HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

The Indestructible Spirit

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL ARON

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Featuring Members of The "1939" Club
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Honoring Sol and Fay Chase

Summaries by
PROFESSOR MARILYN HARRAN
Based upon survivor testimonies
With contributions by Liam Maher IV
Editorial review by Professor Jan Osborn

Student Research Assistants

Erin Anderson
Jessica Bates
Jacklyn Brown
Jenna Brunette
Alia Burdick
Rebecca Campbell
Rebecca Chatham
Potter Clark
Taylor Cotton
Adrienne Crowley
Shannon David
Mitch Fait
Lara Filbert
Mike Frazier
Allison Frey
Anthony Gerstner
Jennifer Grabot
Rachel Hansen
Caitlin Hanson
Kathleen Hasay
Shinae Hickey
Aimee Hutchins
Kanani Hoopai
Layce Johnson
Steve Kent
Liam Maher IV
Jos McKain
Eric Marty
Lucas Milliken
Jennifer Mousseau
Billy Otteman
Lindsey Petersen
Claire Richardson
Christine Rineberg
Joy Ringgold
Nathaniel Robbins
Zachary Roth
Emily Scott
Gregg Sherman
Janessa Simms
Samantha Sleigh
Blake Slyter
Alexis Still
Joseph Thiel
Jennifer Thongnoi
Lindsay Thorsen
Bryan Wage
Tiffany Warch
Jaclyn Zeider

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In each of Bill Aron's stunning photographs, we see the face of a Holocaust survivor who embodies the indestructible spirit of humanity.

The faces in the photographs radiate kindness and love of life. They reflect accomplishment and success. Yet, these same individuals have known intense suffering and immense loss. In most cases, they lost their closest and dearest friends and family members--mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. They continue to this day to grapple with memories of a dark world of inhumanity and indifference.

To retain their humanity in situations so terrible that they defy description, to find the spiritual and physical strength to go on, to share what little they had with someone in even greater need is truly a testimony to these Holocaust survivors' indestructible spirit of humanity. To relive these experiences so that subsequent generations might learn from them and be inspired to create a world free of hatred, racism, and genocide testifies to these witnesses' belief in our indestructible humanity and potential for goodness.

Some of The "1939" Club members in these photographs were children during the Holocaust while others were teenagers or young adults. They survived ghettos; labor, concentration, and death camps; and brutal death marches. Some survived in hiding thanks to the protection of righteous gentiles, who also embody the indestructible spirit of humanity and whose actions remind us that during the Holocaust individuals were not helpless to intervene and save lives.

After liberation and the end of the war, the survivors tried to pick up the threads of their lives before the Holocaust. They returned to school; they began careers and businesses; they learned English; they immigrated eventually to the United States. They married and began their own families. Most now have children and grandchildren and some even have great-grandchildren. They rejoice in their families and their lifetimes of achievement; they celebrate life but they live each day with the memory of what might have been and with the faces of those whose futures were taken from them. For them, memory is not past but present.

Each Holocaust survivor's experience is unique, but they share themes of courage, faith, and hope. Each of these witnesses to the Holocaust would also emphasize that sheer luck played a crucial role in their survival. It would be a terrible mistake to think that the six million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust somehow lacked the initiative or the will of those who survived.

Included here is the first part of a project that will eventually include 100 photographs and summaries. In writing the summaries, I have made extensive use of the research and drafts prepared by the Chapman University students listed. By their commitment and dedication, their investment of intellect and caring, these students have transformed a class assignment into a true labor of love. We are deeply grateful to Irving and Nancy Chase whose extraordinary generosity has made this project possible--a partnership of images and texts that connect past to present to future. We are honored that these photographs and summaries will be part of the permanent collection of the Sala and Aron Samueli Holocaust Memorial Library at Chapman University.

As I have learned over the last months, it is impossible to condense an individual's history into only a few hundred words. Nonetheless, in each summary, I have tried to convey what I believe is at the heart of that person's unique experience and to do so in a way that illuminates, however faintly, that survivor's indestructible spirit. Working on this project continues to be both a humbling and an inspiring experience. Like my students, I too have been transformed by this work.

We are deeply grateful to the members of The "1939" Club for entrusting Chapman University with these testimonies and for allowing us to become the guardians of their memories.

Marilyn J. Harran, Ph.D.
Stern Chair in Holocaust Education
Director, Rodgers Center for Holocaust Education and
Sala and Aron Samueli Holocaust Memorial Library
Professor of Religious Studies and History
Chapman University

Eva Brettler (Katz)

WOMEN WHO CARED

Born in Cluj, Romania in November 1936, Eva Brettler remembers the Holocaust through the eyes of a child. She was visiting her maternal grandparents in Tashnard, Hungary in the summer of 1944 when German soldiers suddenly appeared. Warned to hide, Eva watched as the soldiers took her grandmother and aunt. Hours later she emerged from her hiding place, packed a knapsack and walked across town to the rabbi who succeeded in contacting her parents. In the months that followed, while her father Sandor endured forced labor, Eva's mother Margit tried to save herself and her daughter. First they hid in a house protected by the Swedish government. Then Margit secured a false identity card allowing her to work as a gentile, but shortly afterwards, she was recognized and denounced. Mother and child were arrested.

With thousands of other Jews, in September 1944, they were sent on a forced march toward Germany. With no time to prepare for the arduous journey, dressed only in light summer clothes and wearing high heels, Eva's mother struggled to keep up. Finally, no longer able to walk, she asked the Nazi guards to allow her to ride in the wagon with her daughter—a request that became her death sentence. That night Eva, only eight years old, tried to understand why her mother did not come for her.

Moved by the little girl with the big sad eyes, a fellow prisoner took pity on her. Eva tried her best not to cry so the woman would not tire of her. Eventually the prisoners reached the Ravensbrück concentration camp. There Eva formed a close bond with another woman who became her protector and surrogate mother. When Eva awoke one day to find the woman lying dead beside her, it was more than she could endure. She lost her will to live. The women of her barracks, united in love and support, saved her, insisting that she keep trying.

With the Russian army advancing, the Germans moved their prisoners once more, this time by cattle car to Bergen-Belsen. There prisoners lived among mountains of rotting corpses. Eva survived by faith, luck and ingenuity. She turned her small size into an advantage, squeezing through the wire fence into the refuse area of the kitchen in order to bring back potato peelings for herself and other prisoners.

After liberation, Eva spent eighteen months in a Swedish orphanage until her father located her and brought her back to Hungary where she lived for ten years. In 1956, following the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Revolution, Eva fled her country. In January 1957, she reached the United States where she met and married fellow survivor Marten Brettler. She became the mother of four—making the dream that had once seemed so impossible a reality. With her husband's encouragement, she returned to school, earning a degree in psychology from UCLA in 1983. She became a social worker, carrying on the acts of compassion that had once given hope to a little girl who had lost her mother.

" In my barracks in Ravensbrück, I saw a woman who gave birth to a child. The other women hid the mother and the baby. I don't know how they managed.
This miracle became our happy conspiracy.
I remember thinking that someday I too would like to be a mother with children, in a normal house, in a normal place. To have such an outrageous dream in the concentration camp gave me hope, the belief in a possible future."

" One day I noticed a woman covered with a dirty gray blanket, staring at me through the window as I was cutting bread. Her eyes were sunken and begging. I opened the window and threw out some crumbs. The next day the shadow appeared again and the next day. So I threw out pieces of bread. She was a complete stranger to me. Little did I know that my good deed would bring about my survival."

