

Full Circle

My circular search for the real me.

Elliot Fixler

with
Peter Weisz



Elliot Fixler

FULL CIRCLE

Dedication

To my mother, Rose,
My son, Mathew
and
My wife, Lorraine

Elliot Fixler

FULL CIRCLE

All my life's a circle;
But I can't tell you why;
Season's spinning round again;
The years keep rollin' by.

—*Harry Chapin*

Elliot Fixler

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Introduction

To say that Elliot Fixler is a *mensch* is like saying Tom Brady plays football. It just doesn't tell the half of it. Elliot takes "*mensch*-ness" to an entirely new level. He is also, to put it mildly, a study in contrasts; caring and biting, loving and acerbic, generous and opinionated, methodical and manic. At this point, I have probably known Elliot Fixler longer than any other living person. I've learned that he believes that in order to be a true friend, it's occasionally necessary for him to kick you in the ass. I discovered this the very first time we met.

The year was 1953 and, because of my popularity, I was regarded as the third grade's "Leader of the Pack" among the schoolyard tough guys at Public School 66, located on Buffalo's Tacoma Avenue. In fact, we were known as the Polisner Gang and we ruled the playground during recess. On one fateful day, we spotted a new kid who had recently transferred to our school. He looked funny. He talked funny. And he wore a baseball cap at all times. So, naturally, we wasted no time tormenting him.

After a game of "keep away" using the kid's cap, we began to taunt and tease him mercilessly. The kid stood his ground and looked us up and down and determined that I was the "head honcho." He put his head down and ran straight at me. He then proceeded to beat the living crap out of me.

That pugnacious kid was Elliot, and as I lay panting on the playground tarmac, I remembered my father's advice, "If someone can beat you up, it's better to be his friend than his enemy." Elliot and I have been best friends ever since. And friends like Elliot don't grow on trees, although, as you will read, some of Elliot's clients swing from them.

I am proud to say that I have been at Elliot's side through thick and thin, and I'm not just talking about the hair on his head. We've shared moments of magnificent splendor atop Masada in Israel, as well as periods of the deepest despair imaginable. In this amazing memoir, Elliot recounts many of the cherished memories of our Buffalo boyhood. For example: Scraping the snow from our driveway so we could spend the afternoon shooting baskets in front of our garage, after which my mother introduced Elliot to non-kosher food for the first time in his life (pepperoni pizza). Elliot also unabashedly shares tales of other sorts of "forbidden fruit" that he and I indulged in.

I believe it was Elliot who popularized my nickname that has stuck with me all my life. "Polisner" somehow got slurred into "Parsner" which sounds like parsnip. And Parsnip eventually got whittled down to simply "Snip."

Some of my most enduring memories from our misspent youth include listening to Elliot's mother, Rose, *kvetch* at me for having a *shiksa* (non-Jewish) girlfriend. I also clearly recall the day Elliot and I were playing tackle football with our high school buddies; full contact with no equipment. One of our teammates suffered a serious compound fracture of his forearm, the splintered bone protruding

through the skin. I think that was the day Elliot decided to stick to basketball.

As he matured, Elliot's athletic prowess kept up with his skills as a courtroom litigator. But sometimes he would push the envelope a bit too far. I recall going on a ski vacation to Vail with Elliot when he was in training for an upcoming marathon competition. Despite the wintery weather and unmindful of the unfamiliar Rocky Mountain elevation, he felt compelled to carry out his daily morning jog. Big mistake. He returned blue and barely alive. I was required to assist him into the closest jacuzzi where I served him a Jim Beam breakfast to revive him. I'm pretty sure that was Elliot's last marathon race.

Reading the pre-release version of this book was, naturally, a sentimental journey for me. I learned a great deal about a friend I thought I knew inside and out. What I found in these pages touched my heart and often caused me to really LOL (laugh out loud). I am convinced that, even though you may not know Elliot as well as I do, you will feel the same way as you make your way through his remarkable life saga.

One caveat: in this book, as in real life, Elliot often portrays himself as a curmudgeon and a grouch. Don't be fooled. It's a persona that he developed as part of his courtroom image. In reality, Elliot is one of the most generous, intelligent, well-read and compassionate people I have ever known. The following tale illustrates my point.

