance of fatherly pride.

I will not attempt to summarize, Eugenio Czikk's sober and concise description of the tidal wave that largely destroyed his world during the following years. His chronicle is moving and precise in recapturing facts and emotions, with no concessions to sentimentality or self-

pity. The anxieties of guessing whether the Russians or the Germans would arrive to Hungary first; the Nazi occupation of Hungary, Eichmann in Budapest; the ghetto experience. The men (he and his father) were rounded up for forced labor, as the rest of the family was annihilated. He and his father were deported to Bergen-Belsen. As the Russian troops advanced the Nazis began to evacuate the detainees. During a train transfer toward Terezin, his father dismounted the train to get water. The train left before he could jump on again; the two were separated. Eugenio was eventually liberated in Terezin in May 1945.

No matter how many accounts of the return of concentration camp survivors to their no longer existing families and communities one may have read, Czikk expresses the enormity of the emotions and the devastating loss with remarkably few, weighty, words that will endure.

His father, who had been captured by the Russians, also survived, and the two reunited after the father's grueling months-long trip back from the USSR, which in many ways reminds one Primo Levi's return to Turin.

One would think that a father and a son who, like shipwrecks, had lost everyone else in the Shoah, would deepen their bond. But no.

Eugenio had enrolled in medical school in Prague and

envisioned his life there. His father had lost all hope for the Jews in Europe and married a third wife, a fellow camp survivor. He had come to the conclusion that emigration to Palestine, for him and his son was the only way toward a new beginning.

Eugenio, who was struggling to find his bearings in post-war Czechoslovakia, unexpectedly found himself again in grave danger. This time it was "friendly fire" coming from his very father who was ready and willing to employ any means to force him to choose between going with him to Israel or never seeing him again. A power struggle that would continue, no holds barred, for the rest of their lives.

Unable to see Eugenio as an independent adult, his father felt it was in his right to impose on him his own life decisions, future plans and antidotes to the common trauma: they were going to start over in Israel. In May 1949, abdicating to his father's "emotional blackmail," Eugenio agreed to a plan: with help from the Jewish Agency in Prague, he would obtain a group passport with other students and leave for Bari, Italy. There, a few months later, his father (and new wife) would meet him with a proper visa, and then they would emigrate to Israel.

Eugenio liked what he found in Italy and never joined his father in Israel.

His new life began in a transit camp set up by the Joint

Distribution Committee in Trani (Puglia). From there, eventually, he moved to Turin to continue medical school while lodging at an International Students House.

To support himself, he taught some of his many languages privately, made lasting friendships, and while missing his beloved Prague, slowly adapted to life in Italy. However, after all he had gone through, he no longer had the determination and focus to complete his studies and eventually gave up. Among the many people he met was Luisa Levi (the sister of the writer and painter Carlo Levi), who employed him and lodged him, and eventually Augusta, who became his wife in 1955.

It would appear that his marriage and deep understanding with Augusta were the keys to a return to the full partaking of life and society. In 1957 their lives were further enriched by the birth of a daughter, Nicoletta.

A reconciliation with his father never took place. On the contrary, once in Israel his father continued relentlessly to attempt to blackmail him into joining him, escalating tension and incomprehensions, and eventually disowning him.

Eugenio became a freelance sales representative for major Italian companies, obtaining success and some satisfaction. All the tribulation and dislocations his life perhaps prevented him from finishing his studies and

pursuing a more linear path. "I continue to consider myself an individual "senza timbro" (without a seal or stamp of approval) as will be apparent from the content and form of this text," he writes. However, his voice betrays wisdom, great insight into himself and the world around him, and an uncommon gift for writing.

Late in life, with his wife, he often returned to Prague and some of the places of his youth, transmitting to the reader the intensity of revisiting.

This book is an account of Eugenio Czykk's life against a background of war, persecution, loss, but also renewal and deep reckoning. His writing moves with ease across different registers: the young man caught up in the horrors of the Shoah, and the mature man reading and pondering in an attempt to make sense of all he has lived through. In order to mirror his shift between past and present I too am using both the past and the "historic present tense" which is common in Italian but rare in English).

