

Paul Drexler

Title: *In Search of My Father*

Author: Paul Drexler

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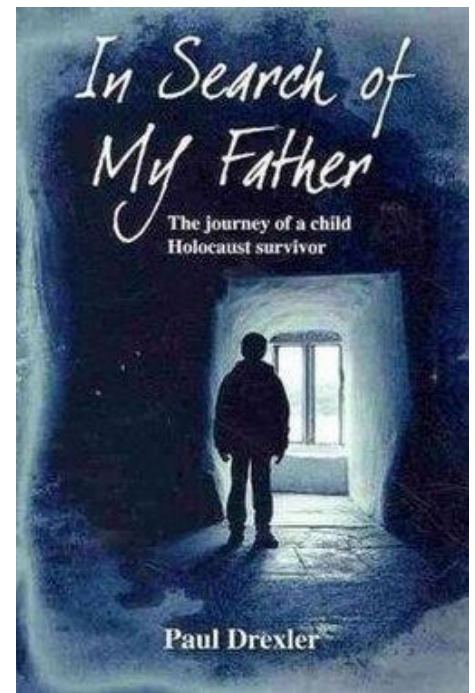
Location of Book: Monash University, Sydney Jewish Museum and other public libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Czechoslovakia: Špačince, Sered transit camp, Theresienstadt, Trnava; Yugoslavia: Split; Australia: Sydney.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: child survivor; in hiding; ghetto.



In Search of My Father is the 234-page memoir of Paul Drexler, a child survivor of Theresienstadt. It chronicles his life and search for knowledge of his father's fate, who he learned was killed by the Nazis mere days before the German surrender.

Pages 1-34 describe the author's childhood, family history and time in-hiding until the family's arrest in September 1944. Pages 35-60 recount their deportation to Sered and subsequent internment in Theresienstadt. Pages 61-99 detail liberation, their return to their former home, relocation to Trnava and journey to Australia. Pages 100-36 describe Paul's early years and schooling in Sydney. Pages 137-50 cover his career, marriage and family. Pages 151-234 reflect on his return travels to Europe and search for traces of his father. The memoir includes a preface by Professor Konrad Kwiet of the University of Sydney, references and source material, as well as 44 family photographs and historical documents.

Paul Drexler was born 29 June 1938 in Špačince, a small agricultural village in Slovakia, to Eugen and Helen Drexler (nee Weiss). The Drexler family belonged to a long-line of wheat farmers. Eugen Drexler, an expert in the wheat industry, played a prominent role in the Slovakian wheat trade, representing local farmers across the country. The family were observant, keeping kosher and celebrating shabbat. When Paul was three-years-old, his father bought him two cashmere blankets – which would become his last link to his father.

A Nazi ally, the Slovakian regime under Jozef Tiso collaborated in the persecution of Jews. After the Aryanisation of Jewish businesses, Eugen's enterprise was placed under government control and managed by appointed trustees. By 1942, two-thirds of the country's Jewish population had been deported to the camps. Because of Eugen's expertise in the wheat industry, the Drexler family was among the minority deemed

“economically essential” and granted exemption certificates. Even with this reprieve, they faced harassment and deprivation. Authorities raided their home and stripped the Drexlers of their valuable possessions.

The situation deteriorated in August 1944, after Germany occupied the country and revoked all exemptions. In September, the Nazis initiated the final round-up of Slovakia’s Jews and the Drexlers were ordered to report for “resettlement.”

The family first went into hiding with a Christian farmer, living for two months in an attic under constant threat of discovery. When the farmer grew fearful of the increasing German presence, they went into hiding with other Christian families but after two weeks the Gestapo broadcast their names on local radio, warning that anyone sheltering them would be executed. Left with no options, the family returned home, where they were arrested and deported to the Sered transit camp.

There, in December Paul saw his father for the last time when he and his mother were placed on a women’s transport bound for Auschwitz. By a twist of fate, their train was diverted to Theresienstadt. Paul was sent to the Boys’ Home, while his mother was assigned to the Hamburg barracks and forced into farm labour.

He attended makeshift classes and was allowed to see his mother once a week. Meagre rations and squalid conditions soon left him gravely ill. After Helen repeatedly petitioned officials, Paul was able to live with her in the women’s barracks. They were later joined by Paul’s grandmothers. Although his health slowly improved, Paul continued to suffer, covered in lice and worms from the rotting bed frame. In April 1945, thousands of emaciated prisoners poured in from camps, bringing typhus. As transports arrived, Paul valiantly sought his father.

On 8 May 1945, Soviet troops liberated Theresienstadt. After a two-week quarantine for typhoid, the four surviving members of the Drexler family were repatriated to Slovakia. His maternal grandmother died from illness on the journey. On arrival in Špačince, they discovered that they were the only Jewish survivors from their town. For six weeks, Helen travelled daily to Bratislava station hoping to find her husband, until a returning survivor told her that he witnessed his death at the Bay of Lübeck.

Without Eugen’s protection, the Drexlers faced growing hostility. In March 1946, they sold their home for a fraction of its value and moved to nearby Trnava. Life remained difficult: Paul endured continued antisemitic abuse at school, while Helen survived on a meagre pension supplemented by black-market trade. After corresponding with relatives abroad, and with the help of the JOINT, Helen secured landing permits to Australia. On 15 November 1947, Helen and nine-year-old Paul left Trnava, travelling through Prague and Belgrade to Split, where they boarded the SS *Partizanka* bound for Australia, arriving in Sydney in January 1948.

They were met by an aunt and uncle, whose sponsorship had cost them their life savings. At first the family shared a cramped apartment. Paul was enrolled in the local primary school, later in a boarding school in Liverpool, while his mother worked long

hours. After graduation, Paul took a clerical job and enrolled in night school, eventually becoming a successful accountant and financial advisor. In 1974 he married Diane and had two daughters, Julie and Michelle.

In 1994, Paul gave his testimony on his existence in Theresienstadt at his daughter's high school, breaking his fifty-year silence. That evening, he began writing his memoirs. In 1995 he was interviewed for the Shoah Foundation. The following year he returned to Czechoslovakia for the first time with his family, revisiting Špačince and Theresienstadt. In 1998, he donated artifacts to the Sydney Jewish Museum and began volunteering as a survivor-guide in 2000.

For decades, Eugen's fate remained shrouded in uncertainty. Following his mother's death in 2003, Paul began obsessively searching for his father's burial place. Years later, through painstaking research to retrace Eugen's wartime experiences, Paul finally discovered that his father had been sent to a slave-labour camp in Germany and was executed by the Nazis during the British bombardment in the Bay of Lübeck in early May 1945 – only days before the German surrender.

In Search of My Father is a candid and moving account of the author's wartime survival and tireless search for truth. It reflects on the legacy of the Holocaust, his memories, trauma and psychological difficulties. Much of the narrative details post-war experiences and life in Australia. The memoir was written and published as part of Sydney Jewish Museum's "Community Stories" Project.