My name is Max Safir.
I survived the Holocaust.
This is my story.

Max Story

Part 1 · My Childhood 1925-1938

The story is based on several interviews with Max Safir.
The family of Max Safir has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

My Childhood 1925-1938

The Fire in Bodzentyn

My name is Max Safir, my Jewish name is Shimon Manes Szafir*.

I was born in Bodzentyn, a small town in southern Poland. I don't know exactly when I was born, what day or what year.

I celebrate my birthday on the 10th of November, and I usually say that I was born in 1925, because I know that my cousin was born then, and we were the same age.

In Bodzentyn my father Icek owned a mill. Next to the mill there was a stream that ran the mill. When I was an infant there was a fire in the mill beside our house. It was wintertime. My parents ran into the house to collect their things. To protect me my mother put me on a cushion and placed it on a tree stump on the ice in the stream.

Suddenly the tree stump started to float. Luckily, one of my cousins, Zindl, could swim and he saved me. During my childhood he often reminded me of it, and I looked up to him as my hero.

In the photo you see my uncle Beresh and his family in Bodzentyn. Three of my cousins emigrated to the British mandate Palestine in the 1930s.

*) *When Manes came to Sweden in 1955 the authorities changed his name to Max, because they thought it was easier to spell.*

My oldest brother Israel was married to a woman called Sara. They lived in Skarzysko-Kamienna, a town close to Kielce.

My sister Feige and her husband Jona.

My brother Natan and his cousin Shirley (Sara) Ejnesman. She emigrated to Canada before the war.

Unfortunately no photo of me as a child has survived. And I don't have any photos of my parents Icek and Perl, or siblings Moshe, Feivl, Henja and Hindl.

My father's mill was destroyed in the fire, that is why we moved to Kielce, about 30 kilometres to the west. My father ran a sawmill there that manufactured wood for parquet floors and frames.

I don't know how much education he had but I know that he and my mother were religious. My mother was a housewife, her name was Perl, and she was very beautiful. She and my father were very kind.

I had five older siblings, Israel, Natan, Moshe, Feige, and Feivl, and I had two younger sisters, Hindl and Henia. They were twins. In Bodzentyn I had several uncles, and I also had an aunt in Kielce who I was close to.

My father was tall and dark and had a beard. He was deeply religious. Every morning, before going to work, he said his morning prayers. He stood there mumbling, waking me up. I didn't like that. Especially in winter when it was cold, I wanted to get going as soon as possible.

On the day of rest, the Sabbath, and on holidays, my father took me to the synagogue.

My brothers and sisters were kind. They got married eventually and had their own children. Sometimes I would babysit for them. But I was happiest with my uncles and cousins in Bodzentyn. As often as I could I would sneak off to visit them. They seemed happy to see me and took good care of me.

On the farm in Kielce where we were living there were several houses. Our apartment was small but modern and on the ground floor. Opposite our house there was a kiosk where you could fetch fresh drinking water. My mother used to say: "Manes take the buckets and fetch water". You had to pay with a special token to a man sitting beside the pump.

My mother used to warn me not to spill or drink from the water. That's why I drank from a fountain that stood there. The man that collected the money didn't like that. One time he suddenly rushed out of his wooden shed and gave me a beating.

Antisemitism

When I was six or seven years old, I started at the religious Talmud Tora-school. I learned Hebrew there. At home we spoke Yiddish, but I also spoke Polish. I wasn't very fond of going to school, but I went anyway. Other children saw that I was an orthodox Jew because of the locks at my temples. On my way to school there was always someone who tripped me. I took long detours in order to be left alone.

Whenever I wanted to avoid trouble, I used to leave school and walk to Bodzentyn, to my cousins and uncles.

In my spare time I mostly hung out with other boys. We used to play football, sneak into games or go to the movies. When I went with my brother Feivl I got in for free. Children in the company of an adult didn't have to pay.

In Kielce we mostly socialized with Jews, mostly with people who went to our synagogue. Many of our acquaintances complained that life was hard in Kielce because there was so much antisemitism. For example, you weren't allowed to walk on the same side of the street as the Christian Poles. If you did, you would get a beating.

Sometimes there was violence against Jews, so called pogroms. It was worst during the Christian Easter. Then my father used to board up the windows of our flat, because when the Poles came from the Catholic church nearby, they threw stones at our windows.

A woman we knew well also walked past us on her way back from church. During winter, the woman would come to our house every Saturday morning to light the fire in our stove, because orthodox Jews aren't allowed to do any work on the Sabbath. My mother put some Sabbath bread and her pay in a jar on the stove. This lady was awfully kind. She even spoke some Yiddish.

But she also picked up a stone, a small stone, and threw it at our house when she walked from church.

In the evenings I used to sit with a couple of friends on some cellar stairs in the street. We were making plans to leave Poland. “Do you see the moon?”, I said. “Over there, far away, is Palestine.” I dreamed about getting there.

I was ten years old and got by well on my own. I did some things that my parents didn’t know about. As often as I could I went to the scouts where Jewish youths prepared to emigrate to the British mandate Palestine. In summer I ran away from home to attend their camp.

Production: Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism

Text: The text is a compilation by Lena Jersenius.