Lidia Budgor (Gryngras)

A SAVING MITZVAH

The eldest of five children, Lidia Budgor was born Lola Gryngras on August 23, 1925 to middle class Chassidic parents in the Polish city of Lodz. Lidia lived in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood and attended a Jewish school where she learned several languages. In early February 1940, following the German invasion of Poland the preceding September, all the city's Jews, including Lidia's family, were ordered into an overcrowded ghetto in the Baluty slum district.

Lidia became the family's breadwinner. Assigned to the meat-distribution department, she smuggled out scraps of horsemeat and fat to keep her family alive. Eventually denounced, she was sentenced to pull wagons of excrement to the outskirts of the ghetto—a death sentence for herself and her family whom she could no longer protect from deportation. Only because of the efforts of influential acquaintances on the Jewish Council was she saved and allowed to return to her family. They remained together until August 1944, escaping numerous deportations, until their luck finally ran out. The family was deported—along with nearly 75,000 others—to Auschwitz. Lidia still remembers the painful separation and her little brother running to her mother to give her a final kiss. Lidia was saved by one of the Sonderkommando (special prisoner squad) but the rest of her family was sent to the gas chambers.

From Auschwitz, Lidia was shipped to the Stutthof concentration camp, east of Danzig, where fortune singled her out yet again—better quarters and a job in the kitchen. She quickly used her position to help another, throwing bits of bread out the window to a starving woman hiding in the shadows. This risky mitzvah (good deed) ultimately saved her life when in January 1945 the Germans evacuated Stutthof sending the prisoners on a death march. Feverish, stricken with typhus, in a louse-infested blanket and broken clogs, Lidia would never have survived had it not been for that same woman who fed her bits of snow and helped her to keep moving. When the march ended at Kolkau, the friend, Mary Procell, brought Lidia soup and bathed her. The Germans abandoned their prisoners on March 10, and the arriving Soviet troops declared them free. For Lidia, there was no elation, only a profound sense of loneliness.

With no family and nowhere to go, Lidia drifted with other girls to Slupsk in Pomerania. There she met her future husband, Wolf Budgor, and stayed behind when the others moved on. From Slupsk, Lidia and her new husband made their way to Vienna and eventually to a displaced persons camp in Munich. In May 1952, the family—with their young son Aaron—obtained entry visas to the United States, settling in New Jersey until Wolf heard unexpectedly from a brother whom he had not seen in forty years and who lived now in Los Angeles. The family moved west.

Recognizing the need for survivors to help one another—even as she and Mary had done—Lidia helped to found the Los Angeles Holocaust Museum and in 1959 to establish the Lodzer Organization, composed of Lodz survivors and their descendents, twice serving as that organization's president, and currently serving as president of the Council of Holocaust Survivor Organizations.

Samuel Goetz

AN EDUCATION TO WITNESS

Sam Goetz was born in Tarnow, Poland on June 8, 1928. Sam's father ran a small import-export business dealing in fur products, often traveling outside Poland's borders and always bringing back a gift, sometimes a stamp, one time a watch, for Sam and his older brother Bernard.

The German invasion of Poland in 1939 destroyed the family's peaceful life, although Sam's parents tried to maintain a sense of normalcy, even arranging for Sam's bar mitzvah in June 1941. Had the ceremony been discovered by the Nazis, it would have meant the death penalty for everyone present. When the Nazis prohibited Jews from attending school, Sam's parents made the daring decision to enroll him in clandestine classes in private homes—until the deportations brought even this secret study to an end. Little did Sam know this secret education would one day become the foundation for his future.

In June 1942, Sam's parents were deported. His aunt, uncle and cousins were rounded up only a few months later. All were murdered at the death camp Belzec. Only 14 years old, Sam was left on his own. With occasional smuggled food from his Polish Christian nanny Tekla, Sam survived the next year. He was among those sent to Plaszow in the suburbs of Krakow and then in the spring of 1944 to the concentration camp Gross-Rosen in Lower Silesia and subsequently to the sub-camp Falkenberg where he labored in the tunnels being built to protect German industry from Allied bombs. There he befriended a Hungarian boy named Willie, with whom he shared day dreams of freedom and food, until they were separated during a death march. Sent eventually to Ebensee, a sub-camp of Mauthausen, Sam was put back to work in the tunnels—only this time, he bonded with no one.

On May 6, 1945, American tanks arrived at the gate, and 16-year-old Sam, barely clinging to life, was freed. Nearly sixty years later, he would meet his liberator, Sgt. Robert Persinger, who commanded the first tank to enter Ebensee.

In a displaced persons camp in Italy, Sam met a 14-year-old girl from Vienna named Gerti with whom he began to share his hopes for the future. In August 1949, Sam departed for the U.S., settling in the Bronx. In a mere six months he attained his high school diploma and made the decision to move to Los Angeles, where Gerti was now living with her family. In July 1950, Sam and Gerti wed. By 1955 both had earned degrees from UCLA and continued on to graduate school with Sam completing a doctorate in optometry in 1960 and Gerti subsequently earning a Ph.D. in German Literature.

In 1962, Sam joined The "1939" Club and later became its president. Refusing to allow Holocaust deniers to go unchallenged, he led the Club's effort to establish the nation's first endowed chair in Holocaust studies at UCLA in 1979, assuring that Holocaust memory will never be lost.

" I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was eleven minutes past one. As hollow-cheeked figures emerged from the gate and swept the GI off his feet, I saw a large, white star on the tank and at that moment I became a free man."

" Soon a young man with an Arrow Cross (Hungarian Nazi Party) insignia came to our door with a rifle slung over his shoulder. He couldn't have been more than 16 or 17 years old. When my mother opened the door, he grabbed her hand and pulled off her wedding ring. I watched this scene anxiously, literally hiding behind her skirt."

John Gordon

FLIGHT TO FREEDOM

Although John Gordon lost his father when he was only two years old, he remembers his early childhood as a happy time with a loving mother and grandparents. His childhood came to an abrupt end when Germany invaded and occupied Hungary in 1944. What first seemed to the boy of eight to be an unexpected vacation from school soon took on a more ominous meaning as the Jews of Budapest were evicted from their homes and sent to overcrowded "Star houses." Even then, John took comfort in the fact that he and his family were together. But soon his mother was ordered to report for forced labor. He would never see her again. For years John would struggle to understand how his mother could leave him.

In the care first of his grandparents and subsequently his aunt, John was among the thousands of Jews who Raoul Wallenberg and the War Refugee Board sought to protect, moving them to houses flying the flag of neutral Sweden as the Nazis sought to exterminate the last major Jewish community in occupied Europe.

For months, John and his family hid in a crowded, dark basement enduring nightly Allied bombings. On January 1, 1945, members of the Arrow Cross, Hungarian Nazis, shot off the padlock of the house in which they were hiding, ignoring the sign that it was Swedish property. Only Wallenberg's swift arrival saved the lives of the eighty occupants. Elsewhere in Budapest, Jews were not so lucky, executed by the Arrow Cross, their bodies tossed into the Danube.

