

Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors Residing in South Florida

CHALLENGES TO SURVIVAL

Holocaust Survivor Albert Ackerstein's Memoir



As told to Bobbi Kaufman

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Published by
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and The George Feldenkreis Program in Judaic Studies



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The information in this book is presented in good faith. The words in this book are the words of Albert Akerstien as he recalled his personal experience in the Holocaust. This is his story and his truth.

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On the cover: Albert Akerstein with his parents and brothers in Lublin, Poland. Circa 1926

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FOREWARD

“For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time....”

“... I have tried to keep memory alive...I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget we are guilty, we are accomplices.”

- Elie Wiesel

As time goes on, the number of Holocaust survivors alive today is rapidly dwindling. With their passing, the incomprehensible cataclysm known as The Holocaust, or Shoah, is fast morphing from a ‘lived memory’ into a ‘historical memory’; from a personal experience of ‘those who were there’ into impersonal commemorative monuments and museums.

All too soon, there will be no one left to offer first hand testimony of what it was like to actually be there when all hell broke loose; all too soon, even those who knew and heard directly from the victims of the Nazis and their collaborators, will be gone.

It is, therefore, a matter of great urgency that we gather and preserve for future generations as much primary documentation and testimony as possible about the lives and experiences of those heroes who survived the Holocaust, managed to build new lives, and were willing to tell their stories.

Memoirs serve as a very important means of preserving these testimonies. Several years ago, Holocaust survivors began approaching Bobbi Kaufman, asking for help writing their memoirs, describing their lives before, during, and since the Holocaust. She began working with the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach (HMMB), writing the memoirs of Holocaust survivors who were docents and contributors to the memorial. This collaboration was instrumental in her developing a series of in-depth, book-length memoirs. Six books were completed and uploaded onto the HMMB website and the HMMB created lesson plans for each book to be used in teaching about the Holocaust.

Now, in collaboration with the HMMB, the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies, and the George Feldenkreis Program in Judaic Studies of the University of Miami, the series has been named Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors Residing in Florida. The existing books were graphically redesigned and several new books have been added to the collection, with the objective of continuing to expand the series. The complete series will be freely available to the public in digital form on the HMMB and Miller Center and Feldenkreis Program websites.

Our hope is that this series will make a significant contribution to the growing literature of Holocaust survivors' memoirs and serve as a tribute to their ability to make new lives for themselves while never forgetting.

Dr. Haim Shaked
Director, The Miller Center and Feldenkreis Program
University of Miami

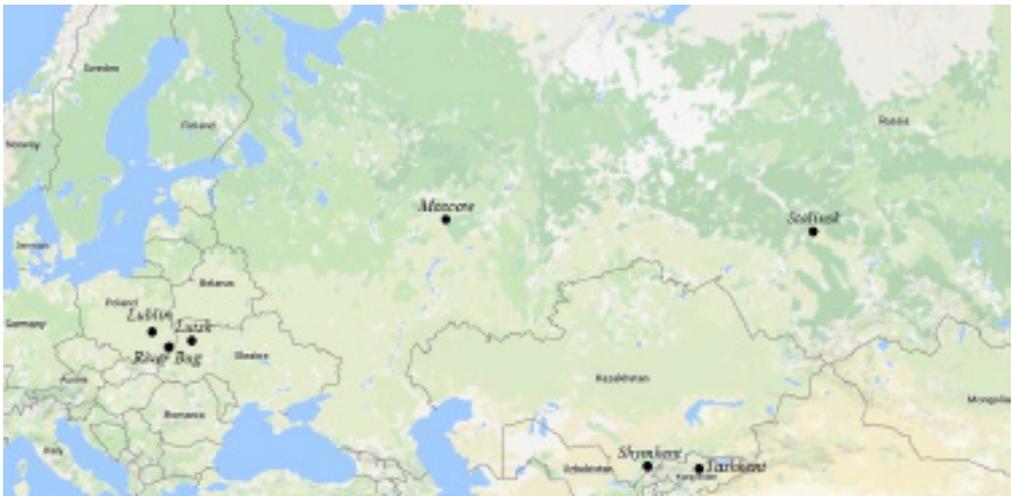
DEDICATION

In memory of my parents Elka and Chiam Shrul Akerstein, my young brother Shaya, as well as the other members of my family who lost their lives in the Holocaust.

To the memory of my brother Michael, of blessed memory, with whom I shared the trials and tribulations of survival.

L'Chaim, To Life, to all those near and dear.

— *Albert Akerstein*



Albert Akerstein's journey from Lublin to Siberia and back.

LIFE BEFORE THE WAR



I was born in Lublin, Poland, on January 3, 1922. My birth name was Abraham Akerstein, but today everybody knows me as Albert. My parents and my younger brother, Shaya, died in the Holocaust. My brother, Michael, who was two years older than me, survived the war with me doing forced labor in Siberia.

My father, Chaim Shrul, was from Piaski, a little town right next to Majdanek. My father was a carpenter, a furniture maker. He made very nice furniture. That was his specialty. He had his own place with people working for him. He was an observant Jew, but he was modern. He did not wear a beard or *peyos*, but he did go to shul every Saturday. He was strict, but very kind and loving to us. He was a good man. We were very respectful to him, that was most important.

My mother's name was Elka. She was from Lublin. My mother took care of the house doing everything herself; she had no help. My mother did everything by the book. She lit Sabbath candles, she kept a kosher home, but she did not have her head covered - she was a modern woman. The people who worked for my father would eat anything - kosher, non-kosher. Once in a while I would go downstairs and they would give me something to eat. My

mother was very unhappy about it, but so long as I didn't bring it into the house it was alright. My mother was a good person. She wanted me to be good.

For our Sabbath meal, my mother would make a big pot of *cholent*, a stew with meat, beans, barley, and vegetables, that I would carry to the bakery on Friday afternoons to cook in the oven there overnight. Because observant Jews could not light or turn off their ovens on Shabbat, it was very common to carry the *cholent* to the kosher bakery where the oven was lit before Shabbat and stayed on all the time. On Saturday we would go to shul, and after shul I would go pick up the *cholent*. Then we would all sit down together for the Sabbath meal. We each had our own place where we sat at the table. There was also a chair where company would sit. We had nice furniture because my father was a furniture maker.

My family always lived in a Polish neighborhood in Lublin — never a Jewish neighborhood. The first place we lived was Krakowsik, Przed Miescie. Everybody in our neighborhood spoke Polish, so I did, too. I did not learn to speak Jewish (Yiddish) until I was about eight years old.

I went to *cheder* (Hebrew school) to learn for my Bar Mitzvah. I had to learn from a rabbi who could speak Polish because I only spoke Polish. It was very hard to find a rabbi who could speak Polish. He taught me the Hebrew and the prayers. For my Bar Mitzvah celebration my father brought a bottle of wine and some cookies to shul and we took a drink.

Our apartment had maybe two rooms. We all slept together in one room. There was no privacy at all. My older brother and I slept together in the same bed. Our mattress was made from hay stuffed inside burlap sacks. Twice a year, around Yom Kippur and then at Pesach, we would put in fresh hay. When I was around seven years old, I would sleep outside in the garden as often as possible. It was a beautiful garden. At four o'clock in the morning a family friend would pick me up in his horse and buggy and we would ride to a farm to pick up milk to take home and to sell.