A large part of the text has been taken from previous versions of

”Max Story” 2017, 2020 with the permission of the author Ewa Wymark.

Cover photo: Marcos Chagallo

Graphic design: Cecilia Undemark Péterfy

My name is Max Safir.
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Max Story

Part 2 · Life Changes 1938-1940

The story is based on several interviews with Max Safir.
The family of Max Safir has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

Life Changes 1938-1940

The Growing Threat Against the Jews

My parents constantly talked about the tense situation in the world, about war and antisemitism. I was curious and listened to those who were older than me, I didn't know so much. I heard my parents talking about the persecution of us Jews.

Christian Poles would stand outside Jewish shops and yell: "Don't buy from the Jews. Buy from us!" Some Jews thought that if there was a war, the situation might get better for the Jews.

My father got up early every morning to start the engines in the sawmill. One day he came home with a rag tied around his neck and chin. When my mother asked him if he was sick, he said he had a toothache.

Later I found out that my father had been attacked by a gang of Christian Poles who had grabbed him and cut off his beard. My father, who was religious, had never shaved. He felt humiliated and ashamed.

After that incident, my father asked if I would walk with him to work before going to school. Normally he didn't want me there around all the dangerous machines.

We walked together every day. I thought it was interesting and fun to see how everything worked.

When the Germans invaded Kielce about a week after the Second World War broke out on 1 September 1939, they immediately ordered that we weren't allowed to go outside the city limits. We could not go outside at night and we were forced to wear a white armband with a star of David showing that we were Jewish. The Germans shot those who didn't obey.

We were given ration cards to buy coal, bread and surrogate coffee. But there was not enough food and people began starving.

A *Volksdeutsche* Takes Over Father's Sawmill

Soon a *Volksdeutsche*, wearing swastikas on his clothes, took over my father's sawmill. A *Volksdeutsche* was a Christian Pole who could show that he had German origins. "Teach me all about the machines", he told my father. "You have three days." When my father showed him how the sawmill worked the man ordered my father to disappear. That man took everything that was in the mill, all the machines and supplies.

When my father had lost the sawmill, and everything in it, our family didn't have any money.

In the winter my father went there to ask for wood shavings. He wasn't allowed inside so he stood at the fence. "May we have some wood shavings to make a fire? My family is freezing." The man who had taken over the sawmill answered: "Go away immediately, or I'll shoot you."

I don't know how we survived. Perhaps my brothers helped my father in some way.

To the Workcamp

When the Germans did raids in Kielce they went from house to house. They knew exactly where all the Jews lived. One day they took me and my brother Feivl. My brother was a little older, but I was only 13 years old.

We were put in an open lorry and brought to the large synagogue. There were many young men from the area there, most of them between 15 and 25 years old. I listened when they talked about what would happen to us. Someone thought the farmers needed workers, but it wasn't so. Later that day they took us to the railway station, and we were pushed into wagons.

The photo shows slave labourers digging anti-tank ditches that would stop Russian armoured vehicles trying to cross the new frontier between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

Prison guards beating a prisoner with sticks in Cieszanów's forced-labour camp.

The train brought us to Cieszanów, close to the Russian border. We were given a pick and a shovel to dig anti-tank ditches. There were only Jews in the camp. We hardly got any food, we were sick and our clothes were in tatters. We had to sleep on the floor in empty houses where Jews used to live. The area was guarded. There were SS-men with dogs everywhere.

Every morning we were forced to walk from the town to the border between the part of Poland that was occupied by the Russians and the part that was occupied by the Germans. It was horrible and we beaten a lot. It was not the Germans that beat us, they called on one of us and ordered us to hit someone on their behind or back. After a few hits you could neither stand nor walk.

I don't know how many we were. Perhaps 800. The Germans killed somebody every day. I cried and told my brother that I wanted to go home to my mother. "So do I", he said. My brother Feivl was my support.

The Germans picked some Jews as leaders. I kept saying that I wanted to go home.

"Why do I have to be here?", I wondered. "I'm so young".

One day the leaders said an important man would come to the camp, Herr Schindler.* "He will make an inspection of this place." When he came there was more food, horse meat. Normally we were never given something like that to eat.

The Jewish leaders put me in front of Herr Schindler. "Please Herr Schindler, let me go home to my mother." The man looked at me and smiled. Another man gave me a kick in the behind. Then I was sent away.

Sometimes some prisoners managed to escape during the march to work. One evening my brother told me that his friend Shai, one of the boys from Kielce, had managed to escape to Russia. "Please let me try also", Feivl pleaded. "Are you going to leave me here all alone?", I asked him, crying. At night I tied our feet together with a rag so that he wouldn't leave me.

We stood very close when we were working. One day one of the boys accidentally hit my brother in the head with his pick. I stood beside him and saw how his brain almost spilled out.

Imagine how naive and childish I was. If I had allowed my brother to escape, I might have had a brother alive today.

**) It is unclear which "Herr Schindler" visited the work camp in Cieszanów. It was most likely General Maximilian Schindler, who was responsible for the inspection of war material in the General Government (Inspektor der Rüstungsinspektion im Generalgouvernement).*

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Max Story

Part 3 · Trapped in the Ghetto 1941-1942

The story is based on several interviews with Max Safir.
The family of Max Safir has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

Trapped in the Ghetto 1941-1942

The ghetto in Kielce.