Unlike accounts written immediately after the war, this text reflects decades of reading and thinking about the Shoah. The author never blindly adopts other writers' conclusions, and occasionally takes issues with some widely spread interpretations. For instance, he claims that "the religious passion of Eastern European Jews did not prevent them from hearing in real-time the noise of war and the snares of Nazism." And goes on to refute Alain Finkielkarut's

assertion (In *Le Juif imaginaire*) that “they found nothing better to do than cover themselves with the shawl of prayer and swing.”

Among the many motivations, one senses above all, a desire to transmit to future generations his memories and posthumously honor people, places, and ways of life that have been wiped out by the Nazi fury.

In the past half a century, our culture has created a category, “the holocaust survivor” with a particular aura of moral authority, the barer of the ultimate victimhood. Czykk, resists speaking from that podium, though his life was shattered by the Shoah, he is not only, or exclusively defined by the tragedy that befell him.

Among many other things, his book traces his experiences in Italy, a country he reached initially out of his father’s imposition and later chose as his home. In the 1930’s Mussolini’s racial laws would have labeled him “a foreign Jew.” A decade later, his itinerary can be also read as the making of an Italian Jew, what else could we call his progeny?

PREFACE

As if life were to go on indefinitely!

This fleeting and provocative sensation took me by surprise at the end of a long and relaxing walk through the beautiful Průhonice Park, at the gates of Prague in April 2007. I was eighty-one years old and in the company of my wife and Péter, an old Czech-Hungarian friend. We weren't talking about happy things. I was questioning Péter about the *syčák*'s resistance to the Hungarian occupation of Subcarpathia in 1939. Unfortunately, Péter, like other interlocutors before him, knew less than I did. The conversation was also difficult in other respects: my wife, Augusta, speaks neither Czech nor Hungarian, and thus translations into English or Italian were necessary. How could such an impression, as trivial as it may have been, emerge and break into this context and join our triad at that moment?

When I got home, I was surprised to find the explanation to the question, in a Czech-German dictionary, under the heading "*syčák*". At thirteen, I was in sub-Carpathian Ruthenia and heard that the "*syčák*" opposed the Hungarian occupiers in a desperate and bloody battle. A carnage. But they did not consider themselves *syčák* which the dictionary defines as scoundrels, vagabonds, but rather, patriots. Perhaps they were called *Syčáci*

(scoundrels) by the Hungarians as the Germans would later call *Banditen* the partisans. But this was simply my guess, and I won't go back to Chust just to verify whether I am correct. The only time I was there was just after the "fall of the wall," when I went to visit the grave of my mother, who died at the age of twenty-five. But as I arrived on the hill at the edge of the village where I was born, I found a Christian cemetery right where the Jewish cemetery used to be. Instead of gravestones with Hebrew inscriptions, I saw crosses. My companion's response to my bewilderment was: "Dear sir, after the war was none of you Jews returned here, so after 50 years ..." Along my path, I experienced many dilemmas. Sometimes I found that they had been confronted, resolved, or vanquished by people better equipped than me. I did not always agree on how a dilemma had been solved, in this case at least, the dilemma underwent a mutation ... When I encountered problems which I deemed to be above my intellectual abilities, I put them aside or postponed any attempt to find a solution to a better time, when I would reach a state of quiescence.

I've been retired for nineteen years now. I filled some gaps, archived or put away some things, while the rest evaporated or dissolved in reading and listening to music. But if my decades of intense activity had also served as a refuge or shield, they had helped my attempt to keep away a past that would have been too painful to recall, my years of "quiescence" — although faced with the

awareness of knowing how to spend my time well — risked to offer too much relaxation.

This danger was also fueled, unknowingly, by my wife with her relentless exhortation to write my memories, in the form of a message to our grandchildren. This was exactly what I had spent a lifetime trying to avoid for the most varied reasons, including:

- my inability to hold my emotion every time I started talking to Augusta about my brothers or my other relatives who were deported and never returned. The same happened in my rare attempts to write my story or while watching the documentaries on the Shoah, which I absolutely had to see in the hope of recognizing the face of at least one of my relatives;

- one of my greatest hesitations was the disastrous relationship with my father after his return from the camp (in addition to the two of us, only my cousin Srül survived out of more than thirty relatives who had been deported);

- the fact that everything has already been documented or told by great writers, who often endured far more devastating experiences than mine. I am referring to excellent texts such as *If This Is a Man* by Primo Levi, *Fatelessness* by Imre Kertész, *The Long Voyage* by Jorge Semprún, *The Seventh Well* by Fred Wander, *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald and many others. It gives one pause to

think that these books have not improved the world in any measurable standard. Anti-Semitism and racism are slowly returning to the crime scene. With ease. Quiescence.

