



My name is Jakob Ringart.
I survived the Holocaust.
This is my story.

Jakob's Story

Part 1 · My Childhood 1925–38

The story is based on several interviews with Jakob Ringart.
Jakob Ringart has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

My Childhood 1925–38

Lodz

I was born in Lodz, approximately 120 km south-west of Warsaw. Lodz had a population of 700,000, some 240,000 of whom were Jews. There were many Germans in Lodz as well.

Most of the Jews in Lodz were quite poor. There were tailors and cobblers, some kept small shops. Most spoke Yiddish, but in my family we spoke Polish.

My father, my mother and my brothers

My father Isaj was head clerk at a large bank with a staff of 500. He had a prominent position at the bank and was well known in the city. I don't want to call him a 'manager' which would make people believe he was well off, even wealthy. He was not. So I say he was head clerk. The bank gave all types of banking services to Jewish businessmen. My father was a very nice person and well thought of.

My father and my mother Sara were married in 1918 when she was 27 years old. My brother Arthur was born the same year and my brother Boleslaw was born in 1922. Arthur and father would decide what we listened to on the radio. That's how I learned to like classical music. It was also Arthur who provided me with books. When I was twelve I was reading the works of many well-known Polish writers.



The photo above:
This is a photograph
from 1933 and I am eight
years old.



To the left:
This is a photo of my
family on a Friday
evening. To the left of
me is my father and my
brother Boleslaw, to the
right my brother Arthur
and my mother. The
photo is taken in our
apartment on Andrzejka
28, in Lodz, Poland, in
the beginning of the
1930s.

Both photos: Private

A child in a 'good' family

I was a child of a 'good' family, a bourgeois family, so I was not supposed to play in the inner courtyard of the apartment building.

But I did spend time with a girl who lived on the ground floor of our building, a Christian Polish girl.

We, the pupils in my class, didn't really meet in our spare time. At Christmas, though, everyone was there. There was food for the pupils and a ball for the parents in the evening. We decorated the gym for the occasion. We also had a Christmas tree at home, for the maid.

There were municipal schools, city schools and elementary schools. There were Polish-language schools where Jewish history and Jewish religion were taught.

At school

Our family put us in state schools which was not an obvious choice. There was a ruling which said that the number of Jews in state and municipal schools must be based on the proportion of Jews in the entire population. Jews made up a tenth of the population of Poland, so ten percent of the pupils in a class could be Jews. The ruling was called *numerus clausus*.

My father had wartime connections in the Polish administration. I could therefore go to a special school, a sort of experimental school. I needed to travel on two tram lines to get to school. The daughter of the chief of police was at my school, as was the son of the district governor. There were three elementary schools in the same building.

There were thirty pupils in our class, three of us were Jews. It was noticeable particularly when the priest visited. All stood up to read the prayer. We Jews did not take part. Instead we chased each other all around the school. The caretaker heartily disliked us.

No difference was made in class between Jews and Poles. We just didn't take part in religious instruction.

One of the Jewish boys was the son of very wealthy parents. The other one's father was an editor at the largest newspaper in Lodz. He had very modern toys. The first time I listened to music from a gramophone was at his house. I had a friend who was not Jewish, whose father owned the largest restaurant in the city.



Photo: Private

In this picture I am together with my brother Boleslaw and my mother. I am 14 years old. The photo was taken in front of a hotel in the Tatra-mountains on our last real vacation in the summer of 1939.

I remember always taking sandwiches to school during the years of economic crisis in the 1930s. I had one for myself and one for the poor, the children at the elementary school.

When I was 13 I applied to the Joseph Pilsudski secondary school. I passed the entrance exam but there was no place for me. There were already three Jewish boys in the class. I ended up going to a private secondary school.

Antisemitism

In the private secondary school there were not many Jewish pupils. Sometimes I would be called 'Jew' and beaten. When that happened, I would hit back. I hadn't come from a Jewish school. I came from a Polish school where I had been treated the same as other pupils. I wanted that in my new school too.

Many other boys were stronger. Some of them would stand around me saying 'beat up the damned Jew'.

The traditional Jews in our town wore black clothes. I did not feel I belonged to them. I identified with the group of assimilated Jews. I grew up with Polish culture. I was a Polish boy of Jewish background.

