My name is Lea Gleitman.
I survived the Holocaust.
This is my story.

# Lea's Story

**Part 1 · My Childhood 1924–1937**

The text is based on several interviews with Lea Gleitman.
Lea Gleitman has read and approved the text.

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# My Childhood 1924–1937

## My Family

I was born on 27 November 1924 in the town of Oświęcim in southern Poland.

I was one of four siblings. My older brother was called Jehuda, but we used to call him Wowek. Jehuda was four years older and Miriam two years older than me. My younger sister Balcia was born three years after me. I was given the name Lea but called Lorka, or Laje in Yiddish.

I used to argue with my older siblings sometimes, but never with Balcia. We loved and adored her.

My father Jonah Posner had a fabric shop. At that time it was common for people to buy textiles that they then paid a seamstress or tailor to sew clothing with. The fabric was sold by the meter. Father used to come home with some beautiful fabrics; he had good taste.

During the summer we used to swim in the Soła river, and one year our father sorted out new swimsuits for Miriam, Balcia and I. They were the same: orange with a navy blue stripe running up them.

My mother Szprinca, or Sabina, Posner was a housewife. She was a proper *Yiddishe mame*, careful with everything and always worried that my siblings and I weren't eating enough. Mother and the wives who lived nearby were always talking to each other about their worries over their children.

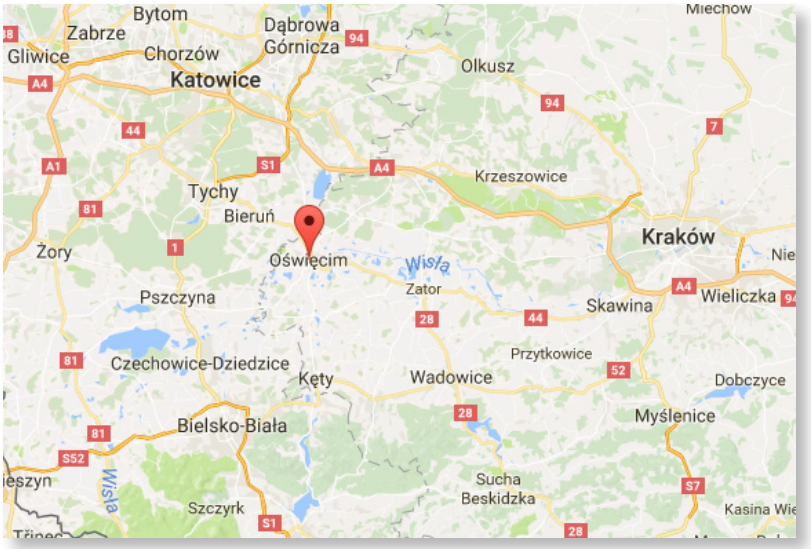
We children loved Oświęcim. It was an idyllic small town, and all of father's eight siblings lived there, and three of his mother's siblings.

Our house was in the town square. My father's parents lived opposite, on the other side. In an adjacent street lived Aunt Regina. Five minutes further away was where father's younger sister Carka had her home. I had cousins on almost every single street.

Mother's relatives also lived close by, mainly in the town of Chrzanów north of Oświęcim.



My mother and father married in 1919. These photos were probably taken a few years earlier when they got engaged. Szprinca and Jonah were both born in 1896.






This map shows the location of my home town Oświęcim which during and after the Holocaust came to be known by its German name: Auschwitz.

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This photo shows my mother with my sister Miriam and brother Jehuda. The photo was taken in 1924, the same year I was born. You can see that my mother's tummy was getting round.

My older brother Jehuda Zew Posner. He was also called Wowek. He is in his twenties in this photo.

My sister Miriam is to the left. To the right is our cousin Sabina. Miriam and Sabina were the same age. The photo was taken in 1941 when they were 19 years old. Sabina didn't survive the Holocaust. She was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944.

*Unfortunately, I don't have a photo of my younger sister Balcia, and this pains me tremendously. She was only 15 years old when she was gassed to death in Auschwitz in 1942.*

## Life in Oświęcim

My family was religious Orthodox Jews. I was very fond of the Jewish weekend. Preparations for the Sabbath already started on Thursdays. Mother went shopping and cooked all the food. I remember the smell of the boiled carp. It was cosy when we came home, and mother had baked biscuits. She always baked many, three or four types for each Sabbath.

We were often together with father's siblings and their family on Friday evenings. There was a party atmosphere. I loved my extended family.

On Saturdays, the men went to the synagogue in their most elegant clothes, fur hats and silk gowns. The women were also finely dressed there.

*"On Saturdays, the men went to the synagogue in their most elegant clothes, fur hats and silk gowns. The women were also finely dressed there."*

I played a lot with my cousins and other Jewish children, but I also had two Christian playmates. My parents didn't have anything against that.

We younger siblings spoke Polish to each other and our parents. They used to reply to us in Yiddish. Mother could speak Polish. Father wasn't very good though. He preferred speaking in Yiddish or German.

Jehuda, who was oldest, also spoke Yiddish. He even went to a Jewish religious school, a *cheder*, and learnt to read the Holy Scriptures in Hebrew.

Both Jewish and Christian children went to my school. In Oświęcim there was a Jewish high school but no Jewish college. Later on, when we moved to Sosnowiec, things were different. There were more Jewish schools there. We read prayers and were taught in Yiddish there.

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Father's fabric shop was in the town of Chorzów, which was in the region of Silesia on the border between Poland and Germany. He travelled there every morning and came home late in the evening. We moved from Oświęcim to Sosnowiec, which was further north in 1932 so that he wouldn't have so far to travel. From there, it only took father about half an hour to get to the shop.

## Life in Sosnowiec

I was eight years old when we moved into 10 Wspólna Street, Sosnowiec.

The relatives used to joke about how much we had changed. Mother stopped wearing the wig that Orthodox women wore. She thought that she could be a good Jewish wife without it. Her hair was beautiful, long and wavy.

My father used to let his beard grow long. When his siblings came to visit us in Sosnowiec, they used to tease him lovingly and told him that, every time they came, it looked like his beard had become even shorter.