A few days later, the family was liberated by the Soviet army. But freedom proved illusory as the Iron Curtain descended upon Hungary. Rejected for admission to the university because he did not have a "proletariat" background, John made the wrenching decision to leave those he loved and risk death to find a better future. He dared not say goodbye to his family, his beloved grandparents and the aunt and uncle who had raised him as their own son, lest they be tried as co-conspirators to treason. At night, with a few companions, John crossed a no-man's land filled with mines, reaching Austria and freedom. At the age of 20, in 1957, John realized his dream to come to the United States. He received a scholarship to Penn State University, graduating with a B.S. in electrical engineering in only four years and later earning a master's degree in business administration from the University of Southern California.

His daring flight to freedom brought a life of professional accomplishment and personal meaning as husband, father, and grandfather, and as president of the Child Survivors of the Holocaust, Los Angeles.

Toni Green (Eichner)

THE BOND OF SISTERS

Toni Green was born in the town of Oswiecim, Poland, on June 17, 1923. Next to the youngest of seven children, she adored and admired her older brothers and sisters. Her parents provided a loving home where both religion and education were highly valued. By the age of 10, Toni already spoke Polish, Yiddish, and German, but her education was cut short by the war. Jews were no longer permitted to learn.

A few months after the German invasion of Poland and the start of the war, Oswiecim was renamed Auschwitz and became part of the territory incorporated into the Greater Reich. The Eichner family struggled to cope with harsh conditions, including curfews and little food. Finally, the parents agreed that their four older children should flee to the Soviet zone in the hope that life would be better there. They would never be heard from again.

In April 1941, the Jews of Auschwitz were expelled to make room for the growing concentration camp complex, now including the factories of IG Farben. The town of Auschwitz was to be "Jew free." Toni, her younger sister Selma, and parents were sent to Sosnowiec, a holding area, while her brother Isaac was sent to a labor camp. Soon the family was faced with a terrible dilemma—the Nazis required that one of the two girls be deported to a labor camp. Secretly Selma and Toni decided that Selma should leave while Toni stayed to care for their sick mother. The two sisters did not know if they would ever see each other again.

In August, the remaining Jews in the Sosnowiec ghetto were required to register. Toni's parents, judged too old and ill to work, were sent to their death at Auschwitz. Toni was spared and sent to various labor camps, including Graben, a sub-camp of Gross-Rosen. With the Soviet army drawing near, in December 1944, the Germans forced Toni and the other prisoners on a six-week death march, followed by a week on a train in an overcrowded cattle car with no food or sanitation before reaching their destination, the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. Like so many others, including Anne Frank, Toni fell desperately ill with typhus. Only the arrival of the British army on April 15, 1945 saved her life.

Liberation brought Toni news that her sister, Selma, was also in Bergen-Belsen but was even more desperately ill than Toni with typhus. In the chaos of the camp, Toni miraculously found Selma, near death, lying on the floor of a stable surrounded by the dead. She nursed her sister day and night, even giving Selma her own rations, and finally was able to get her into an overcrowded hospital where she slowly regained her health. Liberation also brought news that their youngest brother had died in Dachau, a week after liberation. Of seven children, only Toni and Selma had survived.

Once they were well enough, the sisters were sent to a displaced persons camp in Bamberg. Toni, who married fellow survivor Jack Green in 1946, came to the United States in 1949; her sister followed a year later. To this day, they remain not only devoted sisters but best friends, living near one another in Los Angeles and sharing delight in their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

" When I was liberated, I got dressed and went looking for my sister. I said to myself, I am fortunate, lucky, if I will have one sister still. Please, G-d, I ask only that she survive."

" Hitler and his henchmen tried to destroy us physically, but they did not break our spirit. And all this started Friday, September 1, 1939. It is therefore important that the year 1939 should be remembered as a symbol of man's inhumanity to man."

Felicia Haberfeld (Spierer)

REMEMBER NOT TO FORGET

Not every survivor saw evil first-hand; some were forced to stand by helplessly, as everyone and everything they loved was taken from them, and wait for news that would never come.

Felicia Haberfeld was born in Krakow, Poland, on July 21, 1911 and grew up in a large family. As the eldest grandchild, she was especially close to her grandparents, and along with her extended family she spent almost every evening with them. As a youth, Felicia was involved in Zionist organizations. While attending Jagiellonian University she first experienced anti-Semitism, witnessing fights between Jewish and Christian students that led to the death of one classmate.

After spending a year in Vienna to complete her studies, she was awarded a master's degree in philosophy. In 1936 she married Alfons Haberfeld, a leading Jewish industrialist in pre-war Poland. The couple lived in the famous 19th century Haberfeld House in the city of Oswiecim, later known as Auschwitz. Felicia gave birth to their daughter Franciszka in 1937.

On August 1, 1939, Felicia and Alfons sailed from Danzig to New York for the World's Fair, where Alfons was to exhibit products from the Haberfeld Distillery. As they were returning home, Germany invaded Poland, war was declared, and their liner, the M.S. Pilsudski, was intercepted on the high seas by the British navy and diverted to Great Britain. Following several weeks' detention on board, the Haberfelds were admitted to the UK on a "temporary basis." Life in wartime Britain was hard. After selling Felicia's jewelry and other personal items, the Haberfelds eventually made their way to Liverpool and sailed back to the United States.

After a brief stay at Ellis Island, the Haberfelds re-entered the United States as stateless, friendless, and penniless war refugees. They ended up in Baltimore where Alfons found a job in a distillery. All the while they were terrified for their family, still in Poland under Nazi occupation. Finally the Haberfelds found a woman who said that she could get Franciszka out of the country, but it would cost them two thousand dollars. With no other way to raise the money, Alfons went to his employer for a loan. Although Alfons was a hard-working and valued employee, in the end his boss was unwilling to risk such a large sum, and Franciszka was lost forever.

The Haberfelds went on to have another child, Stephen, in 1944, and in 1948 they moved permanently to Los Angeles. In 1967 the Haberfelds returned to Poland to find news of their family. What they learned only confirmed their worst fears—Felicia's entire family had been killed.

She may never have seen the inside of a concentration camp, or struggled to keep quiet in a secret attic, but Felicia Haberfeld is a survivor of the Holocaust. And as a co-founder of The "1939" Club, Felicia has done her part to see that those whose lives were taken in the Holocaust are never forgotten and that families are never again torn asunder by hatred.

Marie Kaufman

A CONSPIRACY OF KINDNESS

Marie Kaufman was born on March 19, 1941, at the height of the war, in Vichy France. Before becoming a couple, her parents, Michael and Anna, both born in Poland, had traveled west in the 1930s, crossing the border into France illegally, in search of work. In the face of the imminent occupation of Paris by the German army in June 1940, each fled south seeking safety in the "free zone" administered by the French government. On the train, mutual friends introduced Michael and Anna to one another.

Arriving in Albi, near Toulouse, Michael told a Red Cross refugee settlement worker that he was with Anna—unexpected news to Anna! But his quick thinking making them a couple earned them a small house in the village of Milhars. It did not take long for the illusion to become reality; Marie was born nine months later.

In December 1942, Michael's employer at the cement factory told him that the authorities had ordered him to a labor camp. His employer had not divulged his whereabouts, but it was crucial that he immediately go into hiding. Michael spent eight months in a cave, but eventually it became too difficult and dangerous for Anna to bring him food. The couple decided that Michael should hide in the basement of their own house. To enable Anna to stay out of the house all day, making the gendarmes think that no one was home, Marie was placed in the care of teenagers from two village families who told anyone who asked that she was their cousin. The parish priest joined the mayor in protecting the family, providing false papers and identity cards for mother and daughter while the factory owner falsely listed Michael as among those sent to the labor camp.

