Uri Shmueli (1928–2023)

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Uri was born on 13 May 1928 in Kraków, Poland. His parents, Moshe Szmulewicz and Nina Seidenfrau Szmulewicz, both of whom were Hebrew teachers and Zionists, named their only child Uriel. He did not become Uri Shmueli until 1954.

In his memoirs dated 2013 (see the supporting information), Uri described his childhood as happy. There were skiing vacations in the winter and two months in a family camp each summer. But Jews in Poland were also subject to increasing harassment. Walking to school could be dangerous.

Starting in September 1939, life for the Szmulewicz family became difficult (see his memoirs). When it became illegal for him to attend school, Uri’s mother taught him Hebrew, Bible and German, and arranged lessons for him in Polish, history, Latin, mathematics, geography, natural history and English. The lessons continued after the family moved to the nearby town of Wieliczka, where much of his mother’s family lived. At 13, Uri had his Bar Mitzvah, necessarily in a private house because the synagogues had been closed. Later he found he was unwelcome for prayers in two different minyans (a quorum of ten Jewish adults required for certain religious obligations in Judaism) because at home his family spoke Hebrew, the holy language, and because he knew no Yiddish.

The family was separated in August 1942. Uri and his father were sent to a work camp in Płaszów, where they were still allowed to wear their own clothes; somewhat later, they were relocated for a time to the Kraków ghetto. Because their factory made electrical cables and Bakelite sockets, they were protected as essential workers. Uri made friends in the camp and, because of his skills, became an informal apprentice to his department’s mechanic. He remembered that there were supervising Poles at the camp who were kind to him. One sneaked him a book about the theory of sets.

In January 1944, Płaszów was converted into a concentration camp. That August, Uri and his father were among the 4500 put on a train for KZ Mauthausen, where they were
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No remembrance of Uri can be complete without mention of his remarkable personal qualities. I first met him in 1981 in Tel Aviv and was immediately struck by his humanity. He was gentle and kind, but also tough. I remember him as surprisingly hopeful and optimistic about mankind. At Tel Aviv University, he was recognized year after year as a beloved instructor whose door was always open. His memoir shows that he made friends easily with all kinds of people, learning their language if necessary. People were drawn to Uri. While he described himself as secular, he shone with a kind of inner light that was appropriate for somebody who had been given the name of an archangel.

I am very grateful for Yael Shmueli-Friedland’s help with this remembrance.