Once a week we would take a bath in a big tub. My mother would pour in the water and clean me up. We had an outhouse, there was no bathroom in the house. We had to go outside in summer and winter - I'll never forget! All my clothes were 'left overs', somebody else's pants or from my brother after he grew out of them.

My father made us a sled. We had one big hill where we could sled in the snow for fun. In the wintertime when my family didn't have money to get enough coal, we would take the sled to the train station where we would look for scrap pieces of wood to bring home to warm up the house or to cook something. My father also made us a wood table to play ping pong. I would charge the Polish kids money to play. If I had money I would go to the movies. I saw mostly American movies - cowboy movies: Tom Mix, Roy Rogers. I loved to play soccer in the street with the

boys in the neighborhood. Sometimes the Polish kids would beat me up. They were always picking on the Jews. This was the only anti-Semitism I felt personally before the war started.

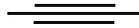
The second place we lived was Ulitza Zmigrod, a neighborhood where there were some Jewish people. Moteck Strasberger, a boy who lived in our building, became my best friend. I went to school until I was nine or ten years old at the most. By nine years old I was working. When I started working I couldn't go to school or *cheder* any longer. I had to go to work because of the finances. My parents were not wealthy. We had to help our parents make a living.

My parents always wanted us to have a profession, so I had to learn to have a profession. My father wanted me to work with him, but it was too much for me. I began working in a tailor shop trying to learn to be a tailor and a furrier when I was eight or nine years old. I didn't like it because it wasn't clean work. I had to make the iron hot — I had to blow on it — and I didn't like it. My brother was already working in a barber shop and he was wearing a white coat. I thought I would like that much better. I decided to become a barber.

The third place my family moved to was Bernadinska. This apartment was much nicer than the last one. The barber shop where I became an apprentice was downstairs in the building where we lived and so was my father's shop. My

mother would come to the barbershop and teach me how to sweep and scrub the floor properly. I worked there as a barber apprentice for three years. The only way I made money was if customers would give me a tip. When I finished the apprenticeship I worked in another barber shop until the Germans took over our area of Poland.

THE GERMAN OCCUPATION



When the war started we knew nothing about what was going to happen, or what the Germans would do. News traveled slowly, if at all. There were rumors, of course, but my parents insisted that there had never been problems before. My father and many other Jewish men in our town had fought for the Germans in World War I so they believed we would be treated well. Everybody prayed and believed that God would help us.

The first thing that happened when the Germans came in — I'll never forget it as long as I live — was they started teaching us how to cross the street. They would pick up pieces of the sidewalks — the sidewalks were made from blocks, concrete blocks — and they would put two or three concrete blocks in your hands and you had to walk across the street. You had to walk all the four corners of the street from one side to the other side and from this side to this side. They were teaching us how to walk, how to cross the street. This was the beginning of them teaching us how to

eat, how to live, how to walk — how to do things their way. If you didn't understand their language and do what they said, they would beat you up. Fortunately, I understood German a little bit so I knew what they were saying. They didn't know if I was Jewish or Polish; they were doing this to Polish people as well as the Jews. I said to myself, "This is not for me. I don't want to live this way. I have to leave."

About a week after the Germans came in, a religious Jew with a beard and *peyos* was walking by the barbershop where I was working when a German soldier stopped him. He said, "I want you to cut your beard off." To the ultra-orthodox Jewish people it was terrible to shave off the beard. The Jewish man said, "My God told me I should have the beard." So the German soldier said to him, "My God says I should take your beard off. I want you to stay right here." He went into the barber shop, picked up the scissors, went onto the sidewalk, and right in front of everybody he started cutting the man's beard off, embarrassing the man. This put the finishing touches in my mind that I have to leave. I knew things would get much worse for the Jews.

No members of my family tried to leave at this time. Only myself. I had a friend who was a little bit older than I was who said he heard the Russians took over the other side of Poland and music was playing there and people were dancing in the streets and it was beautiful. He said to me, "Would you like to go with me? I'm leaving." I said, "Fine." This was in September 1939, two weeks after the Germans came into our city.

I told my mother and my father that I was leaving and that's it. They said, "No, no, you cannot go." That's when my father told me the Germans are good. He said, "Don't worry about it. They were very good to us during World War I. They will not do any harm to us. There is no reason for you to run away." I insisted that I wanted to go. I made up my mind. I just had a feeling that I shouldn't stay. My father was wrong and I was right. I am sorry to say that.

My mother didn't want me to go, "You are too young, you are going all alone, with nobody with you!" I was seventeen. They finally agreed to let me go on the condition that my nineteen-year-old brother would go with me. My mother thought that he would help me and look after me. I said fine. I wanted to take my younger brother also, but my father and mother would not allow him to go. He was only about ten or eleven years old.

I think my parents agreed to let me go because they believed I was not going to go too far or be away for too long. I was only going to the side of Poland where the Russians had taken over. My parents made us comfortable that last night. They made up a clean bed for us — they knew that we were going to miss it. They wished us all the best of luck and we wished them best of luck and said, "We'll see you pretty soon." That's all. We didn't expect to stay away for forever. Of course our Jewish mother packed up a bag for us. I don't remember exactly, but my mother put some food in a bag to carry with us. I had some money I earned working in the barber shop.



My brother, Michael, is standing in front of my father, I am standing next to my father, my mother is holding my sister who died shortly after this picture was taken. My brother, Shaya, was not yet born when this picture was taken. Lublin, c. 1926.

I keep this picture on my night table next to my bed.



My father.

The barbershop where I started as an apprentice in Lublin. The boss is on the right side. Next to him is the owner, then one of the workers.

This is the only picture that was with me when I was in Siberia. It was always with me. I don't know myself how I kept it or protected it. I can't believe I have it! It must be 80 years old!





*My brother and I are on the sled our father made for us.
I am on the left.*

Lublin, c. 1926.

LEAVING LUBLIN FOR RUSSIAN OCCUPIED POLAND



We didn't have transportation; we had to walk from one town to the other. My brother, my friend, and I walked for miles and miles and miles. The first night we slept in Piaski, the town my father was from. We walked every day and at night we slept in the synagogues on the benches like homeless people. We were walking from one town to another to get to the Russian controlled side of Poland. As we were walking we had to hide from the Germans. When we saw a German car we would run away and hide.

I'll never forget — in the middle of October we came to Chelm near the River Bug which was the border between the Russian controlled area of Poland and the German controlled area. We had to go across that river. We were on top of a hill and we had to get down to the river. At the bottom, at the river, there were people from the Russian side with little boats you could pay to smuggle you across. But the Germans wouldn't let us go near the border. We had to wait until the Germans weren't looking so we could run down to the river. We had to run zig zag because the Germans were shooting at us. We somehow made it. Some people didn't. Some people got killed right in front of us. We jumped in a little boat and it took us across. We paid whatever we could afford.

I don't remember the name of my friend who was with us. This bothers me. I lost track of him right after we walked into the Russian zone. He thought the Russians were going to open their arms to him because he felt he was a leftist, a communist, but I don't think they accepted him. What happened to him I don't know.