When Marie's sister, Helene, was born in 1943 the priest concealed the baby's Jewish identity, performing a mock baptism. A gendarme looking for Michael chose not to search the house even though it was the most obvious place to look. And the owner of the cement company secretly gave half of Michael's salary to Anna. The conspiracy of kindness worked; the couple and their two children survived.

The family remained in Milhars for a year after the occupation ended, then returned to Paris, where Michael and Anna finally married in 1947. They learned that all their family members in Poland had been killed, except for Michael's sister Fela.

In 1951 the Kaufman family immigrated to the United States, settling in Los Angeles. Marie married, had two children and is now the grandmother of four. In 1996 she returned to Milhars to meet the people who had saved her. When Marie suggested to the adults who as teenagers had protected her that they and their parents should be honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations, they refused, saying that they deserved no special recognition for their act of ordinary decency, for choosing to participate in a conspiracy of kindness.

" I suggested honoring them and their parents at Yad Vashem; they were silent. I asked again. They responded at last, 'But why? It was normal to do the right thing.'"

" The last time I saw my mother was at the point of Mengele's baton. My mother, sensing her own fate and that of her three daughters, said to me, 'You stay with your older sister. You can survive if you stay together. I am going to stay with the baby.'"

Cesia Kingston (Rozental)

ÜBERLEBEN—LIVE ONE MORE DAY

Cesia Kingston was born in Lodz, Poland in 1926. Her Zionist parents highly valued education and worked long hours in their restaurant to enable their children to attend a Jewish private school. All that would change with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939.

In February 1940, Cesia, then 14, and her family were forced into the ghetto. Living in a single cramped room, Cesia, her four siblings, parents and grandmother, struggled to make the best of the overcrowded conditions and the steadily decreasing food ration. Survival depended on meeting one's daily production quota and when Cesia, her hands bloodied by the work, couldn't keep up, her younger brother stepped in to help. Cesia tried to ease the hunger of her baby sister by entertaining her with stories of the world outside the ghetto—the smell of a flower, the taste of an egg, and the pure delight of eating chocolate.

In August 1944, the family—including Cesia, her two brothers and two sisters, mother, and grandmother—were sent on the next to the last transport from Lodz to Auschwitz. Her father had already been deported. Upon arrival at the camp, her mother, somehow sensing what lay ahead, ordered Cesia to stay with her older sister Nadzia while she remained with the baby. She told the sisters that if they stayed together they would überleben, survive. Cesia's brothers were sent into another line. Her mother's decision meant life for the two girls; death in the gas chambers for herself and her baby.

Throughout the next months of brutal labor and near starvation, Cesia remembered what her mother had said, überleben, survive. That word kept the two sisters going in Auschwitz and later in Stutthof. From there, in the depths of winter, they were sent on a death march, wearing only flimsy clothing and with only one pair of shoes between them. Those who could not keep up were shot. When the march reached the Baltic Sea, the guards jammed the prisoners onto leaky boats and pushed them out into the tumultuous seas. In the split second when the guards were distracted by Allied bombers flying overhead, Cesia grabbed her sister's hand and the two girls fled into the woods.

Close to starvation, with no papers and no clothes, the sisters somehow managed to present themselves as homeless Polish Christians seeking work. When Nadzia's toes became gangrenous because she had given her shoes to her sister on the death march, Cesia carried her to the hospital on her back.

Following liberation, Cesia and her sister returned to Lodz. Everywhere they went, the two girls faced hostility. They learned that their parents, baby sister, and youngest brother had all been killed in Auschwitz. Only one brother had survived.

Cesia married fellow survivor Morrie Kingston in 1946. Recognizing that Poland held no future for them, the couple immigrated to the United States. Eventually, Nadzia would follow—two sisters who had been saved by their mother's admonition, by luck, and by their own unwavering commitment to überleben.

Selma Konitz (Eichner)

LEARNING TO SURVIVE

Selma Konitz was born in Oswiecim, Poland on November 17, 1925. The youngest of seven children, Selma had a wonderful childhood that ended abruptly when Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Her parents had hoped to send their daughter to the university; instead, Selma spent the next years learning to survive.

With only an hour's notice, in April 1941, the family was ordered to pack a few belongings and leave Oswiecim, renamed Auschwitz, which was to be "Jew free" while the nearby camp was to be expanded to become a massive killing site to make all of Europe "Jew free."

In Sosnowiec, the family endured terrible conditions and nightly raids by the SS. When Selma was 16, she received a letter ordering her to report to a labor camp. Heartbroken, she complied only after her uncle secretly told her that if she did not the SS would take away her entire family. Knowing that her mother, in poor health, would protest, Selma left without saying goodbye. A few days later her father came to see her and told her always to remember the family's love for one another. She would never see her parents again.

Selma was sent to Neusalz where she labored 15 hours a day. When the guards weren't looking, Selma and the other prisoners ate leaves from the trees to ease their hunger. Each day, those too weak to work were "selected" to be killed. Miraculously, for four years, Selma survived.

In January 1945, the inmates were sent west on a death march. People died by the thousands from starvation and the bitter cold. Selma longed to trade places with one of the dogs to whom the guards threw pieces of salami. Finally, the prisoners were herded into cattle cars and sent to the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. Packed tightly into the cars, living and dead were held upright by the pressure of one another's bodies.

Upon arrival, Selma was sent to a stable where the prisoners were literally stacked on top of one another. Lice the size of large ants consumed the prisoners. Selma slept with the dead; walked on dead people and was forced to carry the dead to mass graves. Ashes from the crematoria stuck to her skin, and the stench of burning bodies filled the air.

On April 15, 1945, Bergen-Belsen was liberated. Desperately ill from typhus and weighing less than 70 pounds, 19-year-old Selma was too weak to welcome the British. Her life was saved by her sister Toni who found her among the dead and dying, cared for her, and carried her to a hospital. Gradually Selma recovered her health. A year later, Selma met and married handsome survivor Louis Konitz. The couple, with their infant son Jack, immigrated to the United States in 1950. They settled in Los Angeles the next year, and in 1952 had another child, Russ. Family would be at the center of their lives as it had been for the parents that both had lost.

" We have tried not to live in the past, only to remember it. Both my husband and I never knew what growing up meant. What it was like to be a teenager and not to have to worry about beatings, ovens and gas chambers, death and the fight to live. So we gave our children the dearest gift, and the only gift we had, the gift of love and the will to survive no matter what the obstacles."

" You would be amazed how you can get used to misery
because if you can't get used to it, you can't survive.
To survive you make the best out of the worst."

Henry Kress

MAKING THE BEST FROM THE WORST

Born Heniek Krzesiwo in Sosnowiec, Poland, on July 26, 1924, Henry Kress, his sister Esther, and his parents enjoyed a comfortable middle class life. The Friday Shabbat (Sabbath) service was a highlight of the week since the rabbi often invited Henry and the other children into his study afterwards for a special treat—an apple or a piece of chocolate.

In 1939 the family moved to Krakow where Henry planned to become an electrician, but the onset of war ended his education. Thinking they might be safer from Nazi persecution in a smaller town, Henry's parents moved the family to Olkusz, some twenty-five miles away. When it became difficult for Jews to obtain food, Henry got up at 2 a.m. to wait in line for six hours until the bakery opened so that he could buy bread before he left for work.

