



# The Fiftieth Gate: A Journey Through Memory

*Mark Raphael Baker*

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*'This gate here, I recognise it. Behind it is a steep slope, a hill, fields, grass. We would slide down it in winter.'*

*At last, an incontrovertible test through which my father's memory might be vindicated. Two lone gates that appear to lead nowhere.*

*'Push,' we scream, 'lift the latch and push.'*

*'No. I remember too much now. No.'*

A love story and a detective story, a study of history and of memory, this spellbinding new work explores a son's confrontation with the terror of his parents' childhood.

Moving from Poland and Germany to Jerusalem and Melbourne, Mark Raphael Baker travels across the silence of fifty years, through the gates of Auschwitz, and into a dark bunker where a little girl hides in fear. As he returns to scenes of his parents' captivity, he struggles to unveil the mystery of their survival.

*The Fiftieth Gate* is a journey from despair and death towards hope and life; the story of a son who enters his parents' memories and, inside the darkness, finds light.

## The Fiftieth Gate: A Journey Through Memory Details

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Author : Mark Raphael Baker

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# From Reader Review The Fiftieth Gate: A Journey Through Memory for online ebook

## Soph says

i literally cannot deal with mark baker

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## Alice says

I actually liked Baker's Midrash structure. What I don't like is that I have to write an essay on it.

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## Sofia says

ughhhhhhhhhh

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## Shelley says

This book was very moving. I found the stories captivating and just wanted to learn more of their lives and pasts. This is not the typical book I would read being very different in the style of writing from my usual preferences. Although I found it slightly confusing at times I actually really liked the creativity with which baker wrote his parents stories. Very glad this is a book which we have to study at school!

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## Lonleypurplecat says

This book....

The precious hours of my life...wasted...I'm..what..why..hell..

I respect the content of this book. The Holocaust is a tragic event that should never be disrespected or forgotten, but Baker can't write for shit. (Although I probably feel this way because I was forced to read it for school, otherwise you wouldn't have paid me to poke it with a 10 metre stick)

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## Velvetink says

(Review - now it's finished)!

"Freedom is not a happy ending. It is a flame that dances in remembrance, inside the blackness". p.314

Baker's parents lived through the Holocaust and he writes about journeying back with them to Europe, their memories and finding some kind of hope and what it means to be Jewish. There are some sections towards the end that are a bit confusing and disjointed - may have benefited from better editing perhaps, but a thought provoking book. The sources, biblio and info provided about searching for Jewish relatives, towns (pre WW2) etc are extremely helpful. For instance, this website "The Lost Jewish Communities of Poland" aka "Valley of Destroyed Communities"

<http://www.zchor.org/hitachdut/introduct...>

This publication lists the names of 4,500 Jewish communities which were destroyed in the Holocaust. They are recorded according to the geographical boundaries of 1938, before the territorial changes which were caused by the expansion of Nazi Germany.

I might also add Baker's book is a good adjunct to read along with *Everything is Illuminated* - Johnathan Safran Forer AND *Konin: A Quest* by Theo Richmond as they all deal with the Holocaust area around the shifting borders of what was once called Volhynia..(Poland,Belarus,Ukraine, Galicia etc) but each give different perspectives and information which compliment each other, and so far I've found finding books on this topic in that particular location quite a challenge. It seems that for this geographical area one needs to know Russian, Polish, Yiddish, Hebrew, Ukrainian and German if one is to do serious research pre WW2, and I am going to have to live a long time to learn them all I think to find what I am looking for.

Baker's father and grandfather's original last names was Bekirmaszyn or Beckermashin (one is Polish, one is Yiddish) and I've yet to learn the difference. The author wondered why he and his brother were called John and Mark, "gospel boys": the Bakers of Galilee. Mark Baker "knew there was something more deliberate in the names chosen for us, an attempt to obliterate not only my parent's foreignness but the memories attached to it". In Yiddish the author was named informally "Mattis", but no one in Australia knows him by that name. It comes from his father's memory of a boy killed on the road somewhere between Bolszowce and Belzec long before he emigrated down under. "Belzec" stumped me till halfway through the book. It is of course Belsen, & then the name Mattis takes on something chilling. No wonder Baker wondered.

I've read how migrants arrive to new countries with difficult sounding surnames - often they westernised their names, choosing something familiar sounding: cutting the name in half: symbolic of the meaning, choosing something random, going by your occupation. The Baker's in this case were not Bakers, but glass carters or haulers and traders. Mark wonders "by what right did his father have to lop the branches off the trees in their garden (family tree)? Baker-Machine?!!!!!! Mark asked his father, "Why Baker"? and his father answered ""by telling a joke about Berel, Merel and Shmerel, who changed their Yiddish names to Bok, Mok, and Shm... At this point he laughs, even before pronouncing the punchline. "So Shmerel said, "I'm going back to Poland." 'D'you get it, Shmerel! Shmock!, How could he be a Shmock in Australia?"" Baker's father could have chosen to change their their name to something sounding like their name in Russian, Ukrainian, Hebrew, Polish or even German; OR if the customs official couldn't say it right but to whatever he pronounced it as -ending up with a mispronunciation as their name, has often happened from migrant histories I've read of those entering the USA via Ellis Island. This makes tracing someone very difficult, (& don't forget those informal Yiddish names either! as you will find those on records as well) particularly when working backwards in time - add the fact of destroyed records - in fact whole towns razed in Galicia, Poland, and the Ukraine - records gone, it's a jigsaw pickup game...fitting the pieces together not knowing what the final picture will be.