Life in the Ghetto

In the autumn when it was getting cold, we couldn't dig ditches anymore in Cieszanów. Instead, we were sent to work in a salt-mine in Nowy Targ in southern Poland.

But the Germans didn't want us. We were exhausted, sick from diarrhoea and weren't fit for any work. In Nowy Targ we got soup and members of the Jewish congregation gave us some clothes. Jewish doctors examined us. Then the Jewish congregation gave us tickets so we could travel home to Kielce.

It was horrendous to see the situation in my hometown. There were dead people everywhere, there was no time to bury them.

My parents had been forced to leave our home and were living in the ghetto. My brother Moshe who worked in a bakery had been shot when he tried to take a loaf of bread to help our father.

My parents asked about my brother Feivl, but I didn't know what to say. The last time I saw him was in the clinic in Cieszanów when the doctors were bandaging his head. I never saw him again. I didn't tell my mum and dad about that. I said: "He is probably somewhere."

Every day Jews in the ghetto were picked to do forced labour. When the workers gathered, I joined the line.

I worked in a quarry, cutting stone with a sledgehammer. The Germans put Christian Poles in charge of guarding us. In order to get a ration of food I had to work hard.

Sometimes when I went to the toilet I could sneak away to a field and dig up a potato or a vegetable to bring home to my parents. I hid what I could find in my clothes, but it was hard getting past the guards when I was going back to the ghetto. Sometimes you were asked to shake and then everything dropped to the ground. But there were times when I managed to get a little food for my mother and father.

Everybody who worked had ration cards, for coal, bread and some other things. When I saw how my parents were slowly pining away, I decided to give them my ration card and escape to Starachowice-Wierzbnik via Bodzentyn. In Starachowice one of my brothers, Natan, lived.

The Escape to Starachowice-Wierbnik

I took my chance to escape when I was at the quarry. I knew the way to Bodzentyn like I knew my prayer book and I knew where to hide, but I was still not safe on the roads. If somebody found and reported a Jew, they were given a kilo of sugar by the Germans as a reward. So I kept away from the roads as much as possible. I found a trolley that I pushed in front of me on the industrial rails, so it looked as if I was working.

I walked thirty kilometres from Kielce to Bodzentyn and almost as far from Bodzentyn to Starachowice-Wierzbnik.

When I came to my brother Natan he looked at me and asked: "Have you left mother and father?". I said: "Yes", but I left my ration card. It will be better for them."

The map shows the town Starachowice.

Natan didn't have room for me. He had his own family, a wife and two children. "You can stay in the woodshed in the yard", he said. It was small. I could see the night sky between the planks. But I was happy that I could stay there.

My brother had been a baker in another town. Now he had built an oven in secret and smuggled flour. He kept one of the loafs that he baked and sold the others.

Natan had some clothes made for me from burlap. I got a shirt and a pair of pants and was really happy about that.

Natan asked me to help him get flour from an acquaintance that owned a mill. My sister-in-law Chaya would show me the way and keep a lookout for patrols. At the mill I lifted a sack that weighed 25 kilos on my back and started walking.

All went well until I came into the woods and two SS-men caught up with me. "What are you carrying?" they asked. "Flour", I said. And where are you going?" I came up with the idea of taking the flour to my cousin Ejnesman. He was making boots for the Germans and was important to them.

One of the men was asking the questions. The other picked up his gun. I knew who he was. He was called "The wolf". Everybody knew that he liked to shoot Jews and that he did it every day. The man tossed away my cap. If I had gone to pick it up, he could have shot me, saying he'd thought I had tried to run away.

After a while they let me go. To be safe I walked to Ejnesman's house and waited until they had disappeared.

Chaya had run home and warned Natan. When I arrived alone, carrying the flour, he looked very surprised. I told him I had fooled the SS-men. Natan was impressed and grateful. If I hadn't lied, they would have killed the whole family.

At the Ammunition Factory

Just like in Kielce, Jews were picked for forced labour in Starachowice-Wierzbnik. It didn't take long before the Jewish police ordered me to be ready. "Tomorrow you go to work at the ammunition factory Hermann Göring", they said. I had been prepared for that and knew that I had to obey.

Work in the factory was heavy and dangerous. Nobody wanted to be there, and some people paid so they didn't have to work in the factory. Because I didn't come from the city I was treated like an "immigrant" and had no choice.