Father used to go to one of the small prayer houses in Sosnowiec. But on the weekends we used to go together to the large synagogue.

I liked *Pesach*, the Jewish Easter, most of all. That's when we girls were given new dresses and shoes.

Sosnowiec was a large town with a large Jewish population. Thanks to that, there were Jewish colleges and high schools.

Everyone was Jewish at the school I started at. Most of the teachers were also Jews, although there were a few Christians as well.



My school class in Sosnowiec. My teacher Lejbowicz is standing on the left. Next to her is Luba Pergricht. Luba survived the Holocaust and came to Stockholm, Sweden after the war. I am stood to the right of her, and next to me my best friend Fredzia Zając. After the war, Fredzia moved to Melbourne, but we continued to keep in touch and have even visited each other.

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We were allowed to live wherever we wanted in town, but most of the Jewish families lived in the same quarter.

There were 24 families in our block of apartments. The only non-Jew was Jarosz, the porter.

I often played with the neighbourhood children out in the garden or at home with someone.

Everyone knew everyone else in the house. You knew what was going on in all the different families. You even knew what food people were cooking. There was a strong sense of community, which grew towards the end of the 1930s.

*"People in Sosnowiec were antisemitic. It happened that Christian children abused Jewish children on the streets. You could get a stone in the head."*

I often went to the cinema, at least twice a week. I loved films! There was also a theatre. I went there to hunt for autographs when famous actors were in town.

I only had Jewish friends in Sosnowiec. But sometimes I used to play with the Christian porter's sons Staszek and Krysiek who were the same age as me. We played in the garden. They would probably not have dared to play with me in other parts of town.

People in Sosnowiec were antisemitic. It happened that Christian children abused Jewish children on the streets. You could get a stone in the head.

They also used to throw onions at us and call us Jews *cebula*, i.e. "onion". I assume that's because we often used onions in our cooking. They never got me though, I was quick and could run fast. I also knew which streets to avoid. Most of the incidents happened on the outskirts of town. Not that many Jews lived there so if you went there, then there was a great risk of getting hurt.

But in my family, I felt safe and wasn't afraid.

There was a church on one street close to our house. During the Christian Easter, the priest used to stir the crowd up against us by saying things like "the Jews killed God" and "they killed Jesus". After such a sermon, the atmosphere got scary, and our parents made sure that we stayed at home. They forbade us from going out.



Text and cover photo: Ewa Wymark | Translation from the Swedish original: Carl Franks

Graphic design: Cecilia Undemark Péterfy

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# Lea's Story

**Part 2 · Life Changes 1938–1939**

The text is based on several interviews with Lea Gleitman.
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# Life Changes 1938–1939

## Youngsters Planning to Emigrate



My cousin Rachel is on the right, her friend Lola Heiberger in the middle. We lived in the same house in Oświęcim. Lolas grandfather owned the house. I sadly don't know who the third girl is. The photo was taken in 1938.

I think you could say that I was a pretty happy girl right up until that day when Germany invaded Poland.

My parents used to follow what was happening in the newspapers and radio in the last few years before the war broke out. One heard Hitler's yelling and how he was threatening the Jews, not just German Jews but all Jews. You could feel in the air that something was going to happen, and we children noticed that our parents were getting worried.

People talk about the Jewish youth as if leaving Poland was straightforward for us. But we weren't welcome anywhere in the 1930s, and no country wanted to let us in. And in the autumn of 1938 after the November Pogroms in Germany, the British Mandate of Palestine closed its borders entirely for Jews. Some tried, but not many succeeded, in getting themselves out of the country illegally.

One of my older cousins Sabina was a Zionist and had emigrated earlier. She came to us on a visit and tried to persuade us others to go to Palestine.

My youngest uncle on my mother's side, who had recently gotten married, wanted to travel to Palestine illegally with his wife. My grandmother was upset. She cried and said, "I am so old. If you go then I will never get to see you again." So he decided to stay. He didn't want to hurt his mother. Think how it would have been if she hadn't said that and he had instead travelled. Then he would have survived.

I am the second girl from the right. The photo was taken during an outing to Kraków with the Beit Jakob School in 1938. We visited many places and were taught at the same time. There is a monument visible in the background – a burial mound called *Kopiec Piłsudskiego* which was made in memory of the head of state Józef Piłsudski who died in 1935. Many Jews had been involved in building it. I was given the photo by a friend after the war. She had managed to keep it during her years in a concentration camp.

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# Father Ends Up on the Other Side of the Border



Det här fotot togs i samband med min faster Carkas bröllop. Jag minns inte om det var 1937 eller 1938. Längst till vänster i mönstrad klänning syns min mamma och bakom henne min pappa. Jag står längst bak på vänster sida. På samma rad längst till höger står min kusin Rachel. Min farfar som var en mycket religiös man syns längst ned till höger. Av alla som finns med på bilden var det bara jag och Rachel som överlevde Förintelsen.

On 1 September 1939, only a few months before I was due to turn 15, Germany invaded Poland. A few days later the German soldiers rolled into Sosnowiec on their green motorcycles. We felt at once how the atmosphere became even more menacing.

All the Jews were afraid of Germany. Many young men thought that, if they could choose, they would rather end up under the Russian regime and therefore fled east to the part of Poland that had been under Russian control since the start of the war.

Father emptied his shop a week before the war broke out. He took everything home with him so that his goods wouldn't fall into German hands. That way, we also had the chance to earn some extra income as well as clothe ourselves better. The whole apartment was filled with rolls of fabric.

At the same time as the outbreak of war, father was on a trip and ended up in Russian territory in the city of Lvov without any way of getting home to us. He was stuck there until the summer of 1941 when Germany attacked the Soviet Union and captured what was previously eastern Poland.

The Germans started persecuting and murdering Jews as soon as they took Lvov. Father was taken to different camps and managed to write a few letters to us. We received three greetings from one camp he was in, outside Ostrów Wielkopolski. He wrote that hunger was rife and asked us to send a food parcel. We naturally did so. But the last parcel that we sent in 1941 was returned. It said on a paper that the address didn't exist.