Baker has gone some way to completing the jigsaw, for himself, what he accomplished and found, he is satisfied.

I am searching for where my great grandfather originally came from - for he shucked his past, his Jewishness on board the ship sailing here, like so many others..the past to be forgotten. Too Painful. Start anew. The glitch is what name(s), what language did he go by - we are only guessing so far from odd comments said, inferred or not mentioned. avoided.. Sifting and sorting. Picking up clues here and there, from books, from things handed down.. I have an ancient trunk handmade, hewn wood, he brought with him to Australia, full of crockery made in Eastern Europe - that my mother inherited - the trunk it's been painted over tons of times since. Should I get the wood dated?,or see if a museum or collector can fix it's origin; doesn't sound too hopeful, or stick with the paperwork trail. Frustration at finding nothing for months or elation with sudden discovery of a minor detail hounds me, and like Baker it feels like a crazy circus ride you can't get off till the end and you don't know when that will be till you find all the clues: to fill the empty silences, the things not ever spoken about.

There are many still searching, still many lost and unaccounted for. Reading all these holocaust memories, and journeys through the past, like "Konin" and "Everything is Illuminated" and "The Fiftieth Gate", & like so many others there's at once a huge hole in my heart, an uncomprehending at the horror man can do to his fellow man.

"it always begins in blackness, until the first light illuminates a hidden fragment of memory.." p.316

I won't tell you what "The Fiftieth Gate" refers to. You'll have to read the book.

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Another excursion into the Jewish past, memory, despair, hope and life?

\$2 op shop find.

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## **Amy Kew says**

Contrary to popular opinion, i really enjoyed reading this book. I found the concept of history and memory, really intriguing. It was nice to be able to read a book through school, that i normally wouldn't have chosen to read for pleasure, and actually enjoy reading it. It wasn't all about the death camps which was nice, i've read many books based on the Holocaust, from many different perspectives - however this book elaborated on life before, being caught, or the outbreak of war, which was lovely. Don't get me wrong, at times i did struggle to continue reading, and not accidentally on purpose - skip a couple pages and put down my phone and start texting, - but if you read it in one straight sitting its much easier to get through, and becomes quite enjoyable.

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## **Tara says**

Baker conveys the journey through the fog of 'truth' incredibly well. Pattered between his narrative is the voice of his parents, clutching their memories close to their chests. Does sharing your story make it stronger? Or do you lose some ownership, something that tethers you to your origins?

He pieces it together with equal parts of pain and joy. His mother's utter loss, who barely exists on paper. His father's irritation as Baker demands 'fecks', and then the disparate excitement when finding the right barrack at Auschwitz..

A lifetime's research has gone into reconstructing the lives of Baker's parents. I can't imagine the torment it must have been to rake over the past in this way. To find himself questioning their memories in his search for truth. He must have a strong and wonderful relationship with them.

I understand the gaping void of not knowing your own history. My own grandparents, and my infant mother, arrived in Australia in 1949. They came in part of a "group resettlement". To this day I dislike calling them "migrants". It's not like they chose their path. They passed away when I was too young to want more, and now I have nothing but a ship manifest that surfaced on the web a few years back. I've always wondered if searching for my family history would take me anywhere meaningful, or if their history disappeared with them when they fled. Baker makes me believe that there is something out there worth finding.

I didn't buy this book. Or borrow it. But somehow it came into my possession, and I am glad that it did. The cover art does not do it justice.

Ultimately, The Fiftieth Gate is well written, and incredibly well researched. It offers a warm narrative to an otherwise cold and dark timeline. Essential reading for anyone whose family rebuilt their lives after being branded only as 'refugees' or 'displaced persons'.

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### **Bellybubble16 says**

I absolutely hate this book with a passion greater than anything in the world. Although the subject of the book is a moving subject and quite an important one which I have much respect for... I find this book quite annoying and hard to understand. Baker is forceful and annoying to his parents and can't seem to understand that they do not wish to share their memories with him because they are in pain. I hate it. It's jumpy and boring. I can't even get past the 8th chapter.