Many members of the schoolyard gang from PS 66 have, incredibly, managed to stay in touch over what has now been seven decades. Recently, one of our group had fallen on hard times. He swallowed

his pride and shared with me the fact that, at age 78, he was unable to make ends meet on Social Security alone. Could I help him out?

I put out the word to several of the others in our grade school group—some of whom are today very well off financially. I was stunned as my plea was rejected by men who willingly direct their philanthropic dollars toward worthy causes benefiting complete strangers, but who now refused to help a friend in need. The one shining exception was Elliot, whose immediate response was simply “Sure. How much does he need?”

Finally, I feel that the title of this book, *Full Circle*, is highly appropriate describing Elliot’s diverse and distinguished circle of friends. It is a circle that is “full” of exceptional people, many of whom you will meet in the pages of this memoir. I am proud to count myself among those within this “full circle” of friendship.

I am aware that this book is part of Elliot’s quest to resolve many unanswered questions surrounding his family background. I applaud this effort and am deeply moved that he allowed me to offer my words as the Introduction to this extraordinary volume. I am particularly gratified that by invoking the memories of that Buffalo boyhood schoolyard where we first met, I believe I am helping him to, once again, come full circle.

Richard (Snip) Polisner, DPM, MJ
Ponte Vedra, Florida
March, 2022

Author's Foreword

It think it was author Norman Mailer who said that writing a book is about as close to childbirth as a man will ever get. I cannot attest to that, but I can swear that writing this book, like giving birth, involved a lot of labor and for the most part, it was a labor of love. To carry the metaphor a bit further, both undertakings initially require the planting of a seed. In my case, oddly enough, it was my daughter, Sarah, who got me “knocked up” in a literary sense.

Sarah understood, perhaps better than most, that my life had been plagued by unanswered questions about my origins and family background. She was also aware that I had, over the past few years, actively attempted to fill some of the gaps in my life story. Why was my mother living in Budapest when she gave birth to me in 1944? Where and when did my parents get married? How did my mother and I manage to survive the Nazi onslaught that succeeded in murdering so many members of our family? The most aggravating question I faced was, “Why had I failed to question my family members about these things when I had the chance? Why had I waited until they were gone before I began my search?”

Sarah understood my frustration and more than once had commented: “Wouldn’t it be nice if my grandmother had writ-

ten a book about her life? You could just read the book and your questions would be answered.”

I agreed that it would be nice, but, as we both knew, neither she, nor my father, had written any such book.

“Well, then,” she replied. “Don’t make that same mistake.”

“Hunh?”

“You should do what they failed to do,” she advised. “I don’t want to be in the same boat after you’ve gone. It’s important to record your story in a book, a book that I and my brothers and our kids can read to learn about you and our family history.”

“*Wow,*” I thought to myself. “*How did I manage to raise such a smart kid?*”

Her point struck me immediately. She was entirely correct. I should not leave my children in the dark about their past, a darkness that I had lived with and dreaded for years. I should write down whatever I have been able to put together about my own history and those who came before me, no matter how spotty or incomplete the information may be. Plus, I should record the high points—and low points—of my own life, not only for the sake of my heirs, but for anyone who might find such an account to be of interest or benefit. “*But were there really such people out there?*” I wondered.

I got my answer at a dinner party during the summer of 2021, when COVID vaccinations had started giving people the courage to socialize once again. I had monopolized the majority

of the evening's conversation by regaling my friends with a few stories from my wicked wayward past.

My old buddy, restaurateur and businessman, Paul Iacuone, turned to me during dessert and said, "Ell, have you ever thought about writing a book? You've got some amazing stories there that people would really enjoy reading."

Paul's wife, Terry, agreed, as did the other guests: Dave Festa, Raymond Kolkman and their wives.

"That's funny," I replied, "because my daughter, Sarah, has been bugging me to do just that. I just wasn't sure if anyone outside my family would be all that interested."

The encouragement of my friends appeared to be sincere and I put a lot of stock in their judgement. So, I made up mind.

"O.K.," I announced. "I'll do it."