We knew that the Germans carried out mass shootings, but we never found out exactly how it went for my father when he was murdered. He most likely lies in a grave shared by thousands of others.



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# Lea's Story

**Part 3 · Confined to the Ghetto 1940–1943**

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# Confined to the Ghetto 1940–1943

## Life in the Ghetto

The Germans seized Jewish homes. Jews were forced to leave their homes and move to a separate part of the town. It was an open ghetto without walls, barbed wire or fencing. But if a Jew moved around outside the area, he or she was shot by the guards.

Our house was in the part of town that was turned into a ghetto. That's why we were able to continue living in the same apartment on 10 Wspólna Street. But other families moved in, and the area where Jews were allowed to live became smaller and smaller over time.

After about two years, even we were forced out of our apartment and had to share with others. There were up to seven families squeezed into some apartments.

The Germans emptied a number of grocery stores and confiscated the goods. We Jews were only allowed to shop in the few remaining shops that were still open. At first, there was meat and fish, but the food soon ran out, and people started going hungry. The only things you could buy were cabbage and potatoes.

We still had the rolls of fabric that father had carried home. We sold some of the fabrics on the black market in order to get a bit more to eat. One day the Gestapo suddenly appeared. Someone had informed on us. The soldiers screamed at my mother, *"Du verfluchte Jude!"* ("You bloody Jew!") "You've got goods at home! You know that you aren't allowed to have them."

In their eyes, nothing belonged to us any more. Everything belonged to the German Reich. Once they had taken the rolls of fabric, everything just got worse and worse.

In April 1941, when the Germans were constructing the notorious factory of death in my home town Oświęcim, or Auschwitz in German, they forced all the Jews to move. Because of that, all of my father's siblings and their families came to Sosnowiec. I was happy to have them close to me again. It was different now compared to how it was earlier: I wasn't a happy girl any more, and we were forced to live together in a ghetto. But even so, that I got to be with father's family meant a lot to me.

We weren't allowed to be outside after seven or eight in the evening. We grew closer to our neighbours as a result of the curfew. We knew each other before but got to know each other even better during the war.

Rumours started circulating about what was happening in Auschwitz. Even the children heard them. We wondered when we would be hit by it.



I am 17 years old in the photo. I'm the one with the coat with fur collar, at the front and to the left. I loved that coat. The cornflower-blue fabric came from my father's shop. The photo was taken in the ghetto in Sosnowiec in 1941. My friends of the same age are in the photo. Channa Nunberg is sitting to the right of me. Frajda Focher is to the right on the back row. I don't remember the boy's name, but he came from Wadowice and was wanted by the Germans. Standing behind me is Hela Hocherman, we were neighbours. I met her in Israel after the war. She was such a beautiful woman! Chestnut red hair and brown eyes. Of those in the photo, only the boy, Hela and myself survived.

During the war, I gave the photo to a friend. She managed to pack it away before she was taken to a labour camp, and that's how the photo was saved. Many years later, I heard that Marisa Fox, daughter to Hela, was a journalist and working with a project to compile her mother's story. I got in touch with Marisa and explained that I had a photo of her mother. She travelled all the way from the USA to Sweden in order to meet me and hear everything I knew about Hela from that time. She had herself not told Marisa everything that she had been through.

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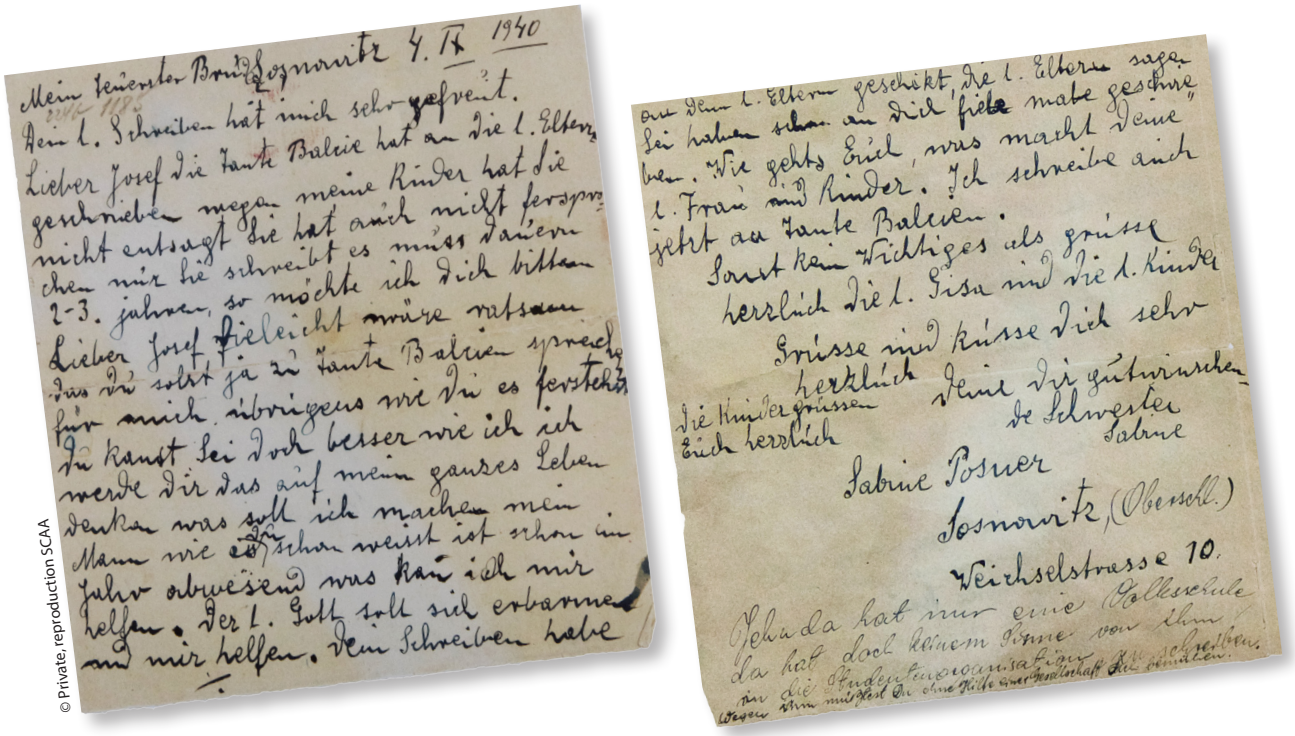
The photo shows me with a bag I had sewn myself. Mother wanted me to have something to do. She sent me on a course where a refugee from Czechoslovakia taught other young women and me to sew.