Photo: Yad Vashem



A class photo from a Jewish school in Lodz. The photo was taken in 1936.

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Part 2 • Life Changes 1938–40

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Life Changes 1938–40

Fräulein Rappaport and the Jews from Germany

Father had actually trained as an engineer. He had studied in Germany and knew the language. My brothers and I also learned German from a Jewish lady who lived with us. She was from Germany, Fräulein Rappaport.

She was one of those who had been thrown out of Germany since she was a Polish citizen. It had happened suddenly, in 1937. The Germans expelled Jewish Polish citizens whose families had lived in Germany for generations.

Fräulein Rappaport had worked for the Jewish community in Dresden. She was an elderly lady. Three times a week she would give my brothers and I German lessons. She lived in our home and ate with us.

A large group of Jews came to Lodz from Germany. Father was on the welcoming committee. They hired an empty factory building and built bunk beds. Those people who had lost their homes were to live there.

Father took me to see one of those buildings. I asked 'Father, why don't they live the way we do? Why do they have to live that way? It's not nice.' I couldn't understand anything. It was my first encounter with people who didn't live like me.

War breaks out, 1939

War broke out when I was 14. People ran in the streets with bags and cases. Everyone knew the Germans were coming, we knew they had crossed the border.

Our house had large double doors towards the street. Carriages would drive in and out through them. There were big posters on the door, in Polish. They read 'We will not give you even a small piece of our country, we will defend ourselves'. There were also patriotic symbols on many windows.

As I was going out I saw two blue-uniformed policemen in the street. They were wearing lots of equipment and helmets. That was rather unusual. Policemen always wore caps. Suddenly

there was a fellow who started tearing down the posters. It was dreadful. To me it was obvious that we should defend our country. I ran after the policemen. I said, 'Sir, there's a boy tearing down the posters'. He answered me 'Get lost, you monkey'. That was a terrible experience, the police saying such a thing, a person who was supposed to defend me.

We had arranged to have father responsible for our whole block. The cellars had been emptied in case there was a bomb attack. I was messenger between two units with a special armband. I felt important. And suddenly, there is the policeman saying a thing like that. 'Get lost.' That is my first recollection, my first experience, that 'something is happening', life is no longer normal. I just stood there, turned to stone.

Then it got worse, the Germans marched in. The German population threw flowers at them in the main street and many hung out small flags with a swastika. They marched to music along the main street in our city.



Photo: Yad Vashem

The German army is welcomed by the large group of Germans living in Lodz.

Life is about to change.

*When Jakob returns to school
after the summer holiday in 1939
nothing is the same.*

*The Occupation Authority has
ordered students of Jewish origin
to immediately leave school.*

The Yellow Band

At the beginning of November all Jews were ordered to wear a yellow 10 cm wide band around their left arm. I wore it on my school clothes. They resembled a military uniform, long like the Russian ones with a high collar and buttons.

The same month the main street in our city, Piotrkowska, became Adolf Hitler Strasse. And Jews were not allowed on it.

In our home we would not have thought of taking off the band. A decree was a decree. 'You'll see it won't be so bad,' said father.



Photo: Bundesarchiv, bild 101-133-0747-12, Knobloch, Ludwig

This is Adolf Hitler Strasse in 1941.

I just wanted to cross the street

Father had a friend who owed him money. This friend lived in the other part of town. To get to his house I had to cross the 'sacred street', the one where Jews were not allowed.

I crossed the street. A German soldier called to me 'Jew, come here'. I went over to him, and he said, 'Didn't you know that you, a Jew, weren't allowed to walk on the Adolf Hitler Strasse?' – 'Yes, I know,' I said, 'I was just crossing to the other side.' – 'No,' he said, 'you were planning to walk along this street.' – 'No, I wasn't.' – 'Yes, you were,' he said. And he took me to the police station. Towards evening there were 22 of us there. We were taken to one of the city gaols.

It was a prison for interrogation, located near my home, in the Ulica Kopernika, and we were placed in the cellar. We were all examined and judged. They took everything away from us. One of the guards was angry because I had a tin with a few cigarettes. 'How old are you?', he asked. 'I'm 14.' – 'Should you be smoking?' He lectured me about smoking. Of course, he took my cigarettes. I didn't get them back.