When we got to the Russian zone of Poland we went to the city called Lutsk. My brother and I did not know where to go, where to stay. We just followed the other people — there were thousands of people going there, not only us. Thousands and thousands of people were running away from the Germans. It was like a different world. In the beginning they were very happy to have us, but that soon changed. Some people were even going back into German occupied Poland. People didn't know what to do — they were tired, they missed their families — so they were going back again. We told them not to go, but they went anyway.

LEAVING OCCUPIED POLAND FOR RUSSIA



The end of the year, or the beginning of the new year, I decided to go into Russia; out of Poland and into Russia. I wanted to see how it was over there. I went with a friend to Lviv, a town in Ukraine. If we liked it we would stay. If we didn't like it we would travel again. My brother stayed behind in Lutsk. In the beginning it was very good — they gave us an apartment and they treated us very nicely. We didn't have to stay in a line to buy anything for the first three months. Luckily, I was a barber so I could work. I

had my tools with me all the time. I took my tools with me when I left Lublin. I never gave up my tools. That's how I survived. I used to go and knock on the doors of somebody's house and say, "I'm hungry. I'm a barber. I will cut your hair." They used to take me in. I would cut their hair and they would give me something to eat and I would be on my way again.

After a while the Russians said, "You are one of us now." Then we had to stand in lines. We stayed maybe six months until we didn't like it anymore. The Russian police were harassing us, along with the other refugees, to move on. It was very hard. I missed my family. My brother wasn't with me. He was working on a farm in Lutsk. I decided to go back to Lutsk, to Poland, to see my brother again. It wasn't easy. Again the traveling Jew.

My friend and I made our way by train to Kiev, the main city in Ukraine. We stayed there in the train station for two or three days until we could get a train out to Lutsk. We slept on the floor of the station. The Russians didn't like that. They used to come in with the hoses, the water hoses, to wash the floor and would use them to chase us out of the station. Then we would go right back after they cleaned everything up. It wasn't pleasant, it wasn't easy, but we were young and we survived. It was no big deal. They knew that we were Jews. They knew that we were Polish, that we were runaways and that we were trying to go back to Poland — and they didn't like that. They didn't like anybody going back and telling them the story of how it was in Russia. But we made it. We went back to Lutsk.

It was the summer of 1940 when all the problems started. We spent time in Lutsk for a while. Then, one day I was picked up on the street, along with thousands of other refugees, by the Russian police and taken to a former soccer stadium. The police commander said that any refugee who would sign an affidavit saying they were willing to return to German held territory would be given food, supplies, and train fare back to their home town. Life was so hard that 99% of the refugees signed the affidavit, including me. I didn't know it then, but at the same time my brother was turned in to the Russian police in another town and signed an affidavit, too.

The majority of people signed the paper saying they wanted to go back to the German zone because we didn't know what was going on there. It could have been a million people who had run away who signed that paper. Plenty of people from all over. Everybody signed the papers. Stalin saw what was going on. He figured the people would go home and join the Germans in fighting against him. That's when he created his plan. In one night he picked up a million people — in one night. He put us in cattle cars to be sent to Siberia. In one night.

TRAIN TO SIBERIA



They picked people from the streets, from their homes, from all over and took them to the train stations and put them in the cattle cars. No questions asked. If a mother was separated from a child, the children separated from the parents — it made no difference. They picked them up and threw them in the cattle cars.

My brother and I were separated when they took us from Lutsk. I was asking my friends, “Did you see my brother? Did you see my brother?” When the train stopped on the border between Poland and Russia to change trains because the railroad tracks were different in Poland and Russia, I met my brother by accident. Somebody told me they saw my brother in the fifth car. I ran over to the fifth car and I saw my brother and that’s when we were reunited. We were together the rest of the time.

The conditions in the cattle cars were awful, awful. There was no room to sit down; we were standing up pressed up against each other. There was no toilet, only a bucket. People were dying in front of us. This went on for two weeks. They would stop at a station and give us hot water and black bread. That’s all. They would say, “So many people come with me, you pick up the water.” “Here is the bread, you distribute the bread.” There was no way to buy anything at a station. They wouldn’t let us go any place. But we were young — we survived.

The train stopped at the end of the world. There were no more train tracks. The train wasn't going any further. We were in Siberia. There was nothing there, not even a house. Nothing, nothing. Who knows how many people died there.

From the train they put us on a boat, a little boat, and took us over to an island. All the people were brought over slowly, a boatload at a time. The first thing they told us was, "This is your island. You are going to build your own Poland right here." The island was deserted. Only woods - that's it. No buildings, nothing. They called the area the Thaga, it meant 'the woods'. They said we had to start building our own island, our own buildings, our own homes. "You'll have your own Warsaw." That's exactly what they said. Those were the words they said, "You'll build your own Warsaw."

So, I was a young kid on an island in Siberia with my brother and five older cousins we found there.

After several weeks we had built some wooden barracks and cooking huts with the saws and hatchets they gave us. There was no food on the island other than the sacks of meager supplies delivered with boatloads of more prisoners. There were no animals to hunt and the water was too deep and the current too swift for fishing. We feared that if we built a raft we would float away and be lost in the wilderness. I said, "This not for us. I can't do this." My

brother said, “Okay, we are going to run away from this island. The only way we can run away is to go on the boat.”

ESCAPE TO ANOTHER LABOR CAMP



One day we heard they were looking for volunteers to unload supplies from one of the boats. My brother, my cousins and I were among the youngest and healthiest, so we were readily chosen. We made several trips carrying the sacks of supplies from the boat. When I sat down in the boat to rest, my cousin took an empty sack and covered me up. Every time they unloaded the sacks of potatoes or the sacks of flour, whatever it was, they would throw the sacks on top of me. I was lying there hiding under the sacks. Right as they finished unloading the supplies, my brother and cousins jumped on the boat too, and hid right next to me.

We didn't know where we were going to go — it might have been someplace even worse, but how could it be worse than the island? As soon as we got off the boat they found us and took us to a forced labor camp. The conditions in this camp were even worse than on the island, but at least it was on the mainland and as we would later learn, twenty miles away from a train station.

I don't remember the name of the camp, but I remember the name of the man in charge of the camp. His name was Myaczyn. He would ride around on a horse telling us to do this, do that. He had been a big shot in Moscow but he did something wrong so they sent him to Siberia and he became in charge of our camp. We learned to live with him.

We were maybe a couple of hundred people working there in the forests, cutting wood to supply all of Russia. We would live in tents and work in the forest for several days then maybe once a week we would go back to the main camp. The main camp was about ten miles away from where we worked cutting the wood. To get back and forth from the camp to the woods we would walk. The winter was very, very hard. We covered ourselves with whatever we had. A lot of people didn't make it. The big people, the strong people were falling faster than the skinny people. Not everybody could survive.

The main camp had wooden barracks but in the woods we lived in tents, big tents. Ten people would sleep on cots lined up on each side of the tent. There was a wood burning stove in the middle. Someone had to stay up at night and constantly put wood into that stove. If that guy fell asleep, we would all freeze to death. He was responsible for all the people in that tent. We all shared the responsibility, but most of the time the responsibility fell on me. That's how we survived there. Otherwise we would have frozen to death.