Now what? I've written legal briefs and articles for law journals, but I had no idea about how to go about writing a memoir. Interestingly, it would be in my capacity as a Holocaust survivor that I would find the help I needed. Not long after, I was invited to testify at a public Palm Beach County School Board meeting. It seemed that a certain high school principal had stirred up a controversy when he had replied to a parent who had inquired as to why the school did not offer a Holocaust education program as specified under Florida law. The principal responded in writing that since some parents held differing opinions about the existence of the Holocaust, and since their

beliefs had to be respected, he could not inject one particular point of view into the school curriculum.

Once his words were made public, the principal was labeled a Holocaust-denier, and calls for his termination echoed throughout the county. The school board invited members of the public to address them about whether they should fire the principal. As I waited to offer my remarks in the five minutes allotted to each witness, I was seated amidst dozens of other witnesses; other Holocaust survivors as well as representatives of area synagogues and Jewish communal organizations. As I chatted with a slightly younger man seated next to me, I learned that his parents, like mine, had been Hungarian Holocaust survivors. He revealed he was a writer who assisted clients in authoring and publishing their memoirs. He handed me his card and suggested I contact him if I ever decided to write my life story. I thanked him, stuck the card into my wallet, and then moved to the podium to offer my testimony—through the mandatory face mask. Within a few weeks, the errant principal had been fired and I had connected and agreed to work with the memoir writer to produce and publish this book.

Thus began a process that was at times gratifying and other times terrifying. I was required to organize my many disparate memories into some sort of cohesive narrative. Most challenging was confronting some of the long-buried ghosts of my past, whom I had not thought about for decades. The range of emotions this process brought to the surface was both compelling

and cathartic. Eventually, the process of viewing my life from an objective vantage point allowed me to discern certain distinct patterns taking shape.

For example, my life's journey began in Budapest, Hungary. Years later, I would return to Budapest where I would pick up the tattered threads of my story and weave them into the tapestry of my life. It was, in a sense, a feeling of having come full circle. This same feeling arose when I thought back to my early Jewish education, conducted by an Orthodox rabbi who was part of the Lubavitch sect known for their "Chabad" movement. I had remained distant from my heritage for most of my life, only to again come full circle, back to Chabad in later years, right here in Palm Beach Gardens.

There is one more instance of having come full circle that illustrates this pattern that accounts for the title of this book.

As I prepare to bring this accounting to an end and thereby bring about a sense of closure regarding the mysteries of my life, I, at the same time, recognize that this book represents a new beginning for my kids and grandkids. The beginning of their understanding about who I am and the values I have attempted to impart. I am most grateful that I was able to complete this book before I "closed the circle," as Apple Watch owners like to say.

I invite you to travel vicariously with me through these pages, pages that chronicle the major memories—both good

and bad—of my life’s journey. I know you will find the trip provocative, amusing, tragic and, at times, uplifting and inspiring. Once you have come full circle and reached the final chapter, perhaps you will find yourself motivated to write your own life story

If this book inspires just one person— be it family member, friend or stranger—to write his or her own memoirs, then I will rank this literary labor as a glorious success. When I, at some future point, find myself holding a book in my hands; a book created by someone who was prompted to write it because of *this* book, then I will consider myself as truly having come full circle.

Elliot Fixler
March, 2022

Chapter One

Someday You'll Understand

“Secrecy involves a tension which, at the moment of revelation, finds its release.”

—Georg Simmel

Revelation arrived in my parents' bedroom closet on a sultry summer afternoon in 1958. Past Bar Mitzvah age, at 14, I was deemed sufficiently mature to be left at home unattended. I had recently graduated from Public School 66 in North Buffalo and was spending my summer working alongside my dad as a painter's assistant. By the 1950s, North Buffalo had solidified its place as the historic center of the local Jewish community. Our little family recently moved from a house behind a flower shop, one of the many “two-flats” along Hertel Avenue, to a more spacious place located at 196 North Park Avenue. Most of Buffalo's non-Orthodox Jewish families have since that time relocated to the more upscale suburban neighborhoods of Amherst and Williamsville. But North Buffalo still retains its ethnic flavor. It is today home to a “Little Italy” community, complete with fine Italian trattorias that dot Hertel Avenue where kosher delis once stood.