The next year Henry was seized and sent to a labor camp near Heidelberg, Germany. He had no chance to say goodbye to his parents. Assigned to building roads, Henry, only 15, had to do the same exhausting physical labor as the older and stronger men. As a result, he developed a painful hernia, making it impossible for him to work. Fortunately, he was allowed to go home for a few weeks to recover. He was so changed that his mother at first didn't recognize him.

His sister Esther was able to get Henry assigned to the same factory where she worked. The family remained together even when they were moved to the Bedzin ghetto. In August 1943 the Germans liquidated the ghetto and sent everyone to Auschwitz. Henry's parents were murdered in the gas chambers there.

Upon arrival, Henry was quarantined in Birkenau before being sent to Auschwitz where he was assigned to searching clothes for valuables. His next job, delivering coal, took him out of Auschwitz and gave him a moment's reunion with Esther in Birkenau. That encounter gave each the strength to continue.

On January 18, 1945, with the Russians approaching, the prisoners were sent on a death march. Henry and a friend managed to escape while a guard was pursuing other prisoners. In terrible danger, they spent the next weeks sneaking from farm to farm, hoping that no one would betray them. Freedom came on March 21 when the Russian army arrived, but the Russians arrested the two as German collaborators. They were released when the Russians realized they had been concentration camp prisoners.

For a time Henry served with the Russian security police, hunting down and bringing to justice German SS. When he learned that his sister had been liberated at Bergen-Belsen, Henry decided to leave Poland, smuggling himself across the border into Czechoslovakia and then into Germany to join her.

In 1949, after a three year wait for his visa, Henry came to the United States. He and his wife Mary, also an Auschwitz survivor, eventually moved with their two children to Los Angeles. Hope, luck, and endurance had enabled Henry to make the best out of the worst and to survive.

Leon Leyson

A BOY ON SCHINDLER'S LIST

Leon Leyson was born Leib Lejzon, the youngest of six children, on September 15, 1929, in Narewka, a small town in northeastern Poland. In the summer, Leon and his friends ran barefoot in the meadows and swam in the river; in the winter, they had snowball fights and skated on the river.

In 1938, Leon's parents moved the family to Krakow, some 350 miles away, where Leon's father had a job. Life in the big city was exciting for a country boy—streetcars, indoor plumbing, electric lights. But his freedom to explore ended with the German invasion in September 1939. His father lost his job, and Leon was prohibited from attending school. The family was ordered into the overcrowded ghetto where they shared a bedroom with two others.

Life in the ghetto meant constant hunger. Leon ran errands for elderly people, always giving his mother the slice of bread he earned so she could divide it into tiny portions for all the family. Yet the Leysons were better off than some because Leon's father, Moishe, and brother, David, were hired by Oskar Schindler, a Nazi businessman who had come to Poland to make his fortune. Although they received no pay, father and son could leave the ghetto for work and smuggle back in their pockets a bit of food or a piece of coal to fuel the stove.

The family faced the constant danger of deportation. In one Aktion (round up), Leon's 17-year-old brother, Tsalig, who could build a radio from scratch and was his younger brother's hero, was seized along with his girlfriend. By chance, Schindler spotted him on the train and offered to get him off, but he could not do the same for his girlfriend. Tsalig refused to abandon her. Both were murdered in the Belzec death camp. Leon's oldest brother, Hershel, who had fled Krakow for Narewka, was killed with all the town's Jews in August 1941. He was 21 years old.

Sent to the Plaszow labor camp, run by the sadistic Amon Goeth, the family survived only because Schindler placed them on his "List" and moved them to his camp. Schindler treated his workers as people, pausing to talk with little Leon, who had to stand on a box to reach the controls of the machine he operated, and afterwards, ordering that he be given an extra bowl of soup.

The Leysons were among the 1,200 Jews Schindler saved by bringing them to his new factory in Brunnlitz, Czechoslovakia where they were liberated on May 8, 1945.

Leon and his parents spent three years in a displaced persons camp in Germany. There Leon resumed the education that had ended when he was ten. In 1949, he and his parents immigrated to the United States. Working days and attending school at night, Leon earned a high school diploma and college degree. He taught for 39 years at Huntington Park High School. He married, became the father of two and the grandfather of three. Since 1993, when the film Schindler's List appeared, he has spoken to dozens of schools, universities, and organizations, inspiring thousands by his story and that of Oskar Schindler.

In 1965 Leon was among the "Schindler Jews" who welcomed their rescuer to Los Angeles. Twenty years had passed and Leon was uncertain if Schindler would remember him, but Schindler looked at him, shook his hand and said, "You're little Leyson."

" While Schindler was looking through the railroad cars full of people, he spotted my brother and offered to take him off the train, but my brother declined because he didn't want to abandon his girlfriend who was with him. They both remained on the train to the end of the line and to the end of their young lives. Tsalig was 17."

" Late at night we were supposed to cross the border, but there was flooding and all the villagers were outside working on sand bags. As a child, I remember that the car was speeding towards Hungary and all of a sudden, the car turned, and we were on our way back home. I didn't understand what happened. Later on I understood that turning around saved my life."

Marta Lightner (Goldstein)

TWO SISTERS SAVED

Born three years apart, Lydia and Marta Goldstein had a wonderful childhood in Michalovce, Czechoslovakia (now Slovakia), surrounded by loving parents, grandparents, and friends. Marta, the younger of the two, was born in 1934. The girls' father, Marek Goldstein, was a prosperous businessman, owning a large hardware store on the town's main street. The two sisters' carefree years ended in March 1939 with the establishment of a pro-Nazi satellite state in Slovakia. Hoping to save their children, the parents made the difficult decision to send their older daughter illegally across the border to Hungary to live with an uncle in Budapest. Marta was to follow later with her grandfather, but their attempt to cross the border failed. Following the occupation of Hungary and the realization that their older daughter was now in grave danger, the parents desperately tried to sneak Lydia back home, but she was caught crossing the border, arrested, and deported to Auschwitz.

Considered too young to work, Lydia would have been sent immediately to the gas chambers had not a kapo (a prisoner in charge of other prisoners), Lydia's former kindergarten teacher, intervened. Risking her own life, she lied about Lydia's age, falsifying documents to make Lydia three years older and so eligible for work—and survival. The rations she shared gave Lydia strength to endure the brutal conditions.

Meanwhile, hoping to evade capture, Marta and her parents fled west to Trnava. The family moved into a small apartment in a building owned by the Blataks, who also gave Mr. Goldstein work. Wealthy and respected, the Blataks nonetheless faced danger themselves since Mrs. Blatak was Jewish. After Marta's father was arrested and deported to Auschwitz, Mrs. Blatak risked discovery to help Marta and her mother, guiding them to a succession of hiding places.

In April 1945, Marta and her mother were liberated by the Soviet army. They returned home and were eventually joined by Lydia, then 15, who had survived both slave labor and a death march. The girls later learned that their father had been murdered at Auschwitz.