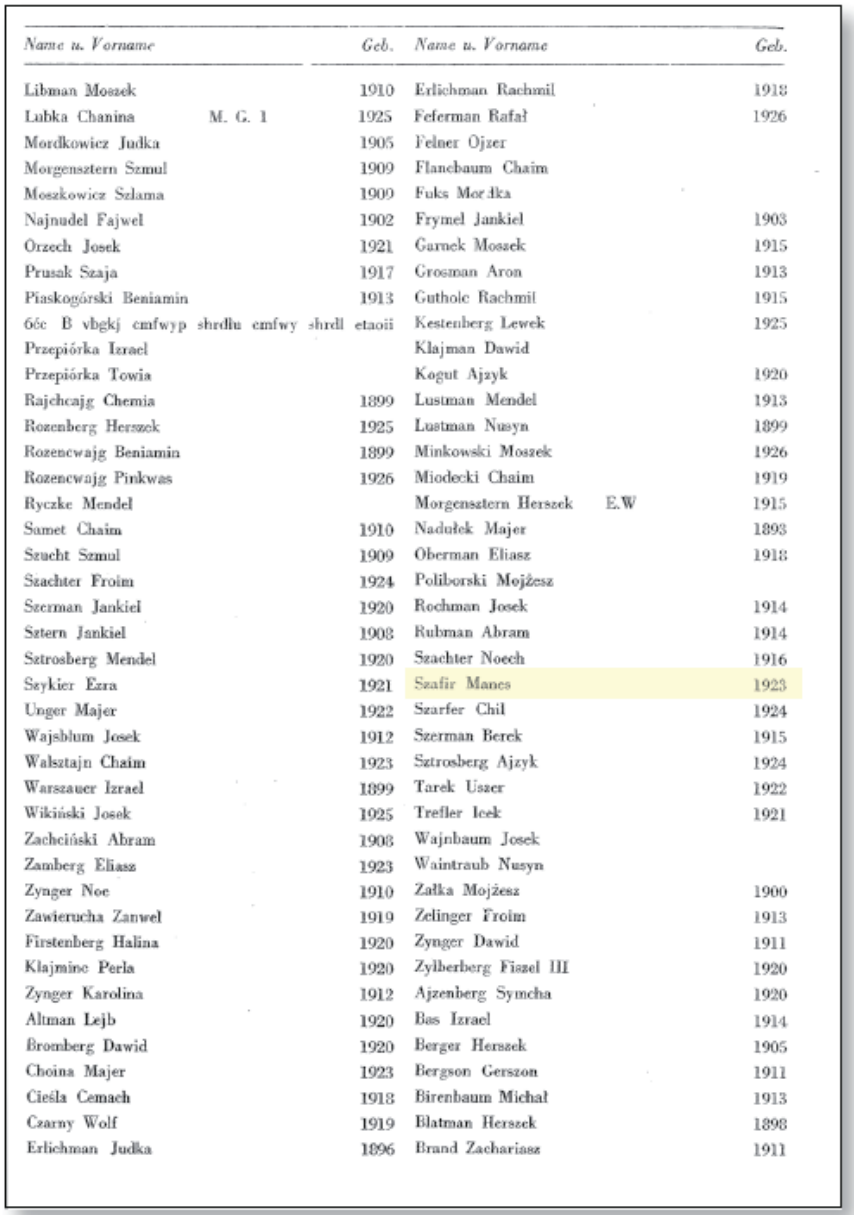
I worked in the storeroom. First my job was to pour acid for batteries, which wasn't easy. I often spilled chemicals and battery acid. It burned holes in my clothes. But because I worked in the storeroom I could change to new clothes.

Large bales of clothes and sheets were constantly delivered from ghettos where Jews had lived. The fabrics were sorted and used as rags to clean the machines.

In the autumn 1942 the Germans ordered that the ghetto in Starachowice-Wierzbnik should be closed. Everybody had to gather at the railway viaduct where carriages waited. We had three hours to pack. I didn't have anything to bring.

Everybody that worked at Herman Göring Werke should stand to the right, as well as those who worked at the Germans' large sawmill. Or maybe it was to the left... I can't remember.

So many people came to the railway viaduct, families also, with small children. The mothers and children walked slowly. Then SS-men took the children and killed them.



Name u. Vorname	*Geb.*	*Name u. Vorname*	*Geb.*
Libman Moszek	1910	Erlichman Rachmil	1918
Lubka Chanina M. G. 1	1925	Feferman Rafał	1926
Mordkowicz Judka	1905	Felner Ojzer	
Morgensztern Szmul	1909	Flancbaum Chaim	
Moszkowicz Szlama	1900	Fuks Mordka	
Najnudel Fajwel	1902	Frymel Jankiel	1903
Orzech Josek	1921	Garnek Moszek	1915
Prusak Szaja	1917	Grosman Aron	1913
Piaskogórski Beniamin	1913	Guthole Rachmil	1915
66c B vbgkj cmfwyp shrdlu cmfwy shrdl etaoii		Kestenberg Lewek	1925
Przepiórka Izrael		Klajman Dawid	
Przepiórka Towia		Kogut Ajzyk	1920
Rajchcajg Chemia	1899	Lustman Mendel	1913
Rozenberg Herszek	1925	Lustman Nusyn	1899
Rozencwajg Beniamin	1899	Minkowski Moszek	1926
Rozencwajg Pinkwas	1926	Miodecki Chaim	1919
Ryczke Mendel		Morgensztern Herszek E.W	1915
Samet Chaim	1910	Nadułek Majer	1893
Szucht Szmul	1909	Oberman Eliasz	1918
Szachter Froim	1924	Poliborski Mojżesz	
Szerman Jankiel	1920	Rochman Josek	1914
Sztern Jankiel	1908	Rubman Abram	1914
Sztrosberg Mendel	1920	Szachter Noech	1916
Szykier Ezra	1921	Szafir Manes	1923
Unger Majer	1922	Szarfer Chil	1924
Wajsblum Josek	1912	Szerman Berek	1915
Walsztajn Chaim	1923	Sztrosberg Ajzyk	1924
Warszauer Izrael	1899	Tarek Uszer	1922
Wikiński Josek	1925	Trefler Icek	1921
Zachciński Abram	1908	Wajnbaum Josek	
Zamberg Eliasz	1923	Waintraub Nusyn	
Zynger Noe	1910	Załka Mojżesz	1900
Zawierucha Zanwel	1919	Zelinger Froim	1913
Firstenberg Halina	1920	Zynger Dawid	1911
Klajmine Perla	1920	Zylberberg Fiszel III	1920
Zynger Karolina	1912	Ajzenberg Symcha	1920
Altman Lejb	1920	Bas Izrael	1914
Bromberg Dawid	1920	Berger Herszek	1905
Choina Majer	1923	Bergson Gerszon	1911
Cieśla Cemach	1918	Birenbaum Michał	1913
Czarny Wolf	1919	Blatman Herszek	1898
Erlichman Judka	1896	Brand Zachariasz	1911