Back in those days, my Jewish friends came from conservative and reform families that had assimilated into American mainstream

culture. Because we were a post-war immigrant family, our religious observance was, by contrast, strictly Orthodox and that was the reason I sported a baseball cap that was nearly permanently affixed to my head. It also meant I would walk to *shul* with my father every week on *Shabbos*. Most importantly, my Orthodox orientation was about to cast me into a future that would drastically diverge from that of my “*Amerikanische*” friends. This fact weighed heavily on my mind on that fateful summer’s day.

When I arrived home, I quickly realized I was alone. My father, Sam, was at work painting houses and my mother, Rose, had left by bus to the market. As an only child, I was accustomed to spending time alone and would only occasionally experience a pang of loneliness or a twinge of isolation. I delighted in the hours spent lying on the carpet with our huge “international-style” radio tuned in to sports broadcasts. Buffalo Baseball Hall of Fame announcer, Bill Mazer, whose coverage of the Buffalo Bisons minor league baseball team, along with his “ticker-tape” reporting of major league games, was a particular favorite of mine. Mazer would read each play from the ticker and then rely upon his imagination alone to inject color and context into his narrative. This was how I was able to follow the legendary New York Yankees and the exploits of my baseball hero, slugger Mickey Mantle. I since learned that Mazer’s real first name was Morris, that he was Jewish and born in Ukraine.

My time home alone was also devoted to books about my other childhood hero, famed attorney Clarence Darrow. Darrow worked on some of the most celebrated legal cases during the first half of the twentieth century, including the Scopes “Monkey Trial” and the Leopold and Loeb murder case. My deep admiration for this “sophis-

ticated” country lawyer with brilliant defense strategies would eventually guide me toward a career in the legal profession.

But on this day, I was not thinking about Clarence Darrow or the Yankees winning the pennant. I was consumed with concern about my own future. The night before, I overheard my parents talking after I went to bed. My father was showing my mother papers he had received from the Hebrew parochial high school, Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, located on South Third Street in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York. While I had assumed I would be attending Buffalo’s Bennett High School in the fall along with my classmates, my parents evidently had other plans.

All I knew about Torah Vodaath, a Jewish boarding school connected to the Mesifita Talmudical Seminary, was that it required strict adherence to Jewish dietary laws and that half of every school day would be devoted to the study of the Torah and other Judaic texts. I had to learn more about this place. I needed to see those brochures and application forms that my father had shown my mom.

I quickly set to work scouring the premises in an effort to locate those Torah Vodaath materials. My search led me to the large closet in my parents’ bedroom. This was territory into which I had not yet ventured since our recent move to the North Park Avenue address. Scanning the shelves and floor of the closet, I spotted something.

It was a weathered and well-worn grainy leather valise that some might call a portfolio. It protruded from among the shoe and hat boxes on the top shelf. I gingerly pulled it out. Opening the metal clasp, I surmised that this was something my parents had carried with them from Europe and then to Israel. It had obviously been though a lot.

And although the valise could easily contain the documents I was seeking, what I found was far from what I was expecting.

Instead of Torah Vodaath paperwork, I discovered a collection of old black and white photographs, along with what appeared to be various old transit documents written in either Czech or Hungarian. Leafing through the photos, it was clear they had been taken long ago, before or during the war. Some were candid photos of family life with surroundings indicating a quaint European village. There were also two photos of a group of well-dressed older men, each of whom wore a square-topped elegant black hat. A Jewish star was stitched onto the breast area of each man's overcoat. There was something haunting and somewhat disturbing about the way each man peered solemnly into the camera.

Eventually, I came across a large collection of professionally produced wedding photos. The only face I recognized belonged to a younger version of my mother, Rose. I wondered why my parents kept these old photos stuffed away in the closet and never showed them to me. After all, there were plenty of family photo albums, sitting on the dining room bookshelf, chronicling my childhood, years in fading Kodachrome. Why were these photos secreted away in the closet?

As I poured through the images, I eventually came across a full-page photographer's portrait of the wedding couple. It featured my mother in a flowing white satin wedding gown. But there was something horribly wrong with this picture. The man next to her, decked out in a double-breasted dark suit, was *not* my father! This was clearly a formal wedding photo; not a candid shot with the bride posing

with a wedding guest. No, this was the happy couple on their wedding day. But why did I recognize the bride and not the groom?