Following the war, Marta joined a Zionist organization and, with other Jewish teenagers, became part of the youth aliyah (immigration) to Israel, settling in Kibbutz Kfar Masaryk, named in honor of the first president of Czechoslovakia. Thirty years later, in 1979, Marta, with her husband and son, moved to the United States, settling first in Chicago and later in California. Her husband passed away in 1992; in 1994 she met and married Al Lightner, establishing a home with him in Newport Beach. Lydia also married and had two children, living first in Czechoslovakia and later in Germany. Marta and Lydia, two girls able to reach adulthood, because of the daring women who refused to put their own safety first.

Esther Livingston (Katz)

FINDING FREEDOM

Born as Stirke Katz in Michaliszki, Belarus, then part of Poland, Esther grew up in a Byelorussian Catholic community with a small Jewish population. She remembers the thrill of shopping for Shabbat, the summertime swims in the Vilia River, and the music performed in their public hall, but she also remembers the rising tide of antisemitism, with young men vandalizing the markets and discouraging business with Jews.

Following a secret treaty with Germany, the Soviets invaded Poland on September 17, 1939, and Esther's village was incorporated into the USSR. For the most part, life went on as before, although school lessons were now in Russian and religious life was curtailed. But worse was to come. The Germans took Michaliszki three days after breaking the treaty with the Soviet Union and marching into the Russian sphere in Poland in June 1941.

A section of Michaliszki was designated a ghetto, and Jews from nearby villages were packed like sardines into the small houses. Esther's father was taken to a labor camp, and when the Germans came for her mother, Esther volunteered in her place, knowing that her mother could better care for her two younger brothers. In 1943, the family was reunited when the ghetto was liquidated.

March 27, 1944 is Esther's most heartbreaking memory. On that day, the SS ordered a selection, consigning to death children too young to work. Esther's mother refused to allow her youngest child to die alone and so went with him. Esther tried to join them, but her mother pushed her away. She would never see her mother and brother again.

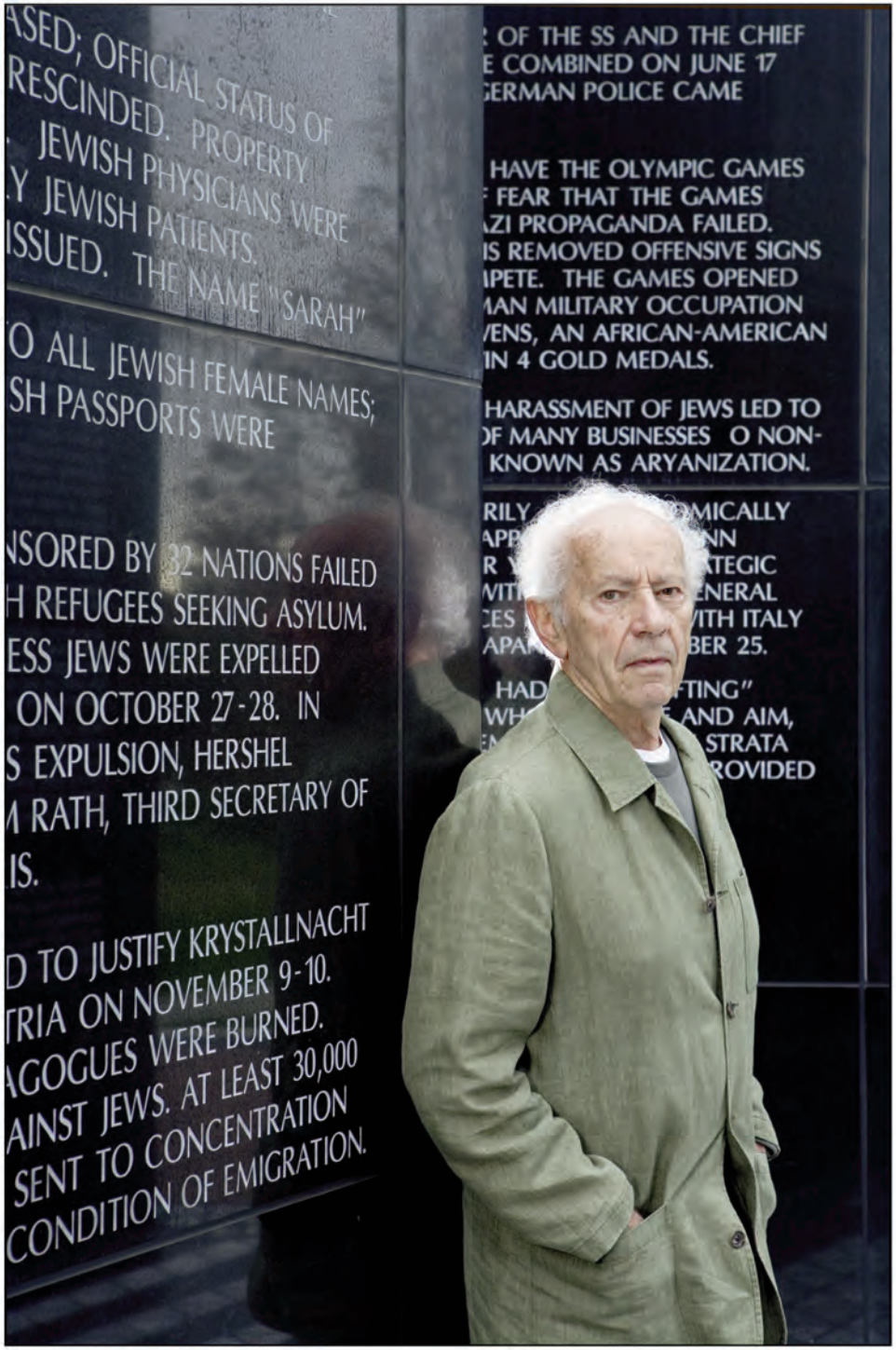
A few weeks later, her father was taken, and she and her surviving brother were sent to the Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig, where they were separated. Esther was sent to several other sites, working on a farm, collecting dead bodies, and digging trenches in the woods. One day she literally touched the horror facing the Jews of Europe. Looking for a replacement for her broken pick, she lifted one out of the snow—with fresh blood on it. Reaching under the snow, she found blood-soaked clothes. She later learned that Jewish women had been taken from a hospital and buried alive there.

Surviving a six-week death march in the winter snow, Esther, suffering from typhus, was liberated by the Soviet army. But liberation did not mean freedom since the Russians compelled all the women they liberated to work for them. When she was finally able to return home, she discovered that everyone in her family had been killed. Desperate for companionship, she joined Kibbutz Ichud where she met her future husband Leon Lewinstein. In time, the entire kibbutz was smuggled into West Germany; Leon became an administrator of the Displaced Persons Camp Gold Cup, near Kassel, and in March 1947 the couple wed. In 1948 they immigrated to Canada and moved to the United States in 1951.

Today, Esther finds her greatest joy in her three children and five grandchildren, exulting in the freedom that comes with living in the United States.

" We went toward the tanks yelling wildly in Russian. The first tank did not stop but closed the hatch. Then a tank stopped. The Russians couldn't believe what they saw. They thought they had run into an insane asylum.
This was my liberation."

" Now my head began to spin. I could not allow myself to be checked a second time. The ID card could be suspected as a fake, my bag contained papers revealing my activity; they could even discover that this young school teacher was a Jew traveling for the Resistance."



Curt Lowens

ACTING TO SURVIVE

As a respected character actor, Curt Lowens has mastered the art of taking on another identity. Yet this profession was actually thrust upon him out of necessity. For Curt, a German Jew, taking on an assumed identity, that of a Dutch gentile schoolteacher, became a matter of survival.