In the daytime we would be allowed only short breaks from cutting and hauling timber to thaw our frozen hands and feet near fires in oil barrels. We had no warm clothes, nothing. They wouldn't give us anything. We had what we were wearing on our backs and that was it. I knew how to sew from when I was learning to be a tailor, so I would patch clothes or put pieces of this and that together to make a pair of pants or a shirt in exchange for some food. We did our best to keep clean, washing ourselves with slivers of soap and buckets of melted snow. We picked the lice from our heads and bodies daily.

I got very sick there. I had what they called the chicken sickness. Chickens cannot see at night; the minute it gets dark they cannot see. I was completely blind at night — the minute the sun would go down and it got dark I would be completely blind. By late afternoon I would have to stay in my bunk to keep from tripping and falling. At night I could only recognize voices. One of the other prisoners, a former medical student, recognized my problem as vitamin deficiency and promised to cure me in exchange for a haircut. He killed a pigeon and took the liver and gave it to me to eat. The liver had vitamins and my sight came back. You have to do things for yourself for your survival. You have to promote yourself.

I always had my barber tools with me. I was able to barter barbering for extra food rations, clothes, soap, blankets, and eventually even boots. I knew not to ask what happened to the previous owners. It's amazing! I survived by barbering — nothing else.

My brother and I had one pair of shoes between us, regular shoes. The other shoes we made with leaves, rags and pieces of wood. The snow would compact under the wood and it would stick to the ice. If I was wearing the wooden shoes all of a sudden I would become taller — I was like on stilts from the layers of built up ice. My brother had to walk behind me to keep pulling the ice and the snow off with his hands. When he was wearing the wooden shoes I was pulling the ice off of his shoes. This was how we survived. That winter in Siberia was the worst we ever experienced in our lives. People froze or starved to death every day.

AN ALMOST FATAL ESCAPE ATTEMPT



I said to my brother I would never stay there another winter even if I had to commit suicide. He promised to find a way for us to escape.

Many times we tried to run away, and every time they would catch us. The Russian civilians would report us. They recognized us by the way we were dressed and the way we looked. The commandant would come on his horse to pick us up and take us back to the camp. This went on three or four times. They wouldn't kill us, they knew we were going to die anyway. They didn't have to kill us.

On one escape attempt my brother crept into my bunk at night and whispered for me to follow him. He told me to take my blanket. (I was wearing my clothes and boots — I never took them off or they would disappear.) We walked twenty miles through the night and at dawn we ran for a freight train pulling into the station. The conductor saw us and started blowing his whistle over and over. We were arrested and taken back to the camp.

The last time my brother and I ran away we were captured and almost didn't make it back to the camp. The commandant came on his beautiful horse and started leading us the twenty miles back to the camp. After ten miles he said, "Okay. You continue on yourselves," and took off on his horse. We were caught in a Siberian blizzard. The

wind whipped the snow at over fifty miles an hour. The ice crystals pierced our skin and eyes. We wandered in circles in snow up to our necks. We couldn't see where to go, but we had to keep going. When the snow came up to my chest I cried out to my brother that I could not move, that I wanted to die. My brother prayed that God would take us quickly. His prayer was partially answered when we bumped into a small tool shed. There was nothing inside but a small length of rope. It was so short that it we could not use it to hang ourselves. The one time that we wanted to die by our own hands we couldn't! I started to laugh hysterically and could not stop. I had lost my mind. When I told my brother why I was laughing, he laughed hysterically, too. We survived that storm laughing inside that little tool shed. When the storm cleared we walked back to camp.

JAIL IN SIBERIA



After the first winter I knew I would never make it another winter. One morning in December 1941 I refused to get out of my bunk to go to work. That's how bad it was. I knew if I didn't go to work I would go to jail. My brother was frantic with worry that I would die from beatings or disease in jail. He begged me to change my mind but I refused. Going to jail was my deliberate plan to survive. I decided to go to jail and so did my cousin Hershel. My brother and my other cousins went out work in the forest and I stayed in bed.

I was immediately dragged from my bunk and brought to a town about twenty miles away. There, the judge sentenced me to four months in prison. I was lashed to about twenty other men and marched into a cinder block cell. The cell had no furnishing other than a tin pail for a toilet. At least there was a solid floor and solid walls to keep out the wind and snow. I was with a lot of other prisoners, maybe twenty or thirty people in the room. It was nice and warm just from our breathing alone. We didn't need any heat. They gave us food. The food wasn't good, but it was enough.

At the jail when they asked me if I wanted to work I said, "Yes, I'm a barber." They said, "Oh. We don't need any barbers." My cousin, Hershel, said, "Oh, I can do anything." So he went to work and I stayed in my room in prison. I stayed in my room for the whole four months. I didn't have to go to work. I didn't have to do anything. All I did was sit or lie down all day. I think the rest helped save my life.

Because I knew how to sew, I was sewing clothes for fellow prisoners, bartering my skill for food. "I'll make you a pair of pants, you give me food, you give me this or that." I bartered with them; everything was bartered there. I was making money that way in jail! Too bad they didn't let me have my barber tools in jail.

In April 1941 I got out of jail and I went back to the labor camp. It was still bitter cold. I desperately searched for my

brother that first day on the work crew in the forest but did not find him. That night I crawled into my bunk and covered myself with my thin blanket. As I was about to fall asleep my brother came into the tent — his face and feet wrapped in rags.

FREED FROM THE LABOR CAMP



About six months later a miracle happened. They let us out of the camp. We had been in Siberia for two years. It was now 1942. They said we were free to go. The Russian government freed us because they made a deal that all the prisoners would be made Polish citizens and be registered in the Polish Brigade to fight the Germans. Now all of a sudden we were Polish. So they let us out.

We were free men now but we had to be in the Polish Brigade. The Polish Brigade was formed in England to have Polish soldiers join the Allies in the fight against the Germans. (I found out later that Menachem Begin was in Siberia the same time I was.) When my brother and I went to register for the Polish Brigade they refused to take us because we were Jewish. They did me a favor.

We didn't know anything about how the war was going. Nobody ever told us anything. We never saw a paper. We never had any mail. We had no information about our parents. We tried to find out, but nobody gave us any information.

LIVING IN RUSSIA



My brother and I went to the train station near the camp and took a train to the first place we could think of — Stalinsk, the city where I had been in jail. We figured we would see what was going on there and then decide where else to go. We didn't know where to go — what did we know about Siberia?

Stalinsk was a big city. I applied for a job and got work as a barber in a hospital. In the hospital they were treating people from the front — they kept bringing patients from the Russian and German fronts. I was taking care of them: helping to carry them in — whatever had to be done. I was giving them haircuts. They gave me a place to sleep. I led a normal life. I could buy some clothes. I lived like the Russian people. I was there maybe six months. But before it got cold again I knew I have to move on.

I stayed in Stalinsk, but my brother continued on. He was always wanting to experiment, see different things. He went all the way to Tashkent, Kazakhstan, not far from the Chinese border. He was looking for a place where there was no snow and there was no snow over there. A few months later he came all the way back to Siberia to see me. He was very sick with typhus. He also had lice. Sanitary conditions were not good over there. When he came to me he was running a very high fever.

Luckily, I worked in the hospital so I could take him right away to a doctor. They started treating him and he recovered. The minute he felt better I asked him, “What did you see on the other side? What is there?” He said, “There’s no snow.” I said, “I’m going there with you before we get snow here in Siberia again.”