Eugenio Czikk

CPL EDITIONS

PART I

Until the outbreak of the Second World War, a lively yet poor multiethnic community lived in a tucked-away corner of Central Europe: the Eastern Carpathians, within the borders of the prosperous, democratic, proud and tolerant state of Czechoslovakia.

Today that strip of land is even more desolate and, with all its material and cultural misery has been absorbed into the Ukraine. There is only one ethnic group left, the basic one, the Ruthenians. Scattered when not annihilated were the other groups that, together with the Ruthenians made the Carpathians lively: the Hungarians, the Czechoslovaks, and the Jews. Hitler exterminated the Jews and Stalin completed the work by annexing that strip of land to have a border with Hungary, thus also pushing for the forced emigration of other ethnic groups. And what remained of Czechoslovakia, of Masaryk was further divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The village where I was born eighty-one years ago consisted of only three houses. Two of them facing each other skirted the provincial road that not far from the border with Romania, wound its way up and down between the railway and the restless Tisza. At one hundred and fifty meters, behind our house, there was the railroad line inspector's house, and only after another five

hundred meters was the subcarpathic village of Rokosov. My maternal grandfather had built his home in a strategic point at the intersection of the provincial road with the road that led to the village through the railway. In order not to be alone, he encouraged and helped his distant cousin Chaim-Leib to build a house on the other side of the provincial road.

The railroad toll keeper was called Schiller. A Handsome man, I remember him very tall, with graying hair, a Franz Joseph mustache, his only vice was incessantly chewing tobacco.

He had no idea he had such an illustrious name until he met my father. A mild-mannered man, he loved children and got along with everyone. He was fluent in Ruthenian, Hungarian, and Czech, and although he was not Jewish, he also spoke Yiddish. In the village only two people read books: Schiller and my father who lent them to him. The majority of the Ruthenian population of Rokosov was not only poor but also illiterate, bigoted and diffident, if not hostile, towards the Jews. The Ruthenians didn't like the Hungarians, despite the deep hatred of the latter towards the Jews, who were the largest minority. The Czech, minority, enjoyed the sympathy and respect of Ruthenians and Jews but was opposed by the savage, mustachioed Hungarians. The Ruthenians and the Jews were similarly indigent: the nonexistence of social conflicts favored a peaceful coexistence despite the mutual distrust inspired

by the difference in religion and the diversity of their daily lives.

Schiller come out of the toll booth at the passage of each train but also to greet every single person who passed the level crossing to go to the village. And he never addressed the person in the wrong language: a Ruthenian did not dress like a Czech, and a Jew was not as arrogant as a Hungarian.

All of Rokosov's houses were tiny. Ours too: a large kitchen, two small bedrooms, a third larger that served as tobacco and alcohol store, where also some hot meals were served. The little shop became necessary after the violent death of grandfather Salamon Jenoe, who owned a plot of land with a thriving farm. Amid a poor population he was considered "wealthy". According to Schiller and my first Ruthenian teacher, my grandfather was loved by everyone. Because of his righteousness and kindness, on his tombstone, next to his name was engraved the solemn word *Zaddik*, "just" man.

He had been killed on a summer night by a thief, who had fired a shotgun at him. What cost him his life was a hesitant movement to detach a rifle from the wall. A rifle he kept hanging there, but which had never fired a single shot. Maybe grandpa didn't even know how to use it.