The weight of a thousand questions landed heavily on my shoulders as I sat on the floor with the open valise across my lap. “Was this older couple my grandparents who were murdered in the Holocaust?” I wondered as I flipped feverishly through the photos. “Did my mother have another husband at some point and, if so, where is this man now?”

I sat there for what seemed like hours, deep in troubled thought as I forgot all about the Yeshiva and my future education. After several long moments puzzling over these matters, I put everything back just as I had found it in the valise and placed it back on the shelf. I decided that I would confront my mother about these photos as soon as possible—but not in the presence of my father.

My dad, Sam Fixler, and I, did not enjoy a typical father-son relationship, at least as far as I could determine by observing how friends and relatives interacted with their fathers. Sam, whom I called Tatte, never engaged with me outside of my role as his assistant on house painting jobs; no ball games, no fishing trips, not even a round of catch in the backyard. There was certainly no love lost or gained between us. Instead, there existed a sort of chilling distance. I grew inured to his lack of fatherly affection to the point that it didn’t really bother me that much. I had come to resign myself to my relationship with a dad that was, well...different.

The next morning, after Sam had left for work, I sat down at the kitchen table where my mother was drinking her morning coffee and asked her, in a very offhanded and casual manner:

“Mom, you know those pictures in your closet...?” The blood immediately drained from her face as she jerked her head swiftly my way—both eyes boring into me.

“What!?” she exclaimed. “What were you doing in there?” I explained that I was searching for the stuff about Yeshiva High School and had come across the old leather valise. We sat in silence for a long and ponderous moment.

“Did you see the wedding photos?” she ventured shakily.

I nodded.

“So, you want to know ‘Who is the man? Who was the *chasan*?’” using the Yiddish word for bridegroom. I nodded again, a bit warily. My mother reached out and placed her hand atop mine.

“I knew this day would come, Ellie,” she said softly. “I just thought you’d be a little older when it did.”

I thought back to the many times I questioned my mother about why my father was not like the other dads. “Someday you’ll understand,” she would invariably and cryptically reply. “Someday you’ll understand.”

Finally, choosing her words carefully, my mother began to recite her story—actually, our story.

“That man, the groom in the pictures, was called Marton Adler-sheim,” she explained patiently. “Mortzy was the finest most wonderful man who ever I knew,” she continued, in a husky voice tinged with emotion.

“He..he was your husband?” I asked shakily, trying to make it easier for her. “Before you married Dad?”

My mother nodded with a wistful smile.

“Yes, *shaffeleh* (little bushel),” she got out. “He was my first husband and...,” Here she paused and looked into my eyes squarely. “...and he was your father.”

I sat in stunned silence as my stomach churned and the scales fell from my eyes. A flood of questions began bubbling up immediately as the meaning of what I had just heard sunk in.

“*Why had I never met my real father?*”

“*Where is this man, Marton ‘whatever’? What happened to him?*”

“*Why was Sam posing as my father?*”

“*Is my mother really my mother?*”

Once I had recovered somewhat from the shock, things started making sense to me. If this man, Sam, was an imposter and not my true father, that would resolve many of the questions that I had been struggling with. It would, in part, explain that emotional wall that existed between us. It would also explain certain mysteries that had confounded me regarding our religious observance.

I had for years accompanied Sam on foot every *Shabbos* to our nearby Lubavitch *shul* (synagogue). It was there that I would, since becoming a Bar Mitzvah, be called up to the *bimah* (altar) to read from the Torah. As per tradition, I would be called by my Hebrew name, “Eliahu Tzvi ben Mordechai.” The final two parts of the name mean “son of Mordechai.” But my father’s name was not Mordechai. It was Shmuel. This puzzled me, but not wishing to make waves, I had never questioned it. Now, I understood. Mordechai was Mortzy, my real father.

Another thing about the Torah ritual bothered me. According to Orthodox tradition, the honor of reading the first segment of the weekly Torah portion (the first *aliyah*) is given to a descendant of the tribe of Aaron the *Kohane*, while the second *aliyah* goes to a member of the tribe of Levi. Whenever I was called to the Torah, it was to read the second *aliyah*. Also, when the sexton called my name, it would be amended with the word “HaLevi,” indicating that I was a hereditary member of the Levites. Yet when my father’s name was called, no such distinction was announced. Since tribal affiliations were a matter of patrilineal descent, how could this be? How could I be a Levite when my father was not? I now had the answer.