Here is me along with some of my friends in Sosnowiec. I'm stood second from the right. The photo was taken in some countryside on the outskirts of Sosnowiec, which was called *działki*. It was roughly like an allotment plot, and we were able to grow vegetables there.





Mein teuerster Bruder Sosnowitz 4. IX 1940

Dein l. Schreiben hat mich sehr gefreut.
Lieber Josef die Tante Balcie hat an die l. Eltern geschrieben wegen meine Kinder hat die nicht entsagt sie hat auch nicht versprochen mir sie schreibt es muss dauern 2-3. jahren, so möchte ich Dich bitten Lieber Josef vielleicht wäre ratsam das du selbst ja zu Tante Balcie sprechst für mich übrigens wie du es verstehst du kannst sie doch besser wie ich ich werde dir das auf mein ganzes Leben denken was soll ich machen mein Mann wie es schon weisst ist schon im Jahr abwesend was kann ich mir helfen. Der l. Gott soll sich erbarmen und mir helfen. Dein Schreiben habe

aus Dein l. Eltern geschickt, die l. Eltern sagen sie haben schon an Dich viele male geschrieben. Wie gehts Euch, was macht Deine l. Frau und Kinder. Ich schreibe auch jetzt an Tante Balcien.
Sonst kein Wichtiges als grüsse herzlich die l. Lisa und die l. Kinder
Grüsse und küsse Dich sehr herzlich
Die Kinder grüssen Euch herzlich
Deine die gutwünschende Schwester Sabine

Sabine Posner
Sosnowitz, (Oberschl.)
Weichselstrasse 10.

Sehe da hat nur eine Volksschule da hat doch keinen Sinne von ihm in die Studentenorganisation zu schreiben. Wegen ihm müsst Du eine Hilfe einer Familie [illegible]

My mother Szprinca, Sabina, wrote this letter in September 1940 to her brother Joseph David Ernst in the USA. Mother wrote to ask him if he could help us and take care of my older brother and sister, thereby saving them from the Nazis. During the first years of the German occupation, we believed that the youngsters were in greatest danger and that it wasn't so dangerous for the younger children. My maternal uncle and aunt probably did all they could, but unfortunately, there was no way during the war for anyone to get to the USA. My mother wrote down our address in Sosnowiec on the last page. The street had been given a German name and was called Weichselstrasse 10.

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# My Mother and Younger Sister Are Deported



In this photo, from 1941, my sister Miriam is to the left and, to the right, my cousin Sabina who was sister to Rachel. Sabina and Miriam were born in the same year, 1922, and were very close friends. They don't appear to be wearing Stars of David on their clothing. Perhaps they had armbands as we had in the beginning.



In this photo is my aunt Lea who lived in Wadowice. There were six brothers and two sisters in the family. The picture was taken in 1938 or 1939.



Here is my paternal grandmother and aunt Mina. The photo was taken in 1934 at a spa resort where they used to go to drink water from a spring. That was what people used to do back then.

On 12 August 1942, the Germans gave orders that all Jews were to leave their homes and assemble on a large sports field. Everyone had to come. Those who didn't obey the order would be sentenced to death: the Germans didn't use any other punishments.

I had been skating at that place many times. Every winter they hosed it down with water which froze to form an ice rink. My friends and I used to go there on Sundays. Now we were back there, crammed together on the ground, around 30 000 Jews. The mood was heavy. Everybody knew that children and the elderly didn't stand a chance. We were all doomed, but those who were sent to a labour camp at least had a small chance of survival.

After the war, I heard that, at the same time as we were waiting at the sports field, there were soldiers going from house to house searching for hiding places. They had informants and dogs with them. Anyone who had tried to hide, perhaps in an attic or basement, was shot dead.

Some managed to escape, but where were they supposed to go? The local population didn't want to help us. There were even those who were happy about what was happening.

For a while, we were all together: my mother, my aunties, sibling, cousins and myself. Father's oldest sister Regina was always so clear-sighted. When we were sat there, she turned to Wowek, Miriam, Sabina, Rachel and me. "You are the only ones who have a chance," she said. "Try to survive. If you don't survive, the whole of our family will be wiped out."

Over the years, we would come to remember what Aunt Regina had said. She was right. None of the others was selected to work and, of the five of us youngsters, only three of us survived.

The Germans used the arena as an *Umschlagplatz,* and after two days, they started to select those who were to be deported to Auschwitz and those who were to be used for labour. The butchers pointed right for the youngsters and left for the others. Left meant Auschwitz.

That was the day when I was separated from most of my family: my paternal grandparents, Aunt Regina, Aunt Mina and her children. They even took my mother, who was then 46 years old, and my beloved little sister Balcia who was 15.

During the years in camp and later on after liberation, I continued to hope that some of them had survived. Long after the war, I was able to hear from one of the prisoners who had survived Auschwitz who talked about the transport from Sosnowiec. He said that everyone who had arrived on that train had been sent straight to the gas chamber.

So I never again saw any of those who went to the left. My brother Wowek, myself, sister Miriam, and my cousins Sabina and Rachel were sent to Środula, a new ghetto on the outskirts of Sosnowiecc.

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## Forced Labour in the Ghetto

My siblings and cousins were allocated different tasks in workshops and factories. Miriam and I sewed underclothes and shirts for German soldiers. My brother was on a building site, and Rachel and Sabina carried out other work.

In the new ghetto in the Sosnowiec-Środula area, we lived in a house that had earlier belonged to the Polish Christian populations. The Germans had forcibly moved them in order to prepare the ghetto.

Wowek, Miriam, Sabina, Rachel and I stuck together. There were almost only youngsters left after the purge at the arena, but we got to know a few Jewish youths from the nearby town of Będzin who the Germans had selected as labour.