So we picked ourselves up and the first city we went to in Kazakhstan was Jamboul. It was a nice city. There were a lot of refugees there, a lot of Polish people were established there. The government didn’t want the refugees to take all the work away from the residents so they told us we could only work outside the city. They took me to a little town called Caulhusk where they gave me a job in a fire station. I knew nothing about putting out fires. Their fire wagons were pulled by horses. I never before cared for horses. I liked horses but I never knew what to do with them. I learned, I became a fireman.

They found me a place to live. The Russian commandant went into a guy’s home and said, “How many people live in your house?” He answered, “Myself, my wife and my daughter.” The commandant said, “Okay. You have room for one more.” So the guy points at me and says, “My daughter lives with us and he is a young fellow and I don’t want him to get involved with my daughter.” She was a young girl and he was afraid. But in Russia nothing belonged to you — the government says who is going to sleep in your home.

If you've got room for one more person, you take in one more person. That's it. They had to take me in. The parents surrounded my bed with blankets so I shouldn't, God forbid, look across and see their daughter sleeping on the other side of the room — it was only one room. Finally he said, "I don't want a Polack Jew to do anything to my daughter," so he sent her away to school - to get rid of her so I wouldn't be too close!

A few months later I got very sick with malaria. That town was in a valley. It was very damp and had a lot of mosquitos. I was so sick I finally went to a doctor. The doctor said, "If you don't leave this place you're going to be dead in no time at all." So I said, "Where do I go?" And he said, "Any place but here." I said, "What's the name of the next town?" He said, "The next town is named Shymkent." I said, "Is it good?" He said, "Over there is good, it is not a valley." So my brother and I went to Shymkent, Kazakhstan. It was very, very pleasant there. It was a beautiful little town.

I established myself very nicely in Shymkent — as a barber this time, not as a fireman! I worked in a barbershop there. My customers were the military people in charge there. The police were right next door. There was a factory nearby. I was giving them haircuts and they were giving me clothes — jackets and pants. Everything was bartered there. What can I do for you, what can you do for me. There was no money exchanged. You couldn't buy anything.

My brother got a job in a meat factory. He was making salami. So I had plenty of salami and he had plenty of haircuts. It was a very good life. I wasn't married, my brother wasn't married — we had a wonderful time with people we met. We lived with two very nice sisters who gave us a home. They were piano teachers, very educated people. They lived in a house with a garden with fruit trees all over the garden. It was gorgeous, just gorgeous — for the Russian way of living it was beautiful. They actually helped save our lives by taking us in.

We were in Shymkent for about a year and a half or two years, until the end of the war.

THE WAR ENDS, RETURN HOME



The minute the war was over I said I have to go back and see if my parents are alive. In Russia you could not travel just because you wanted to travel, you have to have a special pass. You go to the police or the military and they give you a pass so you can travel. I went to see the people I'd been working with for so long to see if they could help. I told them I had to go back to Poland to see if my parents were still alive and that I needed two passes for myself and my brother. They said fine and I had two passes immediately. That's what good friends they were. In the middle of the night my brother and I jumped on a train without telling anybody where we were going. You don't ask any questions

in Russia — you just go. If you want to do something you do it yourself and you don't tell anybody.

We got on a train and we went all the way to Moscow. This was the start of another two week experience on a train. Once in Moscow we couldn't get a train immediately to go to Poland. We had to wait until the train came in. The Russians were suspecting everyone of being their enemy. If we walked the streets they would have stopped us and asked us what we were doing there. They might have picked us up or even sent us back to Siberia. We had no place to stay so we had to be hiding.

The only place we could find to hide was the subway. The subway in Moscow had just opened it up — it was the most beautiful subway I have ever seen in my life. We stayed in the subway just going from one side to the other, back and forth, and sleeping on the subway.

We left the subway and went to the train station right before the train was due to come in. We jumped on the train and we went to Krakow because it was on the way to Lublin. There we experienced the same thing — they were still hunting for Jews, still looking for Jews to kill. And this was after the war. We went to a synagogue asking what to do, where to go.

They said. “Don’t go out on the street after six o’clock because they are shooting people from the rooftops.” I asked why. They answered, “Because they want to kill a Jew.” I couldn’t believe that! I said to my brother, “Let’s get the next train out as fast as possible.”

From Krakow we took a train to Lublin. There were no lights on the trains. The Polacks were sitting there drinking whisky, getting drunk. In Polish they were hollering and screaming, “We want to kill a Jew! We want to kill a Jew!” They were running around all over the train looking to kill a Jew. This was after the war when everyone was saying there was nothing to worry about any more, the war is over, the Germans are defeated... But the Polacks were still looking to kill a Jew. That was the most horrible experience I had as a human being — to sit on a train going back to see if my parents are alive and I couldn’t even be quiet and sit there minding my own business and be safe from people who wanted to kill a Jew. Luckily, we were dressed like Russians. They didn’t know that we were Jews. We were just lucky. We were sitting in a corner shaking - two young kids shaking.

When we finally got back to Lublin, the town where we were born, it wasn’t the most pleasant experience in our lives. We wanted to see if anyone in our family was alive. We went over to the apartment where we lived. We walked around for three days without knocking on the door — we did not have the nerve to go knock on the door because we knew nobody in our family would be there. We knew

it. We just couldn't go over and knock on the door. It is hard to understand the experience we had as kids coming back from war and having a feeling that nobody was there but still wanting to see the house — to see the rooms where we lived. Finally, after the third day we went over and knocked on the door. The woman who used to clean the house, the janitor, was living in our apartment in our place. She told us the whole story.

She told us my father was making furniture for the Germans. She used to clean up and put everything away after my father finished working each day. She used to watch people. She saw my father on November 1, 1944. After that day she did not see him anymore. That was because the Nazis picked up all the people from the place where they were making furniture and took them to Lipowa, a forced labor camp outside of Lublin. That is how we knew what happened to our father.

The janitor told us our mother and little brother had been relocated into the Lublin ghetto and from there my mother was picked up in a truck to be taken to Majdanek concentration camp. She also said she heard that my younger brother was running after the truck hollering, "Mama, Mama, Mama!" and the Germans kept saying stop and he wouldn't stop so they shot him in the street.

That was the end of it. Now we knew exactly what happened. Decades later we learned that our mother was gassed on arrival at Majdanek.

There were plenty of Jews in Lublin then. They were coming in from Russia, from all over, from concentration camps. They were trying to find their families. There was one street in Lublin where all the refugees were staying. My brother and I stayed in Lublin maybe ten days. It was the same experiences again as we had in Krakow — Jews could not walk out on the street after dark because the Poles were shooting at us from the rooftops. I said to my brother, “We cannot stay here.” So we picked ourselves up and we jumped on a train and we went away.

LEAVING POLAND FOR GERMANY



First we went to Lodz, then we went to Katowice. In Katowice we went to the Jewish Committee where they gave us passes, passports, to travel to Prague, Czechoslovakia, as Turks. So we were Turks. We were told not to speak to each other in German, Polish, Russian, or Yiddish because if someone heard us they could report us as not really being Turks. It was a touchy situation, but we kept quiet and made it safely to Prague.