I also had the beginnings of an answer as to why there was this tangible disaffection between Sam and me. Sam’s brother, Jacob, was the father of two daughters who would visit from time to time. I would always notice Sam’s interactions with his two nieces. His demeanor towards them was in stark contrast to the way he behaved toward me. I saw that he could be a warm, loving and strongly affectionate man—just not with me.

As these initial insights flooded my mind, I found that I still needed many more answers. I greatly wanted to interrogate my mother about all the details. How did my father die? How did she meet Sam? Did I have any unknown brothers or sisters?

But I did not ask. I held back.

It sounds strange, perhaps, but I somehow felt that probing too deeply into this alternate universe of my past might be seen as an act of disloyalty to the man who had raised me as his son. I held my tongue. Nevertheless, sensing my desire to know more, my mother

sweetly and patiently related her story to me in broad strokes as she sipped her morning coffee.

My mother, Rose, was originally from the Ruthenian village of Bilke, in what is now the Ukraine, while my father's birthplace was a nearby village, some three kilometers away. I believe Rose and Mortzy were married in Budapest. After years of trying, at age 38, she managed to get pregnant with me in the summer of 1943. Hungarian Jews, at the time, were living in an insulated bubble, blissfully oblivious to the impending onslaught of the Nazi "final solution," that would soon engulf their lives and signal their doom. I was born in Budapest on March 30, 1944, eleven days after German forces occupied Hungary on March 19. Shortly before my birth, Mortzy, my biological father, had been among the first Jews rounded up by the Nazis and their fascist henchmen, the Arrow Cross. My father was sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp, from which he never returned. As far as I have been able to determine, he never saw me, his only child.

My mother, with her newborn baby, found refuge in what was labeled the International Ghetto on the Pest side of the Danube. She miraculously survived the mass deportations to Auschwitz that led to the murder of more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews.

Shortly after the war's end, Rose made her way back to Budapest and connected with her brother-in-law, Sam Fixler. Sam had been married to my mother's sister, Raisele, and, like Rose, had lost his spouse in the inferno of the Holocaust. In a sort of reverse Levirate marriage, the couple wed. After a short stay in Israel, our little family immigrated to the US, settling in Buffalo. Although he never legally

adopted me, Sam Fixler gave me his name and raised me, so to speak, as his son. Wisely or not, my parents decided to put off telling me about my true provenance until I grew older.

My parents' story is more fully recounted in the following chapters, but I begin this book with this seminal moment of personal revelation, because it stands as a critical inflection point that would influence my life's journey moving forward. The impact of that discovery has taken shape in many ways, but perhaps the most salient lesson I learned was this: The truth must be sought out. Things are not always as they first appear. One must dig deeper — snooping around in a dusty old closet, perhaps — to arrive at the truth.

During the course of my legal career, I have often been required to look deeper. I was required to delve into every detail of a witness' testimony to determine if some detail was being hidden. I was frequently required to probe into the personalities of jurors to uncover any biases that might go against the interests of my client.

Just as my parents were reluctant to come forward with the truth about my origin for fear of embarrassment or other such reasons, parties involved in a lawsuit often attempt to conceal what is at the heart of their battle. But just as the pieces of my life fell into place upon my discovery, the facts surrounding a legal proceeding are often brought into clear focus under the bright illumination of the truth.

I have been fortunate, over the years, to have been involved in many fascinating cases, some of which you are invited to read about in the subsequent chapters. Whenever I was called upon to sum up a case before a jury in a courtroom trial, I frequently invoked the

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memory of my mother. I would point out that she was extremely wise, despite the fact that she was not an educated woman.

Don't think you so smart just because you go to school," she would admonish me in her charming European accent. "I got a *Life School*." I always urged juries to reflect upon the value of common sense and to trust their "street smarts" as they began their deliberations.

I invite you to join me on this literary look at my life's circular path. A path that led me from my birthplace in Budapest, to the courtrooms and basketball courts of New York, to the sunny fairways of south Florida, and eventually, in a search for my origins, coming full circle back to Budapest. I promise it will be a fascinating journey of revelation and redemption.

Welcome to my world.