With her improvised and precarious commercial activity,

grandmother Hâni now had to provide for two daughters and three grandchildren, following the divorce of her eldest daughter Scheindl. Fortunately, the land was profitable, she had a cow in the stable, and the courtyard was full of geese, ducks, and chickens. How did grandmother managed to oversee everything, with only the occasional help of a fifteen-year-old *schaigez* (a non-Jewish boy who could also work on a Saturday) was always a mystery to me. She also found time to bake bread for the week, from wheat and corn. And of course, she also milked the cow because aunt Scheindl was lazy, and Ida, who was to become my mother, was spared because too delicate "lady-like," and waiting to take a husband.

Ida had been introduced to Nachman by a friend of his who was a *Schadchen* (matchmaker) in 1923. The two hit it off immediately. Nândor (he preferred to use the Hungarian version of his name outside the home) was handsome, an excellent conversationalist, at ease with everyone, and for that area, also rather elegant. He came from Tmovo, a village 35 km east of Rokosov, the rebellious son of a *melamed* (Hebrew teacher).

Rebellious in that he no longer grew *payot* (untrimmed side-locks) and he did not dress nor did he behave according to customs. But at the same time, he was considered the *bocher* (young student) of Tmovo, the most knowledgeable in the Talmud. His debates with the Rabbi about the sacred texts were highly admired, despite

the fact that there were no *tsitsiyot* (knotted ritual fringes) dangling from his jacket.

This annoyed his “opponents,” who were unnerved by the Rabbi’s clear preference for Nachman whom they called “the modern” (a moderate insult), when not “German” which was almost equivalent to *goy* (non-Jewish), a serious insult. To “German” they also alternated the epithet “nazi,” which, however, at that time didn’t yet have the defamatory meaning it acquired a few years later. What other nicknames could people in a tiny Shtetl bestow upon a modernly dressed 20-year-old *bocher*, who wore a mustache, always a clean shirt and recently a pair of carefully chosen glasses he had acquired in the city? Not that he needed eyeglasses or that he had read Rilke’s *Malte Laurids Brigge*. By merely exercising his smile in front of a mirror, he came to the conclusion that his look would be improved by wearing glasses.

It must be said that the Rabbi had already distanced himself from his virtuous interlocutor after he learned that the young man, upon returning from Kolozsvár, Transylvania, had imported Zionist ideas, albeit armored by abundant religious fervor. Nachman had landed in Kolozsvár at the end of 1914 when he was only 15 years of age. The environment of Trnovo had become too narrow, and his parent’s home, oppressive. While partaking in the traditions, he would have liked, under his sister Alte’s influence, to distance himself from certain ancient customs

and superstitions. His older brother, Moishe, had recently married and with his bride's dowry, had created a small sawmill. His second brother, Jossl, dreamed of becoming a sales representative and helped by his friend Baines, already an established representative, he ended up in Brussels. At home, besides Nachman, there was still his sister Alte, who adored him.

Alte understood his suffering and his desire to "escape". She secretly wrote a heartfelt letter to their aunt who had married to Kolozsvàr, and with her own meager savings, had sent her little brother there. Nacham's mother had consented, while his father instead came to know about the "escape" only after the fact. Nachman then wrote a letter to the Rabbi apologizing for his departure and asking him to explain the gesture to his father.

He hadn't gone to Kolozsvàr to learn a trade. He had gone there because he imagined he would find better study opportunities. The city attracted him with its thriving Jewish cultural life. He spent there nearly three exciting years. A long time away from home for such a young boy. Every year he returned to Trnovo for Rosh Hashana and Kippur. In Kolozsvàr he attended a *Yeshiva*, and in a self-taught manner, he continued studying secular disciplines. To sustain himself, he gave private Hebrew lessons to public school pupils.

DISCLAIMER

This excerpt is part of an unpublished manuscript. Its copyright belongs to the author.

Permission for any use of this text must be requested in writing to the author.

TO READ MORE

To read the whole original manuscript, email info@primolevicenter.org and we'll put you in touch with the author of the book.

Friendly Fire currently only exists in its integral version in Italian. Contact us if you're interested in sponsoring this book, such as donating towards its translation and production, or if you're interested in other publishing opportunities for the book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eugenio Czikk was born in Czechoslovakia in 1926.

After surviving the war and deportation, he attended medical school in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Italy, but never completed his studies. Instead, he became a sales manager for a well-known commercial company. He settled in Italy in 1949, where he married and had a daughter.

Now retired, he lives in Milan.