We slept in the basement and afterwards we came up to the cell. Many Jews had been brought in earlier, some from another town, close to Lodz. There was a lot of 'Apothecary, sir', 'Doctor, sir', 'Solicitor, sir', and so on.

They chose me to report in the morning. I always stood right at the door and reported us, 22 persons. Then we were given black coffee.

The food was bad, watery cabbage soup and black bread. One of the fellows was a pickpocket. He'd already been there for a few months. When he was released I gave him half my handkerchief, saying 'Go to my house. They will give you money, food, whatever you want. Tell them I'm alive.' When they found out they could start sending me food. Our maid would queue for a long time on Friday evening to give me the parcel.

I was still in gaol on my 15th birthday, January 4th. A few weeks later I was called to the office. All my belongings were there in a box. I had to sign a document. I think it said something about my having been sentenced to a month in prison. They called it an 'administrative' penalty, like a parking fine. I had to pay for every day I had spent in prison out of the money I had in my pocket.

Did I run that evening! I had a pass in case anyone stopped me. I ran home and rang the door bell. In the time I had been in prison my mother had gone grey.

Three men are hanged in the square

There was a big beautiful town squared in Lodz, 'rynek'. One day we were all ordered to go there. That's what the posters said. At the square there was a structure, a gallows. Three men were hanging from it. It was a dreadful experience. Father had said I mustn't go, but I went anyway. They hung there. Everyone could see them. We just stood and looked, quiet. Their heads were tilted, their faces were green and their hands had been tied behind their backs.

They had been selected in order to frighten people, so we would see them. I felt that it could happen to me too. I was frightened. The world was no longer the same. My safe world was gone, all I had always known and been accustomed to.

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Part 3 · Confined to the Ghetto 1940–44

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Confined to the Ghetto 1940–44

Everything in a backpack

There was an announcement that all Jews were to move to the ghetto, a very limited area in the city. Father left the bank. He turned everything over to a German. Father was not allowed to travel by tram. He had to walk. He was caught several times. He would come home all dirty because he had been forced to clean the streets.

The German administration had thought it would take four months for all the Jews to move into the ghetto.

The chief commandant probably felt it was taking too long, so he arranged a pogrom. 70 people were killed. That made people afraid they would be shot. And the queue to get into the ghetto grew very long. It was winter and everyone stood there with their carts.

We prepared by keeping a fully packed backpack in the house. In a crisis we could take it and get away quickly. Our doorbell rang at the end of January 1940. There were two young SS-men, Germans, in black uniforms with a swastika. They said our flat had been requisitioned and that we had 20 minutes to get ready. Mother was not yet dressed, she was in her dressing gown.

The Germans did nothing more, they didn't hit us. Mother went into the bathroom. I heard her cry in there. I was 15 at the time. We took our backpacks. We had to take father's too. He wasn't home.

We had prepared the backpacks in advance, in case this happened. The Germans had decreed that one should bring 25 kg, only the most important things. When we were about to leave, Mother remembered that she hadn't packed knives and forks. She asked whether she could do it then. The SS-men replied 'No, no, that's something everyone needs'. The cutlery was to be left to whoever would come after us.



A sign at the entrance to the ghetto said: Area for Jews, entrance forbidden.

This is how we lived

At the beginning of our stay in the ghetto we went to some friends and slept at their 'house'. Father eventually found a position in the ghetto administration, working with the distribution of places to live. He had left the bank. He left everything behind and went to see the head of the ghetto, Chaim Rumkowski.

Mother, father, an aunt and I all lived in one room in a three-room flat. It was a very small room. But the house was big, a five-storey building with at least 50 flats. Our room was on the 4th floor. There was of course no lift. I think the street was Brodzinska and our house was number 26.

In reality we were not allowed to bring anything at all with us to the ghetto, but we had managed to smuggle in a few things from our old home, for instance the beds. We gave the caretaker our sewing machine, so he didn't report us.

I was in charge of the sewers

Father had had to leave his position at the bank. He realized, though, that he had to do something. So he was put in charge of the administrative office that decided where the ghetto inhabitants would live. The same administrative department, Wirtschaftsabteilung, was charged with keeping everything clean. I was to take charge of the sewers. All the waste ran along the gutters and collected in the open sewers, which needed emptying. The Germans were afraid of typhoid fever, so the gutters were to be kept clean and whitewashed. Several people had that job. They kept order and whitewashed; each person was responsible for a certain number of houses, sort of like caretakers.