My name, Manes Szafir, is on a list that was preserved over workers from the labor camp in Starachowice-Wierzbnik. For some reason it is written that I was born in 1923.

Everybody was ordered to stand in different lines.

My cousin Zindl, who had saved me when I was an infant, had gotten a job at the factory with the help of Ejnesman. During the work he had injured his leg and couldn't walk very fast. When he came to stand in our line the Germans shot him several times.

The Jews who were cleaning up the ghetto afterwards put him in the pile of dead bodies. But Zindl wasn't dead. "I'm alive", he said. An SS-man who stood nearby heard him and shot him several times.

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Part 4 · The Time in Camps 1942-1945

The story is based on several interviews with Max Safir.
The family of Max Safir has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

The Time in Camps 1942-1945

Life in the Work Camp

When I worked in the storeroom at Herman Göring Werke I was close to the kitchen. The workers got soup and a small sandwich. Because I was close to the kitchen, I also got soup and a sandwich.

In the storeroom there were bales of clothes and other things that had been collected in the ghettos where Jews were forced to live. When I went to get rags for cleaning machines, I sometimes found things that I could trade for an extra portion of soup. I went to the women in the kitchen and showed them a bra or panties. Sometimes they yelled to me to disappear, other days they were willing to negotiate.

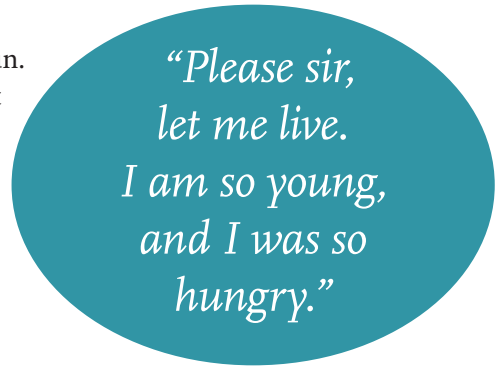
We were a group of 17–20-year-old guys who helped each other to "organise"as it was called, to steal more food. We kept a lookout when the food deliveries were loaded in the storeroom. When it was full, we pilfered turnips and potatoes through an open window.

We took turns. One day it was my turn. I crawled half way in, my legs were on the outside. The factory manager, a Gestapo, discovered me hanging there. He pulled me out by my feet.

"Follow me", he said.

We started walking towards an execution site. The man was fingering his gun. He had killed a lot of people in the camp. I thought it was the end for me. At first, I didn't say a word. I thought, I can't bear it anymore, there is no way out. But then I said to him: "Please sir, let me live. I am so young, and I was so hungry."

Everybody thought I would be killed but he let me go. I don't know why. Suddenly he was gone. He was probably shocked by me speaking to him. Perhaps there is a God? I can't explain what happened.



To Auschwitz-Birkenau

I worked for two and a half years at the Hermann Göring Werke. During this time we lived in barracks. I was saved by the fact that my cousin Szlama Ejnesman was a kind of foreman and had a lot of influence.

Then came the day in July 1944 when all Jews were to leave the camp in Starachowice. It took three days. The Germans brought carriages and emptied the camp. People tried to escape. Ejnesman too, but he was shot outside the camp.

My brother was there too. "Come stand beside me", I told Natan, but he wanted to go his own way.

In my carriage we were one hundred people. We were packed like sardines. Nobody knew where we were going. There was a stench in the carriage, it was crowded and there were fights. The strong ones could get to a narrow opening and get some fresh air.

We asked the guards to put in a bucket and bring out the dead. Their answer was always: *"Jetzt wird es euch schon besser sein"* (it will soon be better for you). They knew.

Finally, we saw a sign with the name Auschwitz. I didn't know what it was.

Then the train arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the doors opened, fresh air came in and we could finally breathe. From everywhere came calls: "Do you have dollars or gold? Give us everything you have. You will perish in the chimney over there."

The ones yelling were also prisoners. I neither had dollars or anything else. I only did what I was told.

We were standing in a line. "What happens here?", I asked and someone said that we were getting a number tattooed. "I don't want a tattoo", I said when it was my turn. Then a man whispered to me: "Are you stupid?" If you get a tattoo you can live another three months."