In Prague we went to the Jewish Committee again and they gave us new passes, passports, as Greeks, to go to Germany. Now we were Greeks. They told us the same thing, “Do not speak Jewish because if you speak Jewish they will think that you are German because they sound the same. The Czechoslovakian people will kill you, they will shoot you if they think you are German.” They just hated the Germans right after the war.

We left Prague for Germany. When we came to the German border the Russian soldiers stopped us. They asked what we were doing there and asked for our passes. They didn't like what we looked like, they didn't like our passes, they were not sure about us. They took us to a building where they held all the POW German soldiers. They didn't put us with them, they put us in the attic. Thank God they put us on a separate floor because I would have strangled a German soldier and then someone would have killed me. We slept on the hay covered floor overnight until they could check that our passes were right. When I woke up in the morning my pants were open — all my money that I had sewn into my pants was gone. All I had left was a watch. Luckily, they couldn't find anything wrong with our passes, so they let us go. We got on a train and we went to Munich, Germany. There we found thousands and thousands of Jewish people.



*Foehrenwald Displaced Persons' Camp.
Munich, Germany.*



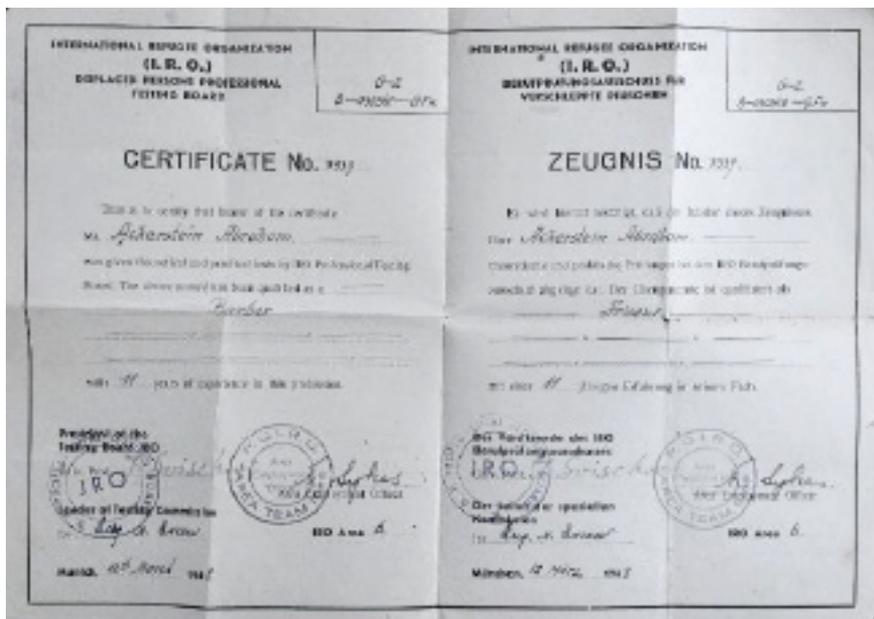
*Foehrenwald Displaced Persons' Camp.
Munich, Germany.*



A barbershop in Foehrenwald.



The police department at Foehrenwald.



I went to ORT to learn how to be a beautician – how to work on women’s hair. In 1948 I passed the test given by the International Refugee Organization Displaced Persons Professional Testing Board to work as a barber. I got this certificate from them. It is in German and English.



At Foehrenwald.

*On vacation in
Germany while I
was living in
Foehrenwald.*





This picture was taken at Foehrenwald. When I showed it to a man I met in Miami he recognized his wife in the picture.

I am behind the two women in the lower right-hand corner.



This picture was taken at Foehrenwald DP Camp. I am in the bottom right corner. My brother is behind me.



*With my brother in
Germany in February.
We are dressed up like
Hollywood stars!*

*In New York in 1949.
People did not expect
a Holocaust survivor
to look so good. It took
at least a year before I
started looking well.*





From the left: Me, Tilly, Chaim Eidelheit. We all lived together in one room for four years at Foehrenwald DP Camp in Munich, Germany.

LIFE IN A DP CAMP IN GERMANY



The only thing I had when I came into Munich was a gold watch. I sold the watch so I would have some money.

The United Nations, UNRRA, was in Munich organizing everything for the refugees including opening camps for all the displaced persons, as they called them. UNRRA took over a building Hitler had planned to make into his Deutsche Museum to exhibit artifacts of the Jews, and others, the Germans had conquered showing why they were inferior to the Aryan race. It was to be his Museum to the Annihilated Peoples. He planned to display heads of every nationality — a Jew, a Gypsy, an American, an English, etc., to show future generations what they had looked like.

When people came out of the concentration camps and the labor camps they had no place to live, so they went and registered at this museum building looking for help. When I registered I gave them my name, Akerstein. They said, “In German it has to have a ‘c’. It has to be Ackerstein.” I said, “Okay.”

Thousands of people were sleeping on the floor of the museum building. Every day there were announcements, “Today you can go to this camp. Tomorrow you can go to this other camp. Wherever you want.” I learned that thirty

miles from Munich the United States Army and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee were opening up a displaced persons camp in Foehrenwald.

I said I would like to see it, so they took me on a bus to see the camp. It was a camp originally made for the German military with beautiful houses. Everything was really very nicely built. They had rooms, big rooms, and every room was big enough for seven people. There were no partitions in the rooms, just cots, beds, all around. So I went back to Munich and I said to my brother, some friends, and some new people that I met, "I found a room! They're opening up a camp and I have a room in this camp. Would you like to go with me?" I got seven people to come — I even got a couple of women to come with us, too. We were one married couple, a single girl named Tilly, and the rest was all single guys. (Tilly would go to the men's' bathroom. We never could figure out how she did that!) We lived together in that one room using blankets hung on ropes for privacy dividers for four and a half years, from 1945 until 1949.

We had parties and dances and many, many weddings at Foehrenwald. We had music playing by our own musicians — we didn't have to bring in the Germans. We had our own police department, our own fire department in the camp. The camp was very nice, very beautiful in the beginning. At the end it was very rundown — not nice anymore.

Everybody in the camp would work. There were restaurants in Foeherwald. There were butchers. Overnight they would take in a cow, slaughter it and sell it. That's how people bought meat. Tailors made us clothes. People from the camp would do business with the German people buying fresh food and supplies. A woman in our building was selling soda water — seltzer. Her name was Genia; my cousin, Jack, who was in Siberia with me, married her. The United Nations gave us a lot.

One roommate, Chaim Eidelheit, had more money than any of us. He made it on the black market. One time, Chaim and my brother, Michael, decided they would corner the onion market. They got all the onions and put them in the cellar thinking in the wintertime everybody would need onions and they would make a lot of money. So, they put them in the cellar and locked the door. When they went to open the door, they couldn't open the door because the onions had sprouted! They lost a lot of money on that deal.

My brother and I passed the tests in Germany to get our licenses to work as barbers. I worked in a barbershop in Foeherwald. I earned just enough money to do what I needed to do. I didn't have too much. I also registered with ORT (an international Jewish education and vocational training organization) to learn how to work on women's hair, how to be a beautician. I had to learn all I could. I had to help myself, because all I had was myself.