We understood that we wouldn't be allowed to stay here forever. We were worried about what had happened to our families, and we wondered about how it would go for us as well.

There wasn't much spare time. We worked many hours each day and were exhausted by the time we got home in the evening.

*"Then suddenly one day in March 1943, some soldiers came to my workplace. They screamed, as always: 'Leave your sewing machines, leave your work tables. Leave the building and await orders.'"*

Then suddenly one day in March 1943, some soldiers came to my workplace. They screamed, as always: "Leave your sewing machines, leave your work tables. Leave the building and await orders."

We did as we were told and, when everyone had gathered outside, we were taken to a place that the Germans called *Durchgangslager*, abbreviated to *Dulag*. Everyone knew that, from there, people were sent to various different forced labour camps.

We often heard the Germans talking about different camps. Jewish youths had earlier on been deported from the ghetto in Sosnowiec to the camps in Germany. They received a notice to assemble and were then sent away.

The transit camp or *Dulag* was located in my school; a large, lovely building where I had spent a few years at the Jewish Business College before the war, between 1938 and 1939.

For some reason, my sister Miriam wasn't at the workplace when I was collected along with the other youths. When she found out what had happened, she packed a bag with clothes and left it with me. A week later, I was sent to eastern Germany.



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**Part 4 · In Different Camps 1943–1945**

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# In Different Camps 1943–1945

## We Get Sent to Different Camps

There were about 120 of us girls sent to the forced labour camp of Gräben bei Striegau in what was then eastern Germany. I had been separated from my brother and sister as well as my cousins.

They later sent my sister Miriam to a camp called Parschnitz, in Sudetenland in what was then Czechoslovakia. My brother was sent to another camp, the name of which I don't remember.

Miriam sent me a postcard from Parschnitz. She was devastated that we weren't sent to the same place. The text was in German since the Germans had to be able to read and censor everything. She wrote, *"Es gibt keine Worte, die mein Schmerz beschreiben können, dass wir nicht zusammen sind."* In English this means, "There are no words to describe the pain I feel over us not being together."

I wrote a reply to Miriam, but I was only allowed to send *one* greeting to her.

I also received a letter from my brother. He wrote that he had suffered a fall and broken his nose. As long as you didn't get injured in the work camp, you had a chance of survival. When I heard what had happened to Wowek I knew that he wouldn't make it.

After a short while in the Gräben bei Striegaus forced labour camp, a new transport arrived from Sosnowiec. Rachel was with it to my great delight. We weren't just cousins but also very close friends.

## Forced Labour in Gräben bei Striegau

We, prisoners, worked twelve hours a day in a flax factory, from six in the morning until six in the evening. The following week we swapped shifts and instead worked from six in the evening until six in the morning.

We were guarded the whole time by SS women. They went around and watched us to make sure that we didn't slack off or steal anything. They could at any moment, dish out beatings or punishments. They sometimes took away the food ration that we had been allocated for various tasks. Those who got injured were taken away.

The night shift was the worst. We were malnourished and mentally affected by all the stress.

Not everybody managed to stay awake.

*"We felt that the SS women were crueller than the men. Perhaps it felt so because you don't expect such evil from women. They mocked us and screamed that we were vermin. 'Du verfluchte Jude!' ('You Bloody Jew!') We heard such things the whole time."*

We felt that the SS women were crueller than the men. Perhaps it felt so because you don't expect such evil from women. They mocked us and screamed that we were vermin. *"Du verfluchte Jude!"* ("You Bloody Jew!") We heard such things the whole time.

One of the women noticed how skilled Rachel was at knitting and crochet. She came with yarn and gave her the task of knitting a sweater. When it was finished, Rachel received a bowl of soup as a reward.

I had gotten to know a young woman in the camp, Bronka Kohn, before Rachel arrived. We three kept together and took care of each other. If somebody got an extra bit of bread, we would share it, so that when Rachel got the bowl of soup from the SS woman, we ate it together.

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I had quite a lot of clothing with me during the first period in the camp since my sister had given me a case before I was transported from the ghetto to Gräben bei Striegau.

To get a bit more food I started to sell the clothes. It was possible to barter with the local population through the non-Jews who worked in the flax factory since they weren't prisoners and had more freedom of movement. I could, for example, get a bit of bread in exchange for a dress.

We lived in barracks, 16 girls to each building, and slept in multi-storey bunks. The barracks were warm, and there was even a place in the camp where we could wash.

We did what we could to endure as people and to maintain our dignity. Even if we had nothing to offer, we still celebrated each other's birthdays. Sometimes we put on plays for each other. I was a "singer" in the camp – the girls often asked me to sing. One girl wrote a wonderful poem that another composed music too. I remember that song to this day:

*I lay down in the sleeping bunk*
*My heart screams with pain*
*I remember our moments*
*Our happy, cheerful moments*

*Every night I dream of you*
*Because I want you*
*I want you so much*

*This song is about freedom*
*It gives us strength*
*We dream of freedom during the nights*
*And look beyond the tears*

*This song is about freedom*
*And we dream about it*
*We hope the time will come*
*When freedom will embrace us*

*Translation from the Polish original: Ewa Better*
*Translation from Swedish into English: Carl Franks*

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## The Death March to Bergen-Belsen

One day in 1944, 10 girls from Auschwitz arrived at our camp. They didn't have any hair on their heads as everything had been shaved off. When they told us what they had seen and heard in the concentration camp, we almost abandoned all hope.

I was in Gräben bei Striegau from March 1943 until December 1944. That was when the Soviet troops were advancing, and our camp was shut down.

An order came for us to evacuate the camp. They didn't tell us where we were going, just that we had to immediately get away from there. We tried to put on as much clothing as possible, sweater-by-sweater, trouser by trouser. I also took my lovely coat that I still had with me.

We were driven out to wagons surrounded by soldiers. They ordered us to walk in a file. They screamed, *"schnell, schnell"* ("quickly, quickly") the whole time. Perhaps they were also in a hurry, keen not to end up in Russian hands.