Mother was experienced in organizing large soup kitchens for the poor and many people wanted her for that job. During the time in the ghetto she managed the Old Age Home, Altersheim.

People arrived from many places, from Berlin, Hamburg and Vienna. They came to us before being sent on to Auschwitz. Mother took care of the elderly. She spoke German. Then, one day, trucks arrived. I helped her get everyone up onto the back of the trucks. They were to be transported, gassed to death. My mother was very unhappy, she was so fond of them.

Gettoverwaltung

A certain German, Biebow, was the administrative chief of the Lodz ghetto. He started a "company" together with some other investors. They called it the *Gettoverwaltung* (Ghetto Administration). Most of the Jews in Lodz were craftsmen, so the company soon found workers for the workshops and small factories Biebow set up. The products were delivered to the German military and the workers were given soup and so called ghetto money.

Regular apartments were altered to become factories. Father was acquainted with the head of the building administration, Banabteilung, who carried out the actual alterations. I was 15 when Father asked his acquaintance to arrange a job for me. That's how I became an apprentice in the mechanics workshop. I would run errands and started to work as a mechanic and a locksmith, schlosser. The foreman would call me from his own window and give me tasks in different places. I carried a box of tools under my arm. I would go off and repair whatever needed it, then return and report the number of



Photo: USHMM

One of the workshops in the ghetto.

hours it had taken me.

The old smith died after two years. A friend of mine, four years my senior, became the smith and I became his assistant.

My brothers disappeared

Arthur, my eldest brother, left together with his girlfriend while I was in prison. They escaped to the Russian-occupied part of the country. We received one letter. After that, nothing more was heard.

Boleslav, my other brother, also disappeared. If I hadn't been in jail, we would all have gone together to Czystochowa, my mother's home town. But he went on his own.

Some relatives fled into the ghetto, others left to go elsewhere. The bonds that united us were loosening. Each person had to look out for himself.

Soup was served out of a large cauldron

There were many large soup kitchens in the ghetto. The soup was cooked in big cauldrons. At every workshop and factory the workers were given a 30-minute lunch break. That's when the soup was served. Everyone had vouchers. You handed in a voucher when you passed the caretaker's window. To the girl who served the soup we said in Yiddish *nemt tifer, nemt tifer*, 'dig deeper, dig deeper'. Down at the bottom were the potatoes or whatever was the mainstay of that particular soup. Sometimes it was cabbage.

The bread was another queue, at the bakery. Once a week we collected round loaves for the family. There were other places where there were mounds of vegetables. Portions were weighed out. In my family I was the one who queued for food rations.

Fire wood and coal were also rationed. People increased the amount of available fire wood by tearing down and burning the wooden fences in the ghetto.

Food rations became progressively smaller until they amounted to about one third of what the German population got. It was enough so we didn't die, but not enough to live on.

In one part of the ghetto there was a small patch of soil where lettuce and some vegetables were grown. I took care of one of those lots of 200 m². I grew carrots, beets, lettuce and cabbage. I sowed it all in spring and in late summer I slept there in a small hut and watched out lest someone try to steal our vegetables.

The hunger was almost indescribable. You had but one single thought, eating your fill. Mother and I would lock away a part of the bread. I would have finished it otherwise. Some people collected their entire ration and cooked soup. They then finished the whole ten-day ration at one sitting.

I wanted to be a ghetto policeman

Nobody was allowed to be out after seven o'clock in the evening. Sometimes we would steal out and run to a friend's house. There were social gatherings where someone would play music on a manually worked gramophone. People listened and danced, young people fell in love. I was too young for all that and a bit childish.

In the early days there was a theatre in the ghetto where they put on plays. There were even concerts. Some of it was filmed and used as propaganda in other European countries.

Then of course most of my friends were roped into the police force. They saw to it that nobody stole from the bakeries and food stores. I wanted to join but wasn't allowed to. Father didn't want our name sullied by one of us being a ghetto policeman.