Then we had to get undressed and stood naked in line.

One line of naked women and one with naked men. For me it was... embarrassing... I don't have words for it!

Then came a short man in a German uniform. He yelled in a shrill voice in broken German: *"Jetzt wird es euch schon besser sein"* (it will soon be better for you) and slapped the naked women's bottoms. I cannot forget him. Ugh.

My Team of Workers

In my barrack there were 1,000 inmates. There were many nationalities – Poles, Turks, Italians – prisoners from all over Europe.

I had a lot of experience in camps and had worked out that it was good to be in the top bunk. The man who was our leader – the block elder – couldn't reach there to hit you with his cane. The ones in the middle and in the bottom were hit by all the shit.

I shared a bunk with two Italians, brothers Ivo and Vasco. They were Jews but only spoke Italian. When the prisoners got their food rations the brothers called to one another: "Ivo, now there's bread". Or "Vasco, now there's soup."

In the morning when we were marching to work the guards wanted to hear singing. They knew that the brothers had nice singing voices and forced them to sing Mama son tanto felice – "Mother I'm so happy". It made me feel bad. Where was their mother? And mine?

I always looked for opportunities to get a better chance to survive and managed to get a place in a work group of mostly Russian soldiers and only a few Jews. Our work was to strip down aeroplanes in a field outside the camp.

The Russians reminded the Germans that they were prisoners of war and therefore entitled to some benefits. That was good for me too. After work we walked back, and the guards demanded singing again.

Once when the bread was handed out, I asked if I could help. I thought that it might be possible to take a few pieces of bread. Not stealing, you didn't say that, you said "organising", that's what it was called. So I took the opportunity to "organise" five pieces of bread. But the block elder saw me taking the bread. "You have stolen other people's bread". For that he gave me a worse beating than I had ever gotten before.

At the morning call I had to drag myself out of the barrack and needed support to be able to stand upright. I couldn't work and was left alone. It felt like it was all over for me. When you can't work in Birkenau you end up in the gas chamber.

I didn't want to end up in the gas chamber. When everyone had gone to work, I took my belt, put it around my neck and attached it to a hook. I didn't want to live any longer. After a while I woke up on the ground, bloody and full of wounds. Perhaps I fainted, I don't know, but somehow, I survived. After a few days I wanted to get back to work, but the team leader, the kapo, said no. He didn't want me. "I promise to work just as well as before", I said. "I won't take a beating for you", he said. It meant everything to me to be a part of this group.

One of the Jews was a friend of the kapo and persuaded him to let me be a part of the work team. I almost crawled to work, but I made it.

To Austria

For almost six months, from July 1944 to January 1945, I was in Birkenau. I didn't think that I would survive that place. There were gas chambers and crematoriums. It was impossible to survive.

Then there was an order that several barracks in Birkenau would be evacuated and the prisoners that could still work were to be moved to other camps. Before we left, I managed to take some tinned food from the storage, a quilt, and a pair of boots.

It took thirteen days before we got to the next camp. First we walked for several days in a so-called "death march". It was hard, there was no water and no food. Those who couldn't cope fell in the ditch. The guards demanded that we carried those who no longer could walk. I carried someone but in the end I had no strength anymore and he ended up in a ditch. Then the Germans shot him.

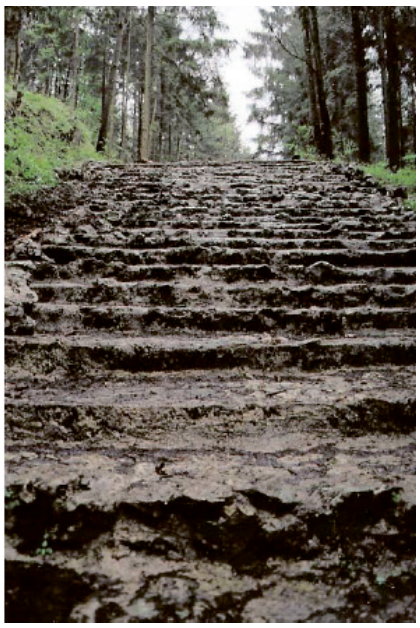
I drank water from the puddles on the ground.

The last stretch from Germany to Austria we travelled on a freight train.