Born on November 17, 1925, in Allenstein, East Prussia (now Olstyn, Poland), Curt Loewenstein spent his childhood in a home filled with music and laughter, feeling loved and protected even after Hitler's ascent to power in 1933 brought an unprecedented rise in anti-Semitism. Yet, not even the most devoted of parents could shield their children from the growing hatred. Curt and his older brother were singled out for abuse at school and their father, whose services as an attorney were once in great demand, now became the "Jew lawyer" with no clients.

In 1936 the family moved to Berlin, hoping to find safety in the large Jewish community there. But conditions worsened daily, and with Curt's brother Heinz safely in England, the Loewensteins began making plans to immigrate to the United States. At last, after months of waiting and red tape, the family received their visa, leaving Berlin for Rotterdam, where they were to board the SS Veendam, bound for America and a new life.

But the day before the family was to leave, May 10, 1940, Germany invaded Holland. Curt's father was able to secure a position with the Jewish Council in Amsterdam which meant a temporary reprieve from deportation. But in June 1943 the family was caught in an unexpected roundup and sent to Westerbork, a transit camp, before deportation to Auschwitz. Luck intervened and the family was miraculously released. They wasted no time in going underground.

Curt was the first to be taken into hiding by the student resistance. He received a false identity card and the new name "Ben Joosten." In January 1944, with his mother dead and his father safely hidden in the countryside, "Ben" himself became an active member of the resistance, carrying false documents, helping to hide Jewish children, and even saving two downed American pilots from capture. In the vortex of danger, the 17-year-old showed courage and ingenuity far beyond his years. Liberated by the British, Ben's knowledge of English and Dutch proved invaluable, and he was offered a chance to join the British Eighth Corps as an interpreter. In a twist of fate beyond fiction, "Benny" served as the interpreter for two British officers of the Military Government Detachment who placed the leaders of the Nazi government under house arrest. Not yet 20 years old, Benny stood face to face with Grand Admiral Doenitz, Hitler's successor. No longer did he have to hide his true identity.

In 1947, Curt, his father and stepmother immigrated to the United States. Curt found a job, and explored his love of acting with night classes at New York's famed Berghoff Studio. It was there he met Katherine Guilford, his scene partner, and later his wife. Now, in America, he was free to choose the roles he would play, from Broadway to film and television.

Elisabeth Mann (Mohr)

CAMP SISTERS

Elisabeth Mann was born in Kecskemet, Hungary in December 1925. Her father fought in World War I, earning several medals for heroism, and the family was proud to be Hungarian. Elisabeth grew up in a house filled with music. Her father played the violin, her mother sang, and each of the four children played an instrument.

On March 19, 1944, the German army occupied Hungary. Jews were now compelled to wear the Yellow Star and allowed only a few hours each day to buy food. Often Elisabeth waited patiently in line only to be told by the grocer that there was no more milk or bread—but the gentile behind her received those very items.

Then in late April the family was ordered into the ghetto. Fifty people shared two rooms. A month later, with ten minutes notice, the family, along with hundreds of others, was deported. They could take only what they could carry. As Elisabeth walked to the train station she saw classmates who only a few months before had been guests at the family's musical evenings. Now they simply turned their heads away.

Loaded into cattle cars with no benches or blankets, and soon, no food or water, Elisabeth, her parents, and younger brother Laci began a torturous journey. The noise, the stench and the heat were overwhelming. After five days, the train reached its destination—Auschwitz-Birkenau. Upon arrival the family tried desperately to stay together, but the men were ordered into one line and the women and children into another. Laci, who had recently turned 13 and by Jewish law was now a man, asked Elisabeth which line he should join. Since he was very ill, Elisabeth told him to go with their mother—not knowing her decision would send Laci to his death in the gas chambers, where their parents were also murdered.

Over the next months surrounded by death, Elisabeth often closed her eyes and in her imagination returned home. Her faith and memories of her family's love gave her strength, as did the love of her nine "camp sisters." She was also sustained by a chance meeting with her older sister Klari who had been seized by the SS at the beginning of the occupation.

In October 1944, Elisabeth was sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where she slept in a tent in the mud and bitter cold before being marched further west, eventually reaching Padborg, Denmark where she was liberated on May 2, 1945.

After the war, she spent several years in Sweden where she met her future husband, also a survivor. The couple married and immigrated to Canada and from there in 1955 to the United States. They became the proud parents of two daughters and a son. Eventually Elisabeth learned that her sister had been shot at Bergen-Belsen shortly before liberation and that her older brother Imre had survived slave labor on the Russian front only to be killed by an anti-Semitic Hungarian Communist in 1951. Stripped of her own family, Elisabeth would never lose touch with her camp sisters—girls who became family to one another.

" There were nine girls in the camp with whom I made a pact. Every morning we had to stand at roll call five in a row. We agreed always to stand together. The two strongest stood on the ends and the three weakest in the middle. We literally supported each other. We wouldn't let one another give up. We became very good friends—we became sisters."

" The camp was not ready for us yet, we slept on straw on the floor and food was scarce, but nothing mattered anymore, as long as Mr. Schindler was with us.
We started to believe that we would survive."

Mila Page (Lewinson)

WITNESS TO THE TRUTH

Born on July 15, 1920, Ludmila Page was the only child of two physicians. She enjoyed a privileged childhood in Lodz, Poland, attending a private girls' school where her friends included Catholics, Protestants, and Jews.

When she was only 14, Mila lost her father. Her mother now became her "Rock of Gibraltar," giving Mila love, strength, and confidence in the future. In 1937, following her parents' wishes, Mila enrolled as a medical student at the University of Vienna, but the German Anschluss (Annexation) in March 1938 ended her studies and compelled her return to Poland. Mila and her mother decided she should continue her education in Switzerland, but before she could leave, war began. Mila took comfort in the fact that she and her mother were together.

In November 1939, Mila's mother was arrested in a roundup of influential citizens. Given no time to pack, mother and daughter were deported to Krakow. A young man, Poldek Pfefferberg (later Page), and his mother generously offered them a room in their apartment, where a chance meeting with a German visitor, seeking to hire Poldek's mother to decorate his apartment, would one day save their lives. The man was Oskar Schindler.

Mila and Poldek married in June 1940; in March 1941, they were ordered into the Krakow ghetto. Mila's mother was deported to Warsaw and later to the death camp Belzec. In a last note she wrote that the "big storm" was approaching and enclosed her only possessions, her wedding ring and a piece of fabric.

In March 1943, Krakow's remaining Jews were sent to the Plaszow labor camp. Although Mila and Poldek initially worked elsewhere, Schindler subsequently added them to his "List."

Hoping to protect his workers, in November 1944, Schindler persuaded the Nazis to allow him to move his factory to Brunnlitz, Czechoslovakia. But there was a misunderstanding and the women were detained at Auschwitz. Three weeks passed before they were loaded onto a train and afterwards marched to an unknown destination. They learned it was Brunnlitz only when they saw Schindler. For Mila, arrival meant reunion with Poldek, her second "Rock of Gibraltar." He even had gifts for her, an old mirror, a toothbrush made of horsehair, and a needle—priceless items of love.

After liberation by the Soviets on May 8, 1945, Mila and Poldek planned to go to Palestine, but in 1947 the couple immigrated to the U.S. living first in New York before moving to Los Angeles. Poldek, who had hoped to return to his profession as a teacher, opened a small handbag repair shop to support his family and later owned a luggage and handbag store. Mila worked there and cared for the couple's two children, Fred and Marie.