They took the children

The transports began when we'd been in the ghetto for one or two years. The Jewish council was responsible for arrangements in the ghetto. The Council head, Chaim Rumkowski, said that 10,000 people had to be collected. After a selection they were sent away. It was dreadful.

In 1942 an order was issued that all children below the age of ten must be given over. At the same time we were suddenly no longer allowed to go out at all, not to leave the house. The operation lasted three days. On the first day a large truck pulling a trailer arrived.

The SS-men wore grey overalls. The truck would stop at a house and all the families who lived there had to come out to the yard. That way they checked to see if there were any young children.

When they let us in again I went over to a window. That was forbidden. I saw a car towing an open cart full of children lying on top of each other. They were screaming and crying. I could hear that, even though the window was shut.

The SS-men in their grey overalls dragged the children to the car and threw them up onto the trailer floor. Mothers who didn't want to let their children go were beaten. One mother was shot to death. When it was all over the truck left. We didn't even want to think the thought; if this is what they do to the children, what will happen to us?

Rumkowski made a speech on the day before the trucks arrived, saying: '... it is a terrible pain for me... but we must do it in order to survive ...', and so on. I believe it was a deep grief for him.

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Part 4 • In Different Camps 1944–45

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Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

In Different Camps 1944–45

The Last Days in the Ghetto

The ghetto grew smaller and smaller. The process of emptying it had been going on for months. Our area, where we lived, was the last part left. We no longer knew what to do. We had had no food rations for several months. We still got water out of the tap, but our food was finished.

Announcements were posted all over the surrounding walls. They said to report to the place where the trains left from. If we did it before 6 o'clock in the morning we'd be sent to another camp where there was food. The announcement also said they needed workers.

Finally, we decided. The tram ran right outside the house where we lived. I carried the cases, mine and father's. Father was unwell, he walked with a cane. We got onto the tram early in the morning. When we arrived we were given a whole loaf of bread – just as promised in the notices on the walls. We were calmed. If they were giving us bread they couldn't be intending to hurt us.

When we arrived to Radegast we were forced to get into a train. There were 60-70 people in each wagon. In the corner there were two buckets. One had water, the other was the toilet. The train left at about ten o'clock. It was July 26th, 1944.



Photo: Yad Vashem (1944)

SS-men guarded, while the ghetto police made sure we, Jews from Lodz, boarded the trains.

To Auschwitz-Birkenau

It was all dark in the wagon and all I felt was the stench of faeces from the bucket in the corner. I must have fallen asleep but I was awakened again when the train stood still. There was no more thumping sound from the rails. I listened. A child wept. Someone snored. Nobody moved.

Had we arrived? I tried to stand up. It was slow work. To the right, way above my head there was a small opening, like a window. I stood on tiptoe to look out. When I did it felt as though my lungs were compressed by an iron hand. I couldn't breathe. I saw strong lamps on cement columns, and barbed wire. I had no idea where they had brought us but I was very scared. At first I wanted to wake my parents but decided to let them sleep.

I almost fell onto the floor again, but I didn't get to sit for long. It was still dark out when the doors were opened. I heard men screaming 'Out! All out!' . It was far from the train to the ground and I helped mother. We wanted to take our cases but the men told us to leave them.

There were soldiers all over. Guns. Dogs. And people in striped clothes. (Probably prisoners from the KANADA COMMANDO who collected everything of value brought by the people in the transports and put it all in big store rooms.)

They pushed us into lines. Women and children went one way, men and boys went another way. We marched in two long lines. I saw mother in another line. She called out to me 'Take care of yourself.' That's the last I heard.

We had to make two lines

The lines walked slowly, slowly towards a German officer in shining boots. He kept one foot on a wooden box. He was wearing a nice cap and was clean shaven. He held a horse whip in one hand, and used it to point left and right. I had no idea what he meant by that. I held on to father's sleeve. He walked with his cane and came up to the man. There were two prisoners in striped clothes beside him. They didn't look as though they were starving.

The officer pointed to me with a sign for 'right'. Then he pointed at father making a sign for 'left'. I tried to go with Father. One of the men in striped clothes hit me hard in my face and I fell headlong to the right. Father walked on in the other direction. That could be the reason why I am sitting here today. I never saw Father again. Nor Mother.

