

Hallandsposten Article on Max Friedman Translation - March 21, 2022

In the year 1998 Max Friedman visited Halmstad in order to obtain more knowledge about his parents who survived the holocaust.

Nearly a quarter of a decade later his research has found it's way into a book where he tells how much his parents life came to affect him.

–The only way to understand the present is to understand the past.

In 1968 the 20-year old American citizen Max Friedman faced the possibility of being drafted and serving in Vietnam. But there was way out of this.

–For emotional reasons, I could be given a suspension if I could prove that my parents would suffer terribly if something happened to me.

Both his parents – Frieda and Szlama Friedman – hade survived the holocaust but lost their families.

–Dad talked to me for 20 minutes about hos his wife and their two daughters who hid from the Germans but were later liquidated. A beautiful but sad story, says Max who never had to serve in Vietnam.

–But the story could not have happened, not in the way dad told it, says Max who travelled to Halmstad to find out more.

In 1998 Max Friedman worked for Bristol Meyers Squibb. That year he travelled with his family – his wife Jessica and their sons Noah and Eric – to Sweden. They undertook the journey just a few weeks after the passing of Max mother.

Max parents had met in Sweden, got married and had two children: Max and his older sister Rachel. Both children were born in Sweden. In mid January 1952 they left Sweden by boat for a new life in Brooklyn in New York.

With his birth certificate Max tried to find some of his Swedish roots. I got a hold of an e-mail Max had written to the City Council. At the time I was working as a reporter for the local newspaper. For a few days I became a guide for Max and his family with visits to a lot of places and meetings with people.

One meeting was with Paula Zuback who had survived the holocaust. Not only was she able to share her memories of Frieda and Szlama – she had in her possession a picture of Rachel!

In the spring off 2022 Max is about to release his book "Painful joy – A holocaust family memoir" via Amsterdam Press in the Netherlands, a publisher who specializes in stories about the holocaust.

Thinking back on his journey to Halmstad in 1998 he finds it amazing to have met people who knew his parents and who had pictures of them as children.

–The memories of my parents were exact descriptions of how they were as human beings, Max says.

–They were a young couple trying to restart their lives in the light of what they had been through. I learned a lot, in fact most of it. Our parents told us hardly anything about their past.

–I placed everything in the back of my mind and didn't do any further research. That had to do with my general incapacity handling the experiences of the holocaust that my parents had experienced.

During the years that since then has passed Max started to realize how much the fate of is parents affected him and his sister.

–My dad spent the rest of his life trying to forget while my mother simply couldn't, Max says.

–As soon as my mother met somebody she immediately started to speak about what she had gone through. She did this even before she said her name. She had features of schizophrenia and was paranoid. It was difficult for her and it was difficult living with her. Mother created a sort of fantasy life. Her daughter would be become that person she never could be.

–This became a burden for Rachel. My sister was a diligent, silent and a fantastic person but maybe not so social. She wasn't fond of parties and enjoyed reading.

–Our mother was the exact opposite. She did not want to read and she wanted to be at the center of attention. Growing up as a young girl in an orthodox family in Europe not much was expected of her. The boys were supposed to be the breadwinners.

Their parents had constant nightmares, probably of what we now know as PTSD. The children had to wake them up. They also argued a lot.

About what?

–Mostly about money. We were quite poor. During the first nine years of my life we lived in a rather bad area of Brooklyn. Mother thought father could have been more aggressive about pay rises – dad worked as shipping clerk – or try to look for another job, Max says.

–But father, I think, had had such experiences that he just wanted to have and maintain a quiet life with his family. He did not care much about money or worldly things. He thought himself of being lucky. And Sweden made it possible to come to the US. Mother did not accept this. They probably were not made for each other...

But Max came to embrace his past. The journey to Sweden became the first step. In the year 2000 he started work as a freelancing consultant.

–I was the ghostwriter for two memoirs. One of them was the former ambassador to the USA in Sweden – the other was the wife of the ambassador.

This spurred Max to know more about his parent's past.

–I also had grandchildren who I spoke to about my life and my parents. My parents were survivors. Had they inherited a streak of this?

Five-six years ago Max and his family started to travel to countries like Israel, Poland, Sweden and Germany. Bits and pieces were put together for a big jigsaw that could form a story.

Max's mother had been married before the war but her husband did not survive the holocaust.

–And I didn't know anything about my father's former wife, what she looked like or the ages of their daughters. But I understood that what he had told me simply could not have happened because he did not know anything about their fate.

–My father had gotten married to a woman who seemed to be a fantastic person. He spent only a few years with her. Enough to have two daughters. He could have had a fantastic life!

Do you think it is important to any child that the parents tell them something about their lives no matter what has happened?

–Yes, but you have to do it at the right moment. You have to think about what you are going to say. The only way to understand the present is to understand the past. Parents are the most important persons in your life. You have to accept what you may get to know things even though it might not be so pleasant.

–I've told you that my dad's story could not be entirely true. You get disappointed. We got along. He was a good man! He was OK to live with.

–But I guess he must have felt guilt and shame for surviving when his wife and daughters didn't. He probably would have wanted to be with them. Even though that would have meant death. None of my parents were given time to grieve.

When Frieda and Szlama met in Sweden they still had some hope of finding their families.

–Somebody had told my father that his wife and children were brought to the gas chambers. But you never know. Mother was told that her husband was brought to the gas chambers in mid 1944 in Buchenwald.

Have you gotten to learn more about yourself as a human being?

–Oh yeah! I learned why I sometimes suffer from panic attacks and why I have a low tolerance of stress. I learned that traumas that an adult experience will affect the life of a child.

–My mother was malnourished when she came to Sweden. My sister was born a year and half later. My sister inherited some things that were not so good such as a high level of cortisol and bad teeth.

–I also discovered a lot more about the fantasy life of my mother. My sister and I believed everything that she told us.

To understand more about your loved ones may not make your life richer “but it becomes more complete”.

–You have a past. That past can be very complicated. Your children can get to know nothing, a little or everything. Max says.

–As a person you might want to tell the truth – it’s just that you do not quite know what it looks like.