It was winter and freezing cold. The ground was frozen. Before we were driven out of the camp, we had managed to steal sugar beets in a storeroom that the Germans used as animal fodder. We also had a bit of stale bread that we cut up into smaller pieces. During the march, we were sometimes given water, but no food.

In two weeks, we had marched through the whole of Germany. The shoes we were wearing no longer held together. We were "happy" when we found a barn to stay overnight in. On other nights we slept outdoors.

Eventually, we arrived at a station somewhere where a train was waiting. It was an incredible relief. I was completely shattered and unable to go further. A friend who was also from Oświęcim helped me to get into the freight wagon.

We travelled by train for a further five days. On the third week of January, we eventually arrived at Bergen-Belsen.

When I think back to it today, I can't understand how we managed to survive. Many people died during the march and on-board the train. Throughout the wagons were stiff corpses that showed that we weren't the only ones the Germans had sent out on so-called death marches.



Text and cover photo: Ewa Wymark | Translation from the Swedish original: Carl Franks

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My name is Lea Gleitman.
I survived the Holocaust.
This is my story.

# Lea's Story

**Part 5 · End of War and Time After 1945**

The text is based on several interviews with Lea Gleitman.
Lea Gleitman has read and approved the text.

**ETERNAL ECHOES**

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

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# End of War and Time After 1945

## The Time in Bergen-Belsen

It was dark when we arrived in Bergen-Belsen. Straight after arriving, we were sent to a barrack with showers. We had earlier heard that there were "false showers" in Auschwitz and were afraid that gas would come out of them instead of water. Two girls who stood next to me hurried to eat up the pieces of bread that they had saved.

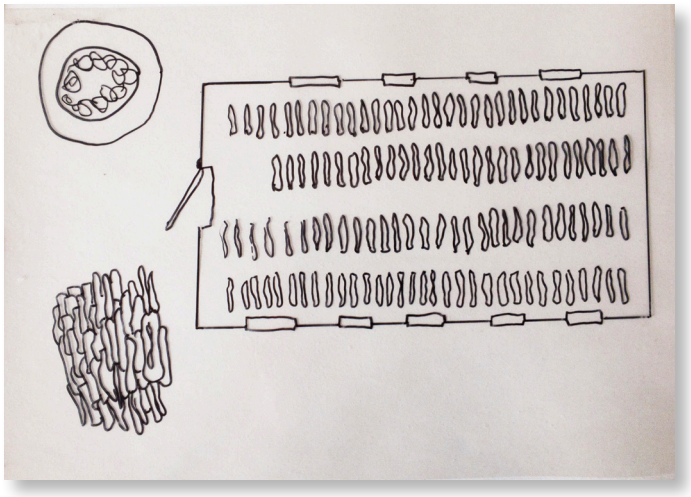
After the shower, the prisoners were allocated different barracks. Bronka, Rachel and I arrived at the so-called death barrack. It was probably called that since we shared the floor with both the sick and the dead.

There were neither chairs nor tables. Nor were there any sleeping bunks or even mattresses. We laid directly on the hard, cold, dirty floor. Three or four girls had one blanket to share between them.

The 200 of us girls who were there were laid tightly packed next to each other in rows. We had to go outside to answer the call of nature. There was a hole in the ground with planks of wood around it.

Typhus and stomach diseases were rampant in the camp. Many were seriously ill and wailing to themselves. I saw them die before my eyes. Whenever somebody died, other prisoners had to carry the body to a designated place in the camp. But nobody had the strength to. We were too weak and exhausted. The dead were instead piled up in a heap directly outside of the barracks. They remained there until after the liberation.





This is a sketch of my barrack as I remember it. Bronka, Rachel and I laid in a row by the third window to the left of the entrance. There was a "toilet" outside on one side of the opening. The dead were piled up in a heap opposite.

We were woken up every morning at six o'clock. In the barracks, there were prisoners who were leaders, *kapos*. They used to chase us out and kept guard until the other butchers came. First, they screamed *"appell"* and then *"schnell, schnell"* to get us to hurry up. Everybody had to get up off the floor and quickly line up in rows outside the barrack. We stood up in the same clothes that we slept in, and that we were never able to wash.

It was the start of the year. We were forced to stand for hours on end in the freezing cold until the Germans came to count us. They knew how many there were in each barrack. But the figures never added up since some people weren't able to go out. A few remained immobile on the floor. A number even died during the time it took for the guards to count us.

One capo had to count those who were in the barrack and another those who were stood in rows outside. When, after four or five hours, they had finally finished the count and everything added up, then we were allowed to go back in again.

Our "breakfast" consisted of a bit of stale bread that was supposed to be enough for the evening meal as well. We were even served a black liquid, substitute coffee.

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In the middle of the day, they rationed out *Mehlsuppe*, flour soup. It tasted bad, but it was so cold in the barrack that, as the soup was warm, we thought it was absolutely heavenly to be able to drink.

There was a so-called *Waschraum* with large metal sinks in another building. But the water was cold, and the room as well since the windows were broken. Due to the cold, there was hardly anyone who went in there.

We were infested with lice. They stuck in one's hair, all over the body and in clothes. Their bites itched something horrible. I felt that I had to at least try to wash myself to get rid of at least some of the dirt and pests.

The temperature was below freezing in the washing room, but I was no longer put off by that. I felt such a strong urge to wash. Another girl came in while I was standing there. The rest of us all looked like skeletons, but she actually looked like a person. The girl washed her hands. But she had a little towel and a bit of soap with her! It was impossible for me to take my eyes off the soap. I felt such a pull towards it that I could feel my legs almost folding underneath me.

When the girl was done, she went out. The towel and soap were still there. I couldn't believe my eyes! Even to this day, I don't know if she saw my glances and left the things there on purpose, or maybe she just forgot about them.

I threw myself over the bit of soap and the towel as soon as she was out of sight. I quickly took off my clothes but kept them within reach on the floor. You never left things unattended in the camp.

Then I started to use the soap and wash. I didn't feel any cold, but I was scared that the girl would come back.

When I was done I put my dirty clothes back on.

Thanks to that soap, I could again wash myself a bit later on. Perhaps it contributed to my survival? I could at least hold back the lice for a while.