In 1952, the couple joined with twelve friends to found The "1939" Club, an organization of Holocaust survivors. Mila and Poldek never forgot Oskar Schindler. When the story Poldek told to author Thomas Keneally became a best-selling book, *Schindler's List*, and later an award-winning film, the couple fulfilled their vow to honor their rescuer and to be witnesses to the truth.

Jack Pariser

INGENUITY AND COMPASSION

Thanks to his parents' ingenuity, the help of righteous gentiles, and sheer luck, Jack Pariser survived the Holocaust without ever seeing the inside of a concentration camp.

Born on December 14, 1929, Jack and his older sister, Rose, lived in Jodlowa, Poland, a small town south of Krakow. His father Abraham sold wholesale lumber and his mother Sarah sold fabric.

Following Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939, life for Jodlowa's Jews changed. The SS began by terrorizing the town's Jews. On one visit, Jack's grandfather was beaten unconscious when he refused to walk on the sacred Torah. He died shortly after.

In early August 1942, Jack's mother was tipped off by a Polish policeman that the Germans were planning to murder Jodlowa's Jews the next morning. His parents spread the word and then fled. Their quick action saved them. The gunshots the family heard the next day attested that the slaughter was under way.

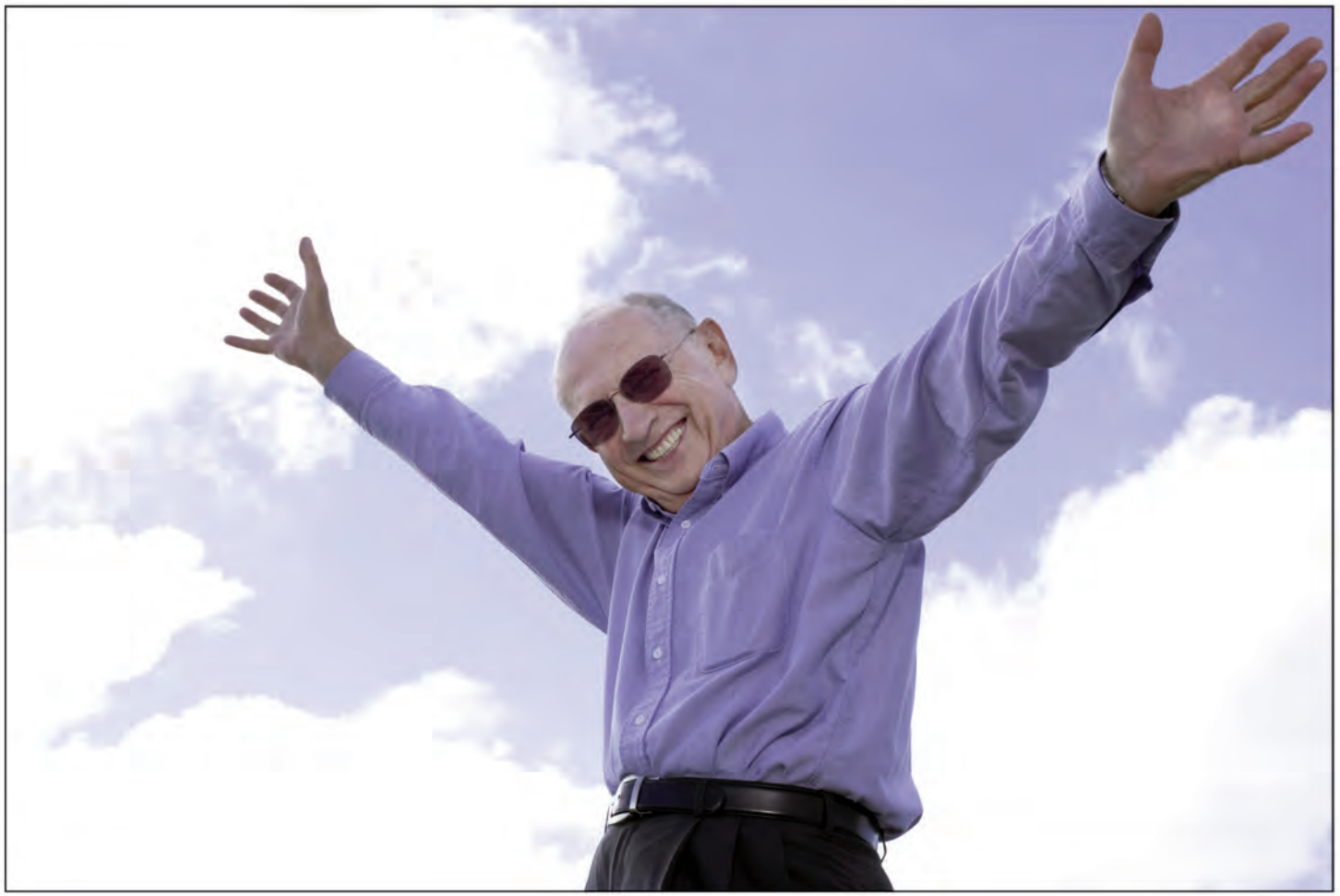
After months in the forest, as winter approached, Abraham appealed to one of his Christian workers, Andrej Porembski, for shelter. Knowing he risked death for hiding Jews, Porembski agreed. The Parisers spent months in a barn and a bunker under the wood-shed floor. The space was so small that they could only lie on their sides and when one person wanted to turn, everyone had to do so. To pass the long hours, Jack learned crafts, including re-knitting his sweater into intricate patterns.

In December 1942, Abraham moved the family to another hiding place where their host subsequently betrayed them. The Polish police arrested the family and threw them into a jail cell. Their jailers laughingly debated whether a table knife or a pen knife—given them to cut bread—would be of less use in helping them escape. They settled on the pen knife. But they underestimated Abe's ingenuity and Sarah's tenacity. Working throughout the night, Abe made a hole under the barred window high on the wall. But one of the four would have to go last—reaching the hole without aid. Agonizing over their decision, they agreed Jack had the best chance and that if he failed, three lives saved were better than none. Fortunately, Jack succeeded; the family had escaped! When they reached the forest and stopped to cut off a bit of bread, the knife broke—but only after it had saved their lives.

The Parisers again stayed with the Porembskis from January 1943 to December 1944 when they went to another family, the Swieczeks, righteous gentiles who had aided them throughout the war and who now hid them in the barn, under the very noses of the Germans. The family's years in hiding ended on January 16, 1945.

The Parisers immigrated to the United States in 1949. Jack married, and he and his wife Leah moved to California. Jack retired as chief scientist at Hughes Aircraft in 1987—an extraordinary life of achievement made possible by his parents' tenacity and ingenuity; a small pen knife, and the courageous action of righteous gentiles.

" After considerable discussion that night, I was selected to be the last with no one to push me out. I had the greatest probability to succeed. I was the smallest and most agile and therefore most likely to stand the cot against the wall like a lean-to ladder, run up the incline, extend my arm through the hole and have my dad pull me through."



" One night I walked out to the infirmary yard. In a daze, I fell near a pile of corpses ready to be cremated. When I regained consciousness and realized I was lying on dead people, I lifted myself up with all my strength and crawled away. Had I stayed, I would have been cremated with the rest of them."