There were constant transports from the camps. Many people were leaving for Israel. I would have gone to Israel if my aunt in the United States hadn't helped me.

ABRAHAM ACKERSTEIN 106-96 150TH ST. JAMAICA L. I. NY C/O GUTHARTZ		A- 262	PLEASE QUOTE THIS NO. IN CORRESPONDENCE RELATIVE TO THIS NUMBER OR APPLICATION.
6300- K-150988			
PRODUCTION FORM	DATE RECD		
N- 300	3/14/49		
1/3/1922 POLAND	BOSTON MASS 2/11/1949		

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE

RECEIPT OF APPLICATION FOR NATURALIZATION

EXCEPT AS ACKNOWLEDGED BY YOUR APPLICATION FOR NATURALIZATION AS INDICATED ABOVE.

FORM 502-A
(2-4-42)

My application for naturalization in the United States.



The S.S. Marine Flasher, the ship I took from Hamburg to Boston in 1949.



*With my brother,
Michael, in
Hamburg,
Germany, before
we boarded the
ship to the United
States.*



*Chaim Eidelheit,
me, and my brother.
We are getting ready
to board the ship for
the United States.
Chaim was with us
at Foehrenwald.*



*With my aunt, Miriam and my brother,
Michael, New York.*

COMING TO THE UNITED STATES



My brother and I were looking for our aunt who lived in New York. We didn't know exactly where, but through the Red Cross we found her. She signed the papers for all of us: my cousin Jacob, my brother and me. My brother and I sailed to the United States on the S.S. Marine Flasher from Hamburg to Boston. Also on our ship was Chaim Eidelheit, one of the people who lived with us in our room at the DP camp. I was seasick the whole trip, especially crossing the English Channel. It was very rough. We did the best we could.

We arrived in Boston on February 11, 1949, then went by train from Boston to New York. When we got off the train in New York, HIAAS (an American organization that assists in relocating people whose lives and freedom are believed to be at risk) gave us each a dollar. They said, "Here is your dollar." I cried and cried because I was so happy to be in a free land, no longer afraid, no longer hated. I still have that dollar.

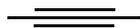
My aunt and her family met us at the train. My aunt, my mother's only living sister, made us feel so welcome. Her name was Miriam Guthartz. She became like a mother to me. She took over. She said, "You didn't lose your mother, you got another mother." It helped, it helped a lot.

My aunt had four children: Barney, Andy, Ruthie, and George. Ruthie was married to Irving Karp. Barney was married to Frieda.

My aunt lived in a very small apartment in Jamaica, New York. She had a paint store. The paint store was downstairs and she lived upstairs with her daughter, son-in-law, and their baby. She didn't have room for us in the apartment, but she had a room in the store, it was like a closet, where she put two cots and that's where we slept. We could smell the paint all the time! My aunt would secretly put money in my pocket, in my brother's pocket, and in my cousin's pocket. I would say, "I don't have any money. How come I have money? I don't understand." She didn't have much but she gave us money. We stayed there until we were able to find work.

HIAAS was a big help to many people in New York. They didn't have to help me personally, but they offered to help. They offered us a place to live in New York, on 2nd Avenue in a big building there. They even offered to give us money each week for living expenses so we would not be a burden to the government. But I wasn't looking for that. I was looking to find a place to work and make myself productive — not just to sit and collect welfare.

LIVING AND WORKING IN NEW YORK



Because I did not have a license to work as a barber, my cousin, who was a policeman, got me a job in a factory pressing ties. After a while I was able to get a job as a barber. What happened was my cousin Ruthie's husband, Irving Karp, wanted to go visit his brother, George, in Brooklyn. So I went with him. When he parked his car I saw a barbershop across the street and a barber standing outside. I recognized him from the DP camp in Germany. (He didn't work with me in the DP camp — there were two barbershops in the camp. The one where he worked was a big, better equipped one, and mine was a small one.) He said, "I am going to Germany to pick up my wife. Would you like to come and work here in the barbershop?" I said I didn't have a license. He said, "Don't worry about it. Nobody has one." I said, "I don't speak English." He said, "Nobody speaks English here. Everybody speaks Jewish. Even the Chinamen, the Black people, everybody speaks Jewish." I had nothing else to do, so I went to work there. After a while I thought if I stayed there I would never learn English, I would never speak anything but Jewish.

I worked there for a couple of weeks, but then I went to see about a job on Long Island. When the owner asked me to come there to work I said, "But you already have six other barbers here." He said, "They speak only Italian. I need someone I can learn to speak English with." I took the job. The other barbers would fight with each other all

the time — shouting in Italian. My boss would say, “Why can’t you be like Albert? Albert never fights with anybody!” Of course I didn’t fight with anyone — I couldn’t speak to them, I didn’t speak Italian or English!

I learned English mostly from TV, movies and shows. My brother and I practiced speaking English to each other — that way we were not worried about making mistakes.

We heard that in the summertime barbers would go up to the Catskill mountains to work. So my brother and I went to the station, got on a bus and we just went. We came in to the town of Monticello. We went into the first barbershop we saw and we said, “Do you need any barbers?” The owner said, “Yes, I need a barber here and I need a barber in the hotel, the Concord Hotel.” So my brother stayed in that shop and I went to the Concord Hotel. At the Concord I changed my name from Abraham to Albert. It was my ‘stage name’!

Danny Kaye’s father was in the Concord. When he found out that I spoke Jewish he would come to the barbershop every day and sit with me and talk with me. The musicians who performed at the hotels would come in and I would talk to them and learn certain words. That’s how I learned some English.

I made a lot of friends and connections there. The problem was I didn't like the winter in New York — I was looking for a place where there was no snow. Someone told me it never snowed in Miami, so I said, "I want to go there! How do I get there?" I found out you go to the train station, pick up a train and twenty-four hours later you will be in Miami Beach on a beautiful beach with women in bathing suits. We were young fellows. So my brother and I picked ourselves up, and we went. I loved Miami. It was so beautiful.

LIFE IN MIAMI



My first barber shop job in Miami was at the Casablanca Hotel on Miami Beach. It was a beautiful place. Then I opened my own shop at the Algiers Hotel, also on Miami Beach. I was there for ten years.

A friend of mine was working in a men's shop in Miami Beach. I used to go and say hello to him all the time. Herby Karliner, a Holocaust survivor, knew my friend and would also go to say hello. So I was introduced to Herby there. We talked for a while and I told him I was looking for a roommate. He said it so happened he was looking for a roommate, too. We started looking and found a place on Pinetree Drive. We were roommates for eight years from 1952 until 1960.

While I was working at the Algiers, my brother told me to go to Temple Ner Tamid for a social dance on a Saturday night. I met a girl there, a beautiful young girl. Her name was Esther Glantz. She was smart and college educated, a teacher. She was twenty-one, and I was thirty-eight years old, an old man already. Her parents did not approve of our relationship because I was so much older and just a poor, ignorant barber. (Esther and my children hate when I say that — they think I am the smartest man alive because I stayed alive.)

On September 11, 1960, Esther and I had a brunch wedding at the Algiers Hotel. Rabbi Lehrman officiated. (He was my customer at the barbershop.) Hurricane Donna hit Miami the day before so we didn't know if we could even have the wedding. We had to have it in the hotel lobby because there was a problem with the ballroom where we had planned to have the ceremony. At our wedding was the first time I met my friend Herby Karliner's soon-to-be wife, Vera.