Since we slept directly on the floor, many of the girls in the death barracks suffered from sores on their backs. There was no need for a gas chamber at Bergen-Belsen. Typhus, diarrhoea, the cold, dirt and hunger claimed the lives of most. Of the 200 of us who came in the same transport, only about 50 survived.

## British Troops Liberate the Camp

Many suffered from diarrhoea. They were too weak to get themselves to the hole in the ground outside the barrack and so the loose excrement ran all over the floor.

Rachel and I still stood on our legs. As soon as we heard that a new transport was arriving, we went to ask about relatives and friends. When we were there, they often served flour soup, and we used to shove our way into the queue to get an extra bowl. We took the soup to our friend Bronka. She had become more and more ill and could no longer stand up.

Bronka was eventually so ill that we were forced to take her to the so-called sickbay. There were no medicines or doctors there. The only advantage was that there were bunks to lie on and a toilet.

Rachel and I visited Bronka every day, sometimes two or three times a day. When we went there on 14 April, she was no longer in her bunk. We understood what had happened and started to search for her among the bodies in the piles of corpses outside the sickbay. That is where we found her. She was lying there with open eyes.

At that moment neither Rachel nor I believed that we had any chance of surviving.



A friend gave this picture of Bronka Kohn to me after the war. It was taken sometime before the outbreak of war in 1939. Bronka was 21 years old when she died in Bergen-Belsen on 14 April 1945.

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The Germans abandoned the camp when they heard that the British troops were advancing. There were therefore no servings of soup or bread during the three days prior to the liberation.

The day after Bronka's death, 15 April, I went to fetch some drinking water. The sunny weather outside the barrack took me by surprise. It had been so cold the whole time, but now the sun gloriously warmed me. I sat down on the ground and turned my face towards the sunshine. Perhaps we would survive after all, I thought. But when I saw the bodies lying all over the place on the ground, it didn't feel quite as sure.

I sat in the sunshine for a long time and enjoyed the warmth. It was such a contrast to the stinking, dirty, cold barrack. Then a uniformed man suddenly drove by on a motorcycle. I could tell at once that he wasn't a German soldier.

*"I sat in the sunshine for a long time and enjoyed the warmth. It was such a contrast to the stinking, dirty, cold barrack. Then a uniformed man suddenly drove by on a motorcycle. I could tell at once that he wasn't a German soldier."*

When the motorcycle disappeared, I went into the barrack and told the other girls what I had seen. Everyone who could went out. We sat ourselves down on the ground outside the barrack and waited together. After a couple of hours, the British troops arrived.

The soldiers felt the smell of the corpses and the stinking sewage holes. A British soldier or officer who sat in a tank apologised to us, saying that they could unfortunately not stop to help us as they had to continue onwards.

We found out later that the British troops couldn't stay. The soldiers were on their way towards Hamburg to fight alongside the other Allied forces.

They arranged for the British Red Cross to help us and the other ex-prisoners in the camp. But the staff didn't know how to take care of such sick people. The food they gave us was unsuitable. Many people threw themselves over the cans of meat. But, after such a long time of hunger and disease, their stomachs couldn't cope with the rich food. They died in agony.

The Red Cross burned down all the barracks in order to exterminate the lice that were spreading typhus. I heard later on that they regretted doing so as there was no longer any evidence left for posterity.

They also incinerated our blankets and clothing. Until then, I had managed to retain my cornflower blue coat. But to my great sadness, it was now taken away from me.

All of the ex-prisoners were disinfected. The most gravely ill were transported to hospitals and many were even taken with the White Buses to Sweden.

Rachel and I were placed in the large holding camp in Bergen-Belsen that the British had established. It was a so-called Displaced Persons Camp or DP. We slowly regained our strength, but we never became entirely healthy again.

The camp stayed open until 1950. Everyone who either didn't want to or couldn't return to their home countries was allowed to stay there. Both Rachel and I remained there. We didn't want to go back to Poland. And we understood that there were no survivors in our families.

## Making Plans to Travel to Sweden

The Red Cross dropped sheets of paper and pens from helicopters. They encouraged everyone to write letters to relatives and promised to make sure that these letters arrived at their given addresses. The thinking was that we would in this way be able to get in touch with those other relatives who had survived.

Rachel and I actually had an address to my father's second-youngest brother, Uncle Moshe Posner. We were 20 years old when he left Poland and relocated to Darmstadt in Germany. He, along with Auntie Berta and their three children, had managed to flee to Copenhagen in Denmark a short while before the outbreak of war in 1939. My family had managed to retain contact with Moshe until the late summer of 1942. The post worked well since the Germans had occupied both Poland and Denmark.

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In this photo is my uncle Moshe Posner. The picture was taken at the end of the 1920s. At that time my uncle lived in Germany. Many of the photos that I have of my family I received from my uncle.

When the ghetto in Sosnowiec closed down, my aunt Regina had called on me, my sister, brother and my cousins to survive. She repeated the address of our uncle: "Sortedamsgade 5 in Copenhagen". That was why Rachel knew it off by heart. It was our duty as survivors to get in touch with him.

In the letter to Uncle Moshe, Rachel and I wrote that we were in a Displaced Persons Camp in Bergen-Belsen. What we didn't know was that Moshe and his family had been forced to flee to Sweden in 1943 since the Germans were threatening to deport all the Danish Jews. When the war ended, Moshe returned to Copenhagen and found our letter. He was distraught. "Are you the only ones left?" he wrote. Before the war, he had seven siblings with families in Poland. Only Rachel and I had survived.

Moshe wanted us to come to him in Copenhagen. It was a big thing for us that we had a relative—a family! But Denmark had closed its borders: they didn't take in refugees. Moshe, therefore, suggested that we should instead travel to Malmö with the White Buses. It was only an hour and a half by ferry between the countries. So Rachel and I decided to travel to Sweden.

Many other survivors came to the Displaced Persons Camp looking for relatives. One of them was a young man from Sosnowiec whom I knew fairly well. He was about a year or so older than me. When he saw me, he exclaimed, "Lorka, I've got good news! I've just come from Bielsko-Biała and there I met your sister Miriam." He passed me a slip of paper with her address on it.

