

Life Times

A lost community

Reporter and his mother tell her Shoa story

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Over cookies and tea at Village Coffee in Maplewood on a recent afternoon, Allan Chernoff, a former senior correspondent for CNN, acknowledged that while all journalists aspire to write books, his first book is much more than a box to check on his resume.

"I would not permit myself to write any other book before I did this. I have felt for a long time that this is a responsibility — something I absolutely must do," said Chernoff, who lives in South Orange.

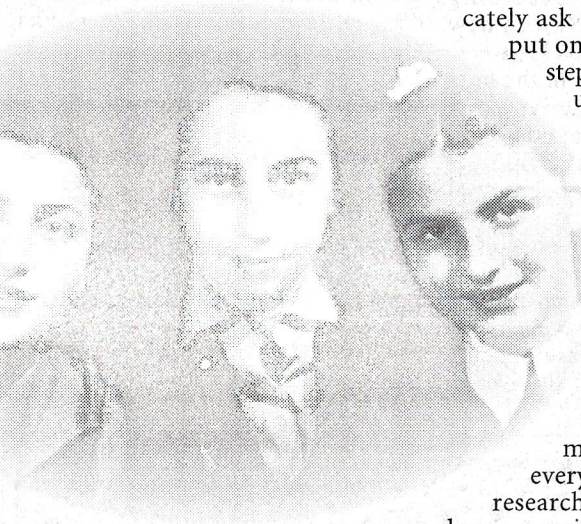
More than 20 years in the making, *The Tailors of Tomaszow: A Memoir of Polish Jews*, published in May by Texas Tech University Press, is a history of the Jewish community of one small town in Poland — the one where his mother was born — and its eradication during the Holocaust.

Rena Margulies Chernoff of Brooklyn, whose memoir provided the foundation for the book and who shares

into the icy depths of his frigid treasure chest to retrieve a Pingwin (Penguin) bar, my favorite brand. Carefully, I would tear the paper wrapper and stare at the eight ounces of chocolate-covered bliss, then slowly sink my teeth through the crunchy coating into the creamy vanilla..."

With these details of childhood, the reader is hooked long before the narrative arrives at the German invasion.

The first third of the book describes the Jewish community of Tomaszow, without sentiment, or, as Chernoff put it, the "sweet violin music in the background and Mama lighting the candles every Friday night." There were arguments, scandals, and deep divides over the implications of modernity: secularism vs. religion; the speaking of Yiddish, Hebrew, or Pol-



From left, Rena Margulies with Frieda Bernstein, a friend, and Fryda Tenenbaum, a cousin, in a displaced persons camp in Heidenheim.

Photo courtesy Fryda Tenenbaum

magnitude of the threat confronting

cately ask questions," he said. "I'd put on my journalist's hat and step across that line. I'd pick up a pen and paper and ask questions and write everything down."

He added: "My rule was that if I felt any emotion, I'm not touching it. Because I wanted to make sure I was writing a history and not opinion. I couldn't get sentimental."

When he asked his mother to write down everything, she did extensive research on her own to confirm her memories. Allan remembers her "interviewing relatives around the world whenever she traveled."

The narrative is dotted with comments from other members of the former Jewish community of Tomaszow. Chernoff had the opportunity to interview many of them for the USC Shoah Foundation during the years they were

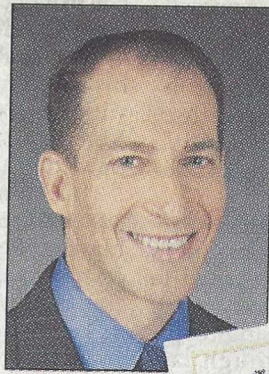
credit with her son, is one of the four children from Tomaszow who survived the Holocaust.

"It was never my intent to write a family history for the family," said Allen. "I wanted to write this for the history to be preserved."

Chernoff put his journalism background to work, painstakingly researching and confirming every detail. And, just to be sure, he handed the final manuscript over to a historian. He called himself "obsessive" in his desire for the history in the book to reach "the highest standards."

The bulk of the narrative is in his mother's voice.

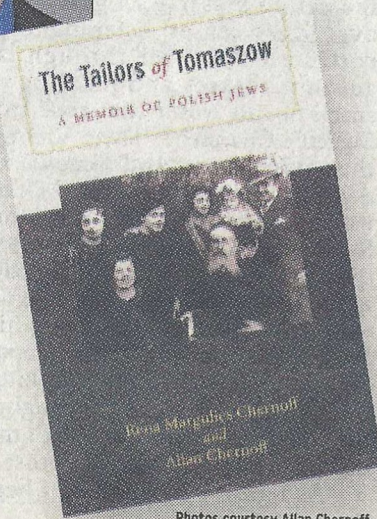
It opens with a summer treat triggering a memory. "Opening the wrapper of an ice-cream bar — loda in Polish — takes me back to my lost childhood. The ice cream vendor with his white pushcart by the kiosk on the corner of Antoniego and Moscickiego Street bent down and reached deep



Alan Chernoff

ish; staying put or moving to what would eventually become Israel.

"It's the real tragedy of the Polish-Jewish community, before the Germans ever invaded that they made such a big deal" out of these things, he said. "Given the



Photos courtesy Alan Chernoff

them, the tragedy is overwhelming."

The book is full of details, from the fabrics and fashions crafted by Rena's father, a master tailor, to the contents of the apartments where they lived and the arrangement of the camps where Rena was taken.

"When we visited Tomaszow [in 1994], we went to every home. I have tons of video of my mother questioning people in Polish," Chernoff recalled. "I had hardly ever heard my mom speak Polish. She wanted to know what happened in precise details and she wanted to be certain exactly what was the configuration of this part of town, or any detail," he said.

"When we went to Auschwitz, we spent hours and hours in the library going through the files — which bunks they slept in, what transport they came in on, finding all the records for every member of the family. The Germans kept impeccable records."

Although Rena never discussed the Holocaust with Allan or his sister when they were children, he said, she finally began to open up after attending a reunion of Holocaust survivors in 1980.

"I had to gradually and deli-

collecting oral histories, from 1994-2002.

"They were looking for interviewers and that was right up my alley. I know how to do interviews, and I understand the stories," he said.

Not everyone he interviewed made it into the book. "As a journalist, I have a good sense about who knows what they're talking about," he said. If they didn't pass the smell test, they didn't make it into the book.

Chernoff left CNN in 2011 for a public relations position. He and his wife Robin are members of Congregation Beth El in South Orange, and their twin daughters attend Golda Och Academy in West Orange.

When the time is right, Chernoff plans to bring them to Tomaszow to share with them the family's story.

"Now I feel a responsibility to have people read the history," he said. "It's not like I went out, did my interviews, came back, wrote the story, handed it in, and now on to the next story." Rather, he said, "When I'm old and buried, this is among the more important things I will have done — along with marrying and raising children." ■

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