We carried on walking in long lines towards a barracks. Big columns held up the roof and there were rugs on the ground, no proper floor. Except for that it was empty.

Henry, a friend from the ghetto, had arrived on the same transport. We caught sight of each other, embraced and cried. It was the first time either of us had been separated from our parents and we still didn't know where they had brought us nor what would happen.

Registration

After half a day we were chased out of the barracks to another building. Before entering we had to undress. (Everything was put in piles, the prisoners got only their shoes back.)

Other prisoners in striped clothes shaved all our hair off, first on our heads, then around the genitals and finally in our armpits. Down the center of the head they left a line of longer hair (in order to identify them as prisoners. If they tried to escape they would be recognized on the outside).

Then we went into a place with shower pipes in the ceiling. First hot water, then cold. That kindled a spark of hope that they wouldn't shoot us, since they let us shower.

In the following room they showered us with disinfectant. Another prisoner came and gave us some clothes. I got a shirt, a jacket and a pair of trousers, nothing in my size. The underwear was made from Jewish prayer shawls, to humiliate us.

Photo: Yad Vashem



When we arrived in Birkenau, we were divided in two lines. My mother went together with the women and I went with my father.

Photo: Yad Vashem



A man was inspecting each person.

“The Gypsy Family Camp”

Then we were taken to the “Gypsy Family Camp”. There were 36 barracks, about 18 on either side. They looked like former horse stables, in each barracks there was a heating stove. It could have been used in winter, so the horses wouldn't be cold.

There were many of us. I was sent to one of the barracks where there were no bunks. There was a pile of blankets in a corner, the kind used for horses. They were rather large and thick. In the evening we covered the floor with the blankets and lay on them to sleep.

We had no markings on our clothing and they didn't tattoo us. So many of us had arrived at the same time. We were totally nameless.

There must have been 800 or 900 men in each barracks. There was a large container for urinating. In the summer it was all right but in winter it was bad. If I went there to urinate my place was gone when I returned. I had to lie closest to the door where there was a cold draught. I tried to wait and not get up until morning.

Already on the second day a kapo came to our barracks (a prisoner with superior status; a collaborator with the camp management whose task it was to guard the other prisoners and supervise their work). He was well-dressed. He walked back and forth among us saying that we Jews must give up the dollars and diamonds that we had sneaked into the camp. Otherwise we would be punished. I cannot recall whether anyone reported.

At one end of the barracks there was a special space. That was where the 'block elder' lived.

We were awakened every morning at 4 o'clock. First of all we had to go to the washing barracks where there was a long cement bench with holes in it. That was our toilet. The water came out of a pipe. We washed and dried using our shirts. There was no soap.

At five we had to stand in line for roll call. In each row stood five people. One hour later an SS-man came to count us. When he arrived our block elder would announce: 'I report barracks number 22 with 820 persons and 3 dead.' Our block elder was not Jewish. He wore black triangles which meant he was a German criminal. The block elders were not the worst. The worst were the kapos who helped them. They tormented us.

The barbed wire around the “Gypsy Family Camp” had a 3 kw charge. That was high tension. If you were not wearing your clogs, touching it was enough to kill you.

We stood for an hour for roll call, and for another hour if needed. The number of persons reported – including the dead – had to tally. They counted the dead as well. When the SS-man had registered everyone there was a loud signal. A few men were sent off to collect a couple of large tins from the kitchen. They contained the black liquid. The prisoners also brought bread and marmalade, but that was put in the room where the block elder lived.

We went in and got a piece of bread with a dollop of carrot marmalade and black coffee out of a tin. There were not enough tins to go round. One had to finish in a hurry, others were waiting their turn.

That was our everyday life. We did nothing. Once we had eaten, when the distribution of food had been done, we were forced outside. Some were called to barracks duty. They sorted all the horse blankets and cleaned up. The rest of us just wandered about the camp.

The kommando in heaven

One day, when I was wandering about, I met a friend from the ghetto, Monke. They had taken him away back in May, in a street raid. He'd been in the camp longer than the rest of us. He said to me 'Make sure you get out of here. Here all you do is die. You've got to get out of here as quickly as possible'. I told Henry too.