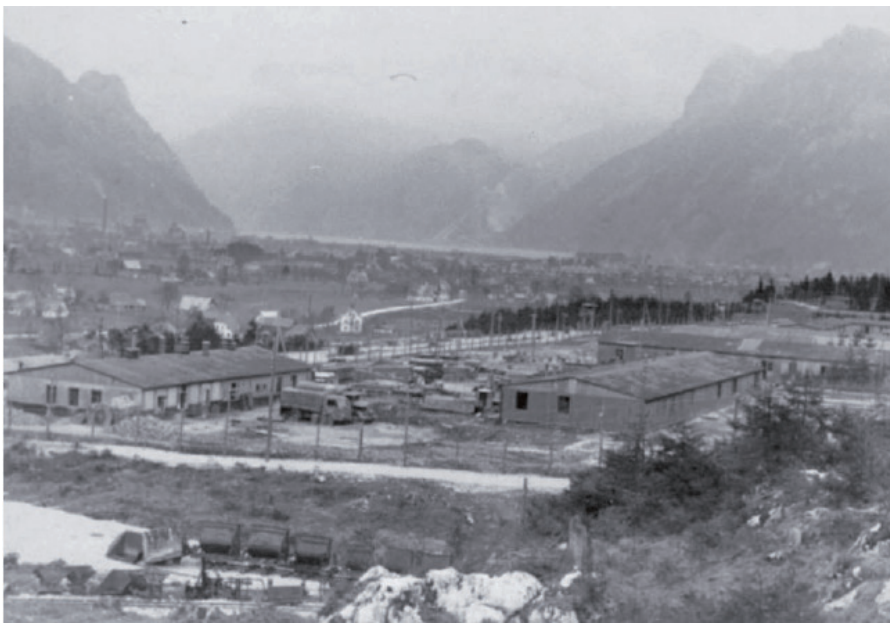
When the train stopped, we were in Mauthausen, which is about 450 kilometres from Auschwitz. I was told that there weren't any gas chambers there, but crematoriums.

The camp was situated far up in the Austrian alps. It was winter and cold, and we were only wearing shoes, t-shirts and pants. Our clothes had been sent off for disinfection. We were crammed into barracks. At the morning call they counted how many had survived.

In Ebensee Work Camp



The photo shows the stone stairs that I and other prisoners were forced to run in to get to the work place.



The Ebensee concentration camp.

After a few weeks, the clothes came back, and we started working. We were brought to Ebensee, which was a smaller subcamp to Mauthausen. When we walked through the gate at Ebensee a Polish man, a kapo, noticed my boots.

"You have nice boots", he said. "Give them to me. I'll give you bread and another pair of shoes. You can give them to me willingly or I'll take them from you."

A few days went by before he confronted me again. I gave him the boots and got a piece of bread and a pair of wooden shoes. Perhaps he would help me later.

Wooden shoes were hard to walk in. When we walked to our work site at a quarry the guards forced us to run up stone stairs in the forest. Then it was dangerous to wear wooden shoes, the boots would have been better. "Faster, faster", the guards yelled. Many prisoners got stuck in the mud or slipped and hurt themselves badly.

Liberated prisoners in Mauthausen concentration camp, Austria. The photo was taken during the liberation in May 1945.

As prisoners we became our own enemies. You must think about yourself if you are to survive.

In Birkenau you knew that you got your bread, but here the Germans stopped giving us food.

There were dead people all around the crematorium. A gas chamber wasn't needed.

I was so hungry that I almost couldn't bear it. At night I dreamt about getting bread the next day. Hope kept me alive.

The hunger was unbearable. On a hill close to the crematorium the mud looked like margarine and people got the idea that it was edible. It isn't possible to describe the situation in the camp. It was a camp for 3,000 people but there were 30,000 people there.

I was completely exhausted and in the end, I couldn't do any work.

The only way was going to a barrack called the infirmary. There were so many exhausted prisoners and dead bodies there.

The Germans were afraid that prisoners would spread disease, so they had guards that made sure that nobody left.

It was a place for the dying. I lay down on a bunk and waited to die.

Production: Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism

Text: The text is a compilation by Lena Jersenius.

A large part of the text has been taken from previous versions of

"Max Story" 2017, 2020 with the permission of the author Ewa Wymark.

Cover photo: Marcos Chagallo

Graphic design: Cecilia Undemark Péterfy

My name is Max Safir.
I survived the Holocaust.
This is my story.

Max Story

Part 5 · The End of the War and Time After 1945

The story is based on several interviews with Max Safir.
The family of Max Safir has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

The End of the War and Time After 1945

I'm standing to the left in the picture. It was taken shortly after the camp in Ebensee was liberated.

The Liberation on 6 May

One day when I looked out of the window, I saw the Germans throwing off their uniforms and the guards running away. Everybody in the hospital started waking up, me too – what happens now? Are we liberated? The body was finished, but the brain worked.

When the Americans came, they emptied the barracks and converted them to a hospital. Volunteer doctors came. I got a bed where the Germans had lived.

After a while, a brigade of Jewish soldiers came who had served in the British army. One of them called: "Are there any Jews here?". And I answered: "Yes! Where were you this whole time?", I asked. He only shook his head and I didn't get an answer.

I stayed there a couple of months; I don't know how long.

One time a doctor came and wanted to give me blood plasma. I thought they could give the plasma to somebody who was in a better condition than I was. "I will not be able to live", I said. But the doctor sat down on the edge of the bunk and said: "As long as your eyes are open you are alive". I said: "I'm not alive. I'm as good as dead, but you can do as you like."

The doctor gave me the blood plasma. Afterwards I had a shivering fit. It felt like I would freeze to death. I called out. A Polish assistant who worked with the doctor threw a blanket over me. "Quiet you Jewish whore!" he yelled.

My first ID-card, 1947 in the British mandate Palestine.

To a New Homeland

I and other survivors wondered what to do now. As soon as I could stand up I went with a group of former prisoners who were getting medical care somewhere in Germany.

When I was there, I heard the staff yelling and shouting at each other. I couldn't stand hearing the German language. Therefore, I and a few others decided to leave Germany and take the train to Italy.