It was an enormous joy! I immediately wrote to Miriam, "Get here quickly! Rachel and I have been in touch with Uncle Moshe in Copenhagen. We are going to travel to Malmö in Sweden." But the postage didn't work. Everything was in a state of chaos in Europe those first months after the war.

The time for our journey to Sweden was approaching. I couldn't go without Miriam, so I decided to go and get her.

## Fetching My Sister

Travelling to Poland was arduous and dangerous. I was only 21 years old and ought not to travel alone. A young couple that I had met in the camp were also looking for surviving relatives. They had decided to continue looking in Poland when they didn't find anyone in Germany, and I asked them if I could come along with them.

It was September and starting to get cold. I didn't have any suitable clothing. One of my friends in the camp sewed a skirt and a jacket from a few blankets. Then I travelled in those clothes in search of Miriam.

I had a paper with me where it was written that as a "returnee to the Fatherland", I was permitted to travel the whole way without a ticket. I showed that paper on the train and even on the tram in Bielsko-Biała. The driver in the tram wanted payment, but I didn't have a single grosz, not a single penny. I pointed at the paper and said, "It says here that I am allowed to travel all the way to this street."

The Red Army had liberated the Parschnitz forced labour camp where my sister had been held captive. The Russians didn't establish any Displaced Persons Camps there but instead sent away all the ex-prisoners to where they came from. In Sosnowiec, Miriam couldn't find any work, but she had met an acquaintance who had helped her to get to Bielsko-Biała, which was fairly close to Oświęcim. She found work there as an office worker in a factory.

I reached Bielsko-Biała on a Sunday. Miriam happened to be free for the day and had decided to meet a friend. The apartment she lived in was on the first floor, and the trams passed by right outside. From her window, Miriam could see who was on board and, that day, she kept an eye on the passing trams to see if her friend was on them.

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Miriam couldn't believe her eyes when she leaned out of the window and suddenly caught sight of me on the tram. We survivors often had such experiences, that we thought we had seen someone we knew who then turned out to be somebody else. It wasn't long before I was knocking on her door. We had been apart for two years but it felt more like two hundred years—we had so much to tell each other. We talked and cried.

The Communist regime in Poland had forbidden people from leaving the country. We paid smugglers to get us over the border to eastern Germany. We set off the same autumn and travelled together with Miriam's friend and her sister and fiancé. In December, we then proceeded from eastern Berlin to the western side of town.

Rachel had at the same time been assisted by Zionist activists in getting to Belgium and further on to the British Mandate of Palestine. That's why it was Miriam and me who travelled on to Sweden on 6 May 1946.

## Life in Sweden



Josef and I couldn't afford a big wedding, so instead, we arranged a wedding reception at our home. At the time, we lived in an apartment without a bathroom and shared a toilet with the other homes in our block. And there was no warm water in the kitchen. We got married in Malmö's synagogue on 24 December 1950. We hadn't thought that this was Christmas Eve but noticed when we came out onto the street that it was difficult to get hold of a taxi. So we had to travel by tram back home to the waiting guests: How people looked at us and my long wedding dress! That was a source of comedy later on during the reception.

In Sweden, Miriam and I, along with other refugees, were put into quarantine in Landskrona for a few weeks. I immediately felt a strong connection with the town. I had actually read *Gösta Berling's Saga* by Selma Lagerlöf, and I knew that she had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for that book.

We came to Malmö after our time in quarantine, and that was where we met Uncle Moshe and Aunt Berta for the first time. They became like parents to us, and cousins Joakim, Hanna and Bernard became like siblings to us. We often travelled with them to Copenhagen and celebrated the holidays together.

There was at that time a rich Jewish life in Malmö. We formed bonds of friendship with many and became members of the Jewish community. When we met, we used to mainly speak Polish and Yiddish.

After a few weeks, I had already found work at a hosiery factory. To start with, I could only utter a few words in Swedish: "hello", "thanks a lot" and "how are you" and so on. But gradually, I learnt more and more.

I met my future husband Josef Gleitman in 1948, and we got married in 1950. It was love at first sight. He came from the same Polish town as me, Sosnowiec. It turned out that I had been a classmate of one of his sisters, Rutka. Josef had survived one of the death marches, from Auschwitz to Sachsenhausen, and came to Sweden through the White Buses rescue operation.

We had two daughters together, Barbro and Susanne, and later even grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Josef sadly died of cancer in 1961.

My sister Miriam got married to a man from the USA. They spent their final years in Israel with Sylvia, one of their two daughters. Miriam passed away in 2016. Rachel had died three years earlier. I am the last of us three who is still alive.

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In 1989, Ahmed Rami started to spread lies on Stockholm's local radio about how the Holocaust had never taken place. Some of us survivors in Malmö decided that we had to do something: we couldn't keep silent. In 1991 we started an organisation called Holocaust Eyewitnesses, with Harry Rubinstein as chairman. In 2005 we published the Holocaust Eyewitnesses memorial compilation, a text where everybody described a specific event that happened in the camps.

At the start, there were twenty of us witnesses from different countries such as Poland, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Germany and Hungary. Each and every one of us started to give talks about our experiences in schools. Now, in 2017, there are only two of us who still have the ability to visit school classes, and I continue to meet new students once or twice a week.




The images feature my husband Josef Gleitman's identity papers. He survived the death marches from Auschwitz to Sachsenhausen. That was where he as a captive, was given a "passport". Joseph had to have his fingerprints taken and sign the document. He listed Radomsko as his place of birth. He stated that his occupation was that of "locksmith" *(schlosser)*.



Here I am on a walk with my daughters Barbro and Susanne in Helsingborg, 1956.

In 2016 I travelled with my daughters to Poland. Here are Barbro and I at the entrance to the house I lived in Sosnowiec.

*It says in my Swedish identity papers that I was born on 27 January. It was during the Communist time in Poland when the authorities there made an error on my identity papers. I have tried to have the details corrected but have not succeeded.*



Text and cover photo: Ewa Wymark | Translation from the Swedish original: Carl Franks

Graphic design: Cecilia Undemark Péterfy

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