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### **Michelle says**

Took me a while but I got there

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### **Cecilia says**

I really tried hard to read this book. I thought it would give me a window into the events of the holocaust and it did. The problem I had with the story, if you can call it that, is that the author seemed to drift into gore and suffering over and over again just for the sake of focusing on the inhumanity and brutality of the Nazis. I don't mean to demean or make light of the events of this tragic period in the world's history but this book wallowed in the worst and as I continued to read, the author seemed to be trying to outdo his own previous descriptions of the atrocities.

I couldn't finish it. Perhaps a Catholic, American born female of the 50's and 60's wasn't the author's audience. I read a fair amount about this topic and met people who shared their first-hand experiences. This

book just seemed excessive in it's dwelling on this sadness.

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### **Cheryl Leslie says**

This is a true tale of love, memory, the Holocaust and the present day. Mark Baker interviewed and videotaped his parents searching their particular memories of their separate lives in Poland during the Nazi terror. While his father Joe has vivid and traceable memories of being in the death camps, his mother, a five-year old at the time, is convinced her memories are as clear, though Baker, a historian, cannot seem to find documentation of what his mother tells him.

I liked this book once I was able to delineate who was speaking what memories. It seems painful what Baker put his parents through in his quest for the "truth" of their experience of the Shoah.

If you are interested in Holocaust history, this is a good book with first-hand experiences within a love story and how generations after may pursue this history.

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### **Jane Heo says**

really did not enjoy this, the style of writing wasn't for me. Some good ideas but overall really difficult to get through

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### **Uyen says**

Though it made for an informative read, *The Fiftieth Gate* was at times confusing, with its abrupt time hops and unmarked dialogue. I can appreciate the way Baker made unconventional decisions in the novel's composition, but ultimately, it didn't make for a compelling book. Two stars.

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### **Text Publishing says**

*'Combining precise historical research and poetic eloquence, Mark Baker's The Fiftieth Gate remains the gold standard of second generation Holocaust memoirs on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary edition.'*

**Christopher R. Browning**

*'Baker does with memory, what Rembrandt does with light. He uses it to model, to imagine, to illuminate, to astonish.'*

**Philip Adams**

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### **Andrew Montgomery says**

As I joined Mark Baker on his journey through both history and memory, I felt countless emotions. The way in which he approaches piecing together his parent's story is truly one of a kind - a combination of documented evidence and personal experience. At several points throughout the novel, I had to put the book

down simply to contain myself; countless tears were shared whether from happiness, sadness, anger, or frustration. This novel was gorgeously written. While Baker struggled at several occasions to find the right balance between researcher and son, the result of his efforts culminated in a sense of closure - for both himself, and his parents.

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## **Ruediger Landmann says**

*The Fiftieth Gate: A Journey Through Memory* is, at its core, historian Mark Raphael Baker's journey to record, contextualise, and understand his own family history: the Holocaust through the eyes of his parents, Polish Jews who survived it as children. His process combined interviews with his parents with meticulous combing of Polish, German, Russian, and American records. He even returns his parents to Poland--to their childhood villages and to Auschwitz--to discover what memories these places will shake loose.

The results are as potent as might be expected, and Baker's book is a mixture of his parents' statements in interviews and in the field. He combines this with descriptions of what he has learned from documentary evidence of the period and with creative non-fiction to fill in gaps.

What emerges is a meditation not just on family history, but on much bigger questions, including the reliability of memory, the ownership of the past, the need for and nature of memorialisation, the "value" (or even sacredness) of place, and even on the past as a kind of a fetish (in the anthropological sense of the word). Ultimately, what's at stake here is identity: Baker's own, that of his family, and of *dor dorot*, the generations to come. This quest for identity is thrown into sharp relief by the understanding reinforced by the book of just how perilously close the families and even their ethnic group came to annihilation. The stakes for identity are much higher than just "finding oneself".

Of course, the source material makes this an incredibly, horribly sad book. But it is Baker's contemplation of and reflection on his material that makes this book so fascinating and significant to me.

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## **Ria Lize says**

T\_T I never understood what was going on. Probably because I was reading too fast to get it all over and done with.

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## **Mgn says**

I read it for school. I wrote a killer essay about it but I really struggled to read it. Baker's idea is interesting- to research the Holocaust and team it with eye witness accounts from his Jewish holocaust survivor parents and draw a comparison between history and memory- But I found it rather difficult to read as it seemed to lack some element to tie it all together. I'd enjoy it if it was logically presented and consistently narrated, otherwise I found it hard to motivate myself to figure out what was going on. I did find the structure to be interesting though, it is called *The Fiftieth Gate*, has 50 chapters and has a motif about gates- such as the mention of gates of the concentration camps, a Jewish parable about gates and the gate of their house. It is a great idea and maybe I am a bit young to appreciate it but I really struggled.



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## **Hermien says**

Interesting would be the most accurate word for me to describe this book. Even though it deals with the writer's own family it has the feel of a book researched by an historian with a certain distance to his subject. I liked the parents who never over-dramatised what happened to them and were a lot less interested in digging up the past than their son. I'm glad I read it because it provided insight into the feelings of children of holocaust survivors.

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