

THE CAMPS ■ MORRIS ENDURES FOUR CAMPS

Morris Stein was born in 1928 in a small town in Poland. His father was a businessman who traded in cattle. When Morris was 11, the Nazis invaded and occupied Poland, leaving his town alone for a while. But after a year the Germans started coming to the town and demanding young Jewish men for labor—nobody ever knew where they were sent. In 1941, Morris's ordeal began: he endured hard labor in four concentration camps before liberation in 1945.

In the beginning of 1941, the Nazis ordered that every Jew must wear a white band with a yellow star on the left arm so that we would be recognizable. And they started to stop over more often, sometimes in the middle of the night. In the morning we found a few Jewish people shot to death in the streets for no reason at all, just because they were Jewish.

In the middle of 1941, the German military ordered all the Jewish community in our town to concentrate in another town about ten miles from ours, in a specific place and on a certain hour and date. Everybody was scared, because we had heard rumors of what happened in other places. But we still didn't want to believe that human beings, even Germans, were capable of such atrocities against other humans. Besides, children had no say and grownups followed the orders.



Morris (third from left) and his family in Poland around 1938

Nobody dreamed that this was the beginning of the end.

People started leaving on foot and followed the orders of the Germans. We had to leave everything behind. As soon as a house was vacant, the Polish people and neighbors waited outside like scavengers to take our possessions. My parents, two sisters, and one brother (I was the youngest; we were all two years apart from each other) decided not to follow the orders of the Germans.

My father and brother joined the underground organization. They were called "partisans" (today they would be called "guerrillas"). Their aim was to fight the Germans any way they could and disrupt the German military machine wherever possible, like undermining a military train or attacking a German military convoy and taking their weapons and ammunition. My father became a leader of a group, and their main aim was to kill as many German soldiers as possible and take their weapons, since there were a lot of people, including Poles, who wanted to join them but couldn't afford to buy a rifle on the black market. The more people they had, the stronger the group became, and they could attack bigger German outfits. My oldest sister had a boyfriend. She and her boyfriend joined a different group of partisans.

My mother, my other sister, and I were hiding in another village in the attic of a farmer's house. My parents paid them a monthly fee for taking that risk. The German authorities had warned the Polish people not to aid in any way, especially not to hide anybody who was Jewish. Aiding a

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Jewish partisan fighters in the Parczew Forest near Morris's town (Zakrzówek), 1944

Jewish person would be punishable by death, and everyone was required to report to the authorities if they knew that someone was helping or hiding Jews. Some Poles took the risk for the money, and others risked their lives because they were good hearted or for religious reasons. But there were more people helping the Germans than the Jews.

My father used to come at least once a week at night with my brother and a few of his soldiers to bring us food and money. He used to tell us of the operations they were involved in. After an hour or two, he would disappear in the darkness of the night, back into the woods to his headquarters.

They had to change their hiding places very often so that the Germans couldn't trace them to a certain place. They were not a national organization. Each group operated independently like a unit. Sometimes they united with other units for a bigger undertaking. Of course, a lot of times there were armed clashes with German soldiers, and some got killed or injured, but there was no other way to survive.

The Germans passed a law that each farmer had to give to the German army a certain amount of what he grew, according to the size of his farm. Small farmers couldn't afford to give anything, so the Germans went from farm to farm and confiscated whatever they found. Through informers, my father found out the date they were coming to the village where we were hiding. In the middle of one night, we (my mother, sister, and I) left that village to go to another village where our father made arrangements for us to hide until it was safe to return.

After a few days I went back to the first farmer to find out if it was safe to return. I had to go through woods and fields and was approaching a railway crossing when I heard the order in Polish, "Stop! If not we will shoot." I was handcuffed by two Polish guards, who were guarding the railway against the underground, and brought to a prison in another village.

After a few days, the Polish police took me to another town and handed me over to the German Gestapo. They told the Gestapo that I threatened them, that if they didn't let me go free, my father in the underground would kill them for arresting me—which was a complete lie. Those Poles knew my family personally, and they knew about my father, because to survive in the underground my father had to raid some farms for food supply, some of which my father used to bring us on his visits.

The Gestapo locked me up in a room by myself. A few hours later they took me to another room. After a while, two officers and a dog, a German shepherd, came to the room. They interrogated me with all kinds of questions about my parents and my family, where my father was hiding, and so on. To all their questions I answered that I didn't know and that I was all by myself. They got mad and started beating me with a leather strap and, while they were beating me, the dog was biting me all over. When they stopped, the dog stopped. I don't know how long it went on like this, but I didn't tell them anything, because I knew that they were going to kill me anyway, so I made up my mind not to disclose anything about the rest of my family. When the interrogation stopped they locked me in a dark room.

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After a while they brought me to a prison. There were about 50 Jewish men, women, and children in one big room. I sat in a corner on the floor crying and bleeding from the dog bites. There was nothing anybody could do for me. There was no toilet or any water in the room. All we had was the dirty clothes on our bodies.

After a few days in prison I remember, on a Friday, they took us outside the prison. A German officer looked us over and he picked out seven men and seven women including me. They put us on a truck and we thought this was the end for us. After a while, we found ourselves in a camp with barbed wire and guards on the towers. A few days later we found out that they had shot all the others from that prison.

BUDZYN _____ 1½ years: 1941-1942.

The first camp I was in was Budzyn. It was about 15 kilometers [about 9.3 miles] from my hometown. There were about 5,000 people, all Jewish, some from my town including some of my relatives and neighbors. I was assigned to a barrack [living quarters]. The next day we were awakened at five o'clock in the morning. At six we were lined up in the barrack and received a portion of bread and tea and sometimes coffee. At seven they lined us up in groups. Each group had a different task of work. I was assigned to a group whose job was to dig out the stumps from big trees in a wooded area where they cut the trees down.

The conditions in that camp were terrible. After we got a piece of bread and tea in the morning, we went out to work all day without water or food, all day. We received a bowl of soup when we returned to camp. We were just as hungry after we ate as before. After a while a lot of people got swelling in their feet, especially their ankles, from malnutrition. In time, they just couldn't walk anymore. Either they died or were selected to be killed.

They marched us every morning and evening to work and back with guards on both sides of the road. I was warned by the people in camp not to go to the doctor and not to complain about my wounds from the dog bites, because whoever couldn't work was eliminated. My wounds got infected and it took quite a while until they healed.

Then I thought to escape. It was almost impossible to escape from the camp with the high barbed-wire fence and the guards, but where we worked was an open wooded field and some guards with rifles. Every once in a while, one or two people attempted to escape. Some were shot trying. Others succeeded, later to be caught by the Poles and handed over to the Germans. In that case, they brought the individual to the camp, lined up the whole camp and brought the prisoner to the middle of the camp with a few guards. They told us what his crime was (escaping), and we all had to watch him being hanged. They left the body hanging for two days. Whenever we had to go to the field bathroom we had to pass the body. It was like a warning to the others not to try to escape.

After a while they designed a new punishment. Whenever somebody escaped, they lined us up five deep and they took every tenth person starting from the front until they had ten people and ordered them to kneel and shot them in front



USHMM/Lee T. Stinchfield
After liberation, a camp survivor reenacts how the hangings took place at Ohrdruf concentration camp in Germany. The caption for the photo reads, "The scaffold for public execution. The prisoner was hung from a chain noose. The plank was then pushed from under his feet."

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