Later in September it started to rain and it got all muddy. The religious prisoners collected in a circle to say their morning prayers. They stood in a tight circle to keep warm. When I saw them pray I envied them. It was as though they were not there. In their prayers they were somewhere else. I felt like an outsider. I had no faith.

They made a selection during the Jewish holidays. We had to line up, naked down to the waist. In rows of five. An SS-man came, our ribs stuck out. He pointed out the ones who looked weak or sick. The prisoners in striped clothes took

them away to the barracks across from ours. They would be kept there until morning, then sent to the gas chambers.

We had asked other prisoners what had happened to our parents, where they had gone. They would point to the chimney. We could see it from the “Gypsy Family Camp”. It was always smoking, and sometimes there were flames. The older prisoners told us that the people we missed were up there, in the HEAVENLY COMMANDO. At first we didn't believe it. But we felt the smell. It stank. Eventually we accepted it. The men who had been picked out at the selection also knew it. They cried and moaned the whole night. They prayed to God and called out 'don't forget us', *fargess undz nisht* in Yiddish. And I have not forgotten them.



Block BIIe in the Gypsy Camp.

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Graphic design: Cecilia Undemark Péterfy



My name is Jakob Ringart.
I survived the Holocaust.
This is my story.

Jakob's Story

Part 5 · End of War and Postwar Experience

The story is based on several interviews with Jakob Ringart.
Jakob Ringart has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

End of War and Postwar Experience

To Braunschweig

In October of 1944 they called out an order through the loudspeakers. All those who could handle metal processing equipment were to report to Block 14. I remembered what Monke had said about the camp – that the best was to get out of there. So I took Henry with me and joined the line. A man in civilian clothes looked at us. He turned out to be the personnel manager for a company called Bissing NAG AG in Braunschweig. They produced trucks. The SS had given him permission to buy slaves. He asked which hinges there were. I knew things like that. I had worked in the ghetto as an apprentice mechanic and locksmith.

Those of us who were chosen were closed into a special barracks. Both Henry and Monke were there too. A few days later we were loaded onto a train. We didn't know where we were going or what awaited us. We knew only that they needed workers for some machinery.

The lice eat us

Just then the English had bombed Braunschweig. A few of us had to go straight from the train and start fixing broken windows and doors. The rest were marched on to a camp.

After a few hours there was an air raid siren. The SS-man who was with us was frightened, he took us to one of the cement buildings. At the same time I saw mothers with children come running. Seeing that was wonderful. Something was making them hide. There was a power above those who had tormented me for five years.

The SS-man didn't know what to do with us. He went into the building and kept watch over us from the entrance. We had to stand outside.

In the camp where we were the bunk beds were in three tiers. They were like a frame with nothing but a cloth and a blanket.

A week later we found out that workers were needed in a kommando in another, smaller camp, outside the city. At that factory they produced the chassis for trucks. I reported to a small group there and to the night shift. I counted on the SS sleeping at night.

The conditions in the camp were horrible. The ones who worked at night slept in the same bunks as the ones who worked during the day. The place stank and we were eaten by lice.

I lathed round bronze barrels, I had to make eight each night. They weighed 10-12 kg each, and needed to be carried and worked over. Two Italian prisoners worked there and a master craftsman called Rudi Ehlert. He was a German. Once he came up to me and told me that his mother could not eat the crust of the bread and that if I wanted I could have a small sack of them. I was grateful. He was a very friendly and nice person.

Beside me at the machine was another prisoner from my transport. Every other night he brought a big crock full of good soup. He shared it with me.

In the morning when I came back from work I spent an hour sitting on the bed killing lice. But it didn't help. When I woke up towards evening I was covered in sores and bites. There was no water. We lived in dirt and filth and were chased out to work.

From the beginning of 1945 the Allied fighter planes flew very low. They bombed German transports. Sometimes we had nothing to do because the deliveries did not arrive at the factory.

It was April and quite cold

On a spring day at the end of March 1945 we had to march to Braunschweig and then on many kilometers to Wattenstedt. There we were loaded onto trains, 70-80 men in each wagon.

The allied forces were making progress from all directions.

Because of that the Nazis had Jakob and other prisoners transported all over Germany in packed freight wagons.

The trains made a stop at the Ravensbrück concentration camp where the prisoners were given Red Cross food packages. During the last days the prisoners got no other food.

Finally the prisoners arrived at Wöbbelin concentration camp, near the city of Ludwigslust in Mecklenburg.

'The building was still unfinished,' Jakob tells us. 'There was nothing there. In front of the laundry hut there was a pile of corpses'.



Photo: USHMM

The prisoners arrived at Wöbbelin concentration camp.

Jakob and other prisoners were forced onto a freight train on May 1st.

The train never left the camp but many prisoners died that night of illnesses and because the wagons were so overcrowded – just before they would have been liberated.

The doors were opened on the 2nd of May. The camp had been liberated by an American airborne division.

What happened afterwards?

*After being liberated
Jakob was brought to
Bergen-Belsen.*

*Doctors discovered he had
TBC and suggested he be
treated in Sweden.*

*On July 20th 1945 Jakob
arrived to Trelleborg
by boat from Lübeck.*

In Lübeck we had to have a sauna followed by a cold shower. Many of us were weak and we didn't know why they treated us that way. Then we were sent by boat from Lübeck to Trelleborg. When I arrived I saw a young woman in uniform, a Swedish WAC. She gave me a cup of hot chocolate and a sandwich with liver paste spread. That was the welcome to this new country. It was my first encounter with Sweden. Then we were placed in quarantine for three weeks, in a school building in Trelleborg. A young man taught us some Swedish and some typically Swedish songs.

Since I was ill I was sent to a hospital in Växjö and from there to a military hospital in the forest near Avesta. I was there for half a year. Then I was brought to the Jonas Selggren Sanatorium near Gävle. I started correspondence courses. I studied Swedish, maths and physics.

I was released from the sanatorium at the end of 1946. I continued being treated for many years to heal my lungs. The treatment continued even when I moved to Stockholm to study at the Stockholm Institute of Technology. I got a degree in electrical engineering.

I met Hanna, my future wife, in Växjö. She was also from Lodz and we were about the same age. She had come to Sweden with her two sisters. We made a new family. We were married at the Stockholm synagogue on February 2nd, 1947. We have four children and eight grandchildren.

Jakob has worked for various Swedish electronics companies. He was at Swedish Philips for thirty years, until his retirement. Today Jakob is the Honorary President of the Association of Holocaust Survivors. He often visits schools to tell pupils about his experiences during the Second World War.

Photo: Private



This is a photo taken during my first months in Sweden. I am the sixth person from the right.

Henry – my friend from the ghetto

Henry met a girl who had relatives in the United States. He moved there and studied chemistry. We still keep in touch.

Monke – my friend from the ghetto

Monke had a relative in Sweden. They were the first Swedish Jewish family I visited.

Two different worlds

In the summer of 1948 I returned to Poland. It was not a nice feeling. I went there mostly to visit my brother Boleslaw in Silesia. He could not get out of there. Eventually I arranged a visa for him and he came to Sweden.

I also went to visit a cousin in Lodz. The city was so changed. It was empty. Everyone I had once known was gone. I went to the house where we had lived. Other people lived there now. The caretaker's wife – the one we'd given the sewing machine to – recognized me. When she saw me she said 'Hello, is that you, Kuba? Have you come for your sewing machine?'

It was off. It was as though we lived in two different worlds. What did I care about the sewing machine or about anything else? She was still there in her hole. To her the sewing machine meant a fortune. My world was completely different.

Classmates in Lodz

A few years ago I met my school mates in Lodz. Those who were still there. There were 14 of us. I was the only Jew. Two of the others had been given a commendation by Yad Vashem for having protected Jews. That was a pleasant surprise.

Photo: Eva Wymark, SKMA/SCAA



Jakob has worked in various Swedish electronics companies, including Swedish Philips, for thirty years until his retirement.

He is now Honorary President of the Association of Holocaust Survivors.

He often visit schools to tell about his experiences during the Second World War.

Why did I survive?

Why did I survive? Through a series of coincidences.

Sometimes I think it was because mother and father were good people. They were sincere and they hurt nobody.
I remember that they let me bicycle with matzes at Passover. I gave them to poor people.

Perhaps that was why ... what do I know? One cannot know why.

Or maybe I survived to tell about my experiences, so that something similar will never be repeated.



Photo: Eva Wymark, SKMA

Jakob Ringart, 2010.

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