When I was working in Miami, the owner of the Concord Hotel, Arthur Winarick, came to me and asked me if I wanted to come back to work in the barber shop at the Concord. I said I have to stay in Miami, I like it here better. At the same time, my cousin who lived in Montreal told my brother she had a girl for him in Montreal. I said to him, "Why don't you go to Montreal and visit the girl and take the job in the barber shop at the Concord while I stay

in Miami?” So he went to Montreal to meet the girl, Essia. Michael and Essia married and had a daughter, Sheila, and two granddaughters. My brother was very successful at the Concord; he worked there for over thirty years.

Esther and I moved to North Miami Beach thinking it was a better place to raise a family. With my wife’s help I opened Albert’s Barbershop on 163rd Street. Esther and I have two wonderful children, a boy and a girl. They are both professionals. My son Scott was born May 31, 1961. He was named after my father. Scott and his wife, Amy, have two daughters: Stephanie and Carli. My daughter Elise was born April 8, 1964. She was named after my mother, Elka. Elise and her husband, David Dubinsky, have a son, Joshua, and a daughter, Robyn. My son lives in Atlanta and my daughter lives in Sharon, Massachusetts. They live too far away. That is the problem.



*The barber shop I owned at the Algiers Hotel in
Miami Beach. 1962.*



My cousin Jacob Weisenfeld, my brother Michael, and Moteck Strasberger. Moteck lived in the same building my family lived in in Poland. He was my best friend. We were together in Siberia.

With Herby Karliner in Miami Beach. We were roommates from 1952 until 1960.





*A family friend, Michael, Essia,
and me at my brother and Essia's
wedding in Brooklyn, New York.*



*Esther and I when we were
engaged to be married.*



*Esther and I at our wedding.
September 11, 1960, Miami Beach, Florida*



*With my grandchildren.
From the left: Joshua, Robyn, Carli, Stephanie*



My family today.

*Front row from left to right: Robyn Dubinsky, me,
Esther, Stephanie Ackerstein.*

*Back row from left to right: Carli Ackerstein, Scott
Ackerstein, Joshua Dubinsky, David Dubinsky,
Elise Dubinsky, Amy Ackerstein.*

WHO I AM



In 1987 at 66 years old, I was in the intensive care unit hovering between life and death from a massive infection after surgery. One doctor told my wife that at most fifteen percent of people survive this infection, and of those, most are left completely disabled. Another doctor, a Jewish doctor, had a different opinion of my chances. He said, “Mrs. Ackerstein, your husband is a Holocaust survivor which means he has a fierce will to live. If anyone can make it through this infection it will be him. We will keep treating him; we will not give up unless he gives up.” I survived. It took many months for me to fully recover, but I am a survivor.

People ask me what is my secret for being so vibrant and cheerful at my age. It is very simple: you must love life above all else. You must love someone above all else. You must learn to let go of what you cannot control. You must promote yourself because no one else will do it for you. You have to be happy no matter what you have been through.

Everyone says I am such a cheerful person. If only they knew what goes on inside. I have PTSD. I still have nightmares and flashbacks. I still have negative and anxious thoughts. Whenever I get that way I tell myself to stop, stop - it serves no purpose. I have to go on for my family, for the future generations.

People have asked me if I believe in God. I guess I really don't anymore because I cannot see how He would let this happen to us, His chosen people, to me who had never hurt anyone or anything knowingly or willingly. I lost faith but I never lost hope. My lesson is that no matter what you are going through today, hold onto the hope of a better tomorrow.

When people ask me if I am Polish I say no, and for a good reason. I was born there. I have my birth certificate saying I was born there, but still, I was never considered a citizen. Because to the Polish I was a Jew, I was not a Polack. So why should I be a Polack now? As far as I am concerned I have nothing to do with Poland now. I am an American.

It is very hard to talk to my children about the Holocaust. It brings back memories that are not pleasant to talk about. It brings back bad memories, sad memories. Believe me. I lost my whole family in the Holocaust. That is the worst thing that could ever happen to anybody. When I talk it burns my heart out when I think about it. Now that I am older, I have the need to talk so my children will understand. My family all wanted to know how I survived the war; so this will leave something for them. They should know what happened.

My brother, Michael, died in 2004. Now I am the only one left to tell our children and grandchildren what happened to us and how we survived.

ABOUT THE WRITER

I began writing for Holocaust survivors in the 1990's when survivors I met on The March of the Living asked me for help writing about their feelings on returning to Poland for the first time. Later, survivors I interviewed for Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation asked me for help writing down all the things they did not speak about in their interview. Soon, other survivors began approaching me seeking help writing a book about their experiences in the Holocaust. I met with the survivors, recorded our numerous conversations, organized and wrote the stories in the survivors' own words, printed the books, and then handed the books to the survivors as my gift to them. The books were written solely for the survivors and their families; they were never intended for publication. They are being published now because my friends, Carol and Jaime Suchlicki, recognizing their historical value as first-person testimony, introduced me to Dr. Haim Shaked to discuss finding a wider audience for the books.

Thank you to Dr. Haim Shaked director of the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies at the University of Miami for agreeing to publish the books and for your guidance and patience as we worked together on this project.

I am grateful to the March of the Living for introducing me to the world of Holocaust education and finding a role for me in it.

Thank you to the Shoah Foundation for choosing me to be an interviewer and for mentoring me through more than thirty interviews of Holocaust survivors. Your training led me to do the work I do today.

Thank you to the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach for encouraging the docents at the memorial to work with me to write their memoirs. I appreciate your confidence in me and your respect for my work.

Thank you to the my dear Holocaust survivors for sharing your most painful as well as your most joyful memories with me. Thank you for answering questions that no one should ever have to ask or answer. Thank you for trusting me to write your memoirs accurately and respectfully. It has been my honor and pleasure to work with you.

—Bobbi Kaufman



“From the train they put us on a little boat, and took us to a remote island. The first thing they told us was, ‘This is your island. You are going to build your own Poland right here. You’ll have your own Warsaw.’ So, I was a young kid on a deserted island in Siberia.”

— *Albert Ackerstein*

In the summer of 1940, along with tens of thousands of other Polish refugees fleeing from the Nazis, Albert and his brother crossed into Russia where they were picked up, locked in a cattle car, and endured a two week long journey to Siberia where they would spend the next two years at forced labor in the Siberian forest.

When the war ended, the brothers trekked home bartering haircuts for food and shelter. They then spent years in a displaced persons’ camp before immigrating to the United States. Never wanting to see snow ever again, Albert moved to Miami Beach where he married, raised a family, and had a successful career as a barber.

There is a concept in Judaism of a positive commandment, something that is time dependent, something that must be done *now*. One must, accordingly, applaud this important effort by the Miller Center and Feldenkreis Program of the University of Miami to collect and publish Holocaust survivors’ memoirs as there will soon—too soon—come a time when the last survivors will be no longer. Sadly, tragically, this testimony is not only urgent but timely because the world in which we live echoes their world and the quality of their witness. The very nature of their survival has much to teach today’s generations. One must express gratitude for this project and in the sagacious words of Hillel say: “If not now, when?”

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