In Modena in northern Italy there was a camp for displaced persons. We went there.

The Red Cross was there also. They put up lists of names of survivors from the camps. I went there many times and looked. But I didn't find any names from my family. Nobody had survived.

I understood that nobody was waiting for me in Bodzentyn, in Kielce or Starachowice. So, I decided to join a group that was travelling to the British mandate Palestine. It had been my goal to get there since I was ten years old.

The Journey to Sweden

In Palestine I met a beautiful Hungarian girl, Helena Kaufmann, and we got married. Her sister had been saved by the Swedish Red Cross action with the White buses in 1945. They had been together all the years in the camps and were very close.

A few years later my wife got very sick, and she wanted to be close to her sister, that's why we moved to Sweden when our children were three and five years old.

We settled down in Katrineholm, we were the only Jews. I started looking for work in different workshops. I didn't speak any Swedish and only a little German and English. "May I work here? I'm good. Do you need staff?" I went around asking and I got a break at a Ford garage that had a German boss. I tried to assimilate, become friends with my colleagues and the management. I took after them and did what they did. When I saw that they were smoking I also started to smoke, not cigarettes because it was too expensive, I smoked a pipe.

One day they started talking about politics and one of them said: "It's a pity that Hitler didn't have time to exterminate all the Jews."

My wife had warned me that I would hear things like that. But when I heard what the man said I took my coat and went home.

When Helena came home I was lying on the bed: "Have you been in a fight?", she asked me. "No", I said.

That's the way I was welcomed in Sweden the first couple of years. Sometimes the children in the neighbourhood called: "Mama, there go the children of Israel."

In 2009, on Max's initiative, there was a restoration of the Jewish cemetery in Bodzentyn where Max was born. A memorial was also erected to honour the victims of the Holocaust. A year later, the Catholic priest in the village, father Leszek Sikorski, helped erect a stone in memory of Max's family and the people who helped him in especially hard times during the Holocoast.

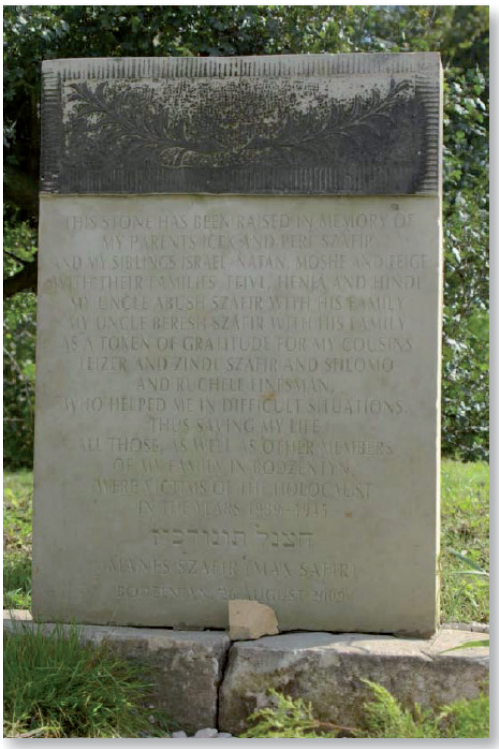
Max in front of the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. The photo was taken during a trip in 2008.

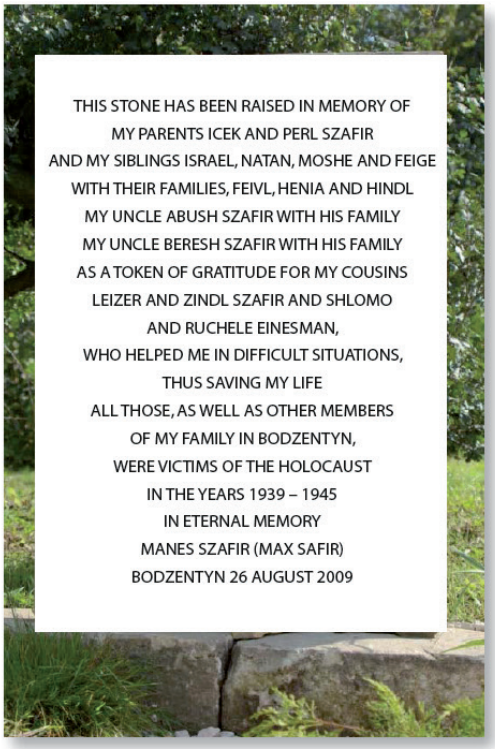
For many years Max has lectured to schoolchildren and confirmation students. In the book *Bäste herrn, låt mig få leva* Max talks about experiences of Holocaust survivors.

Later, when I became a widower and pensioner I moved to Stockholm. My children are here. With time I've also had grandchildren and great grandchildren.

It took a long time after the war before I felt that I could cope with a visit to Poland. Afterwards I have been able to process more of the things that happened to me.

When I speak with students, I urge them to listen to their teachers and learn from history. Every generation is responsible for its actions. The young people are responsible for their choices.





In 2010, the Catholic priest of the village, Father Leszek Sikorski, helped erect a memorial stone in memory of Max relatives and those who helped him in a special way in difficult moments during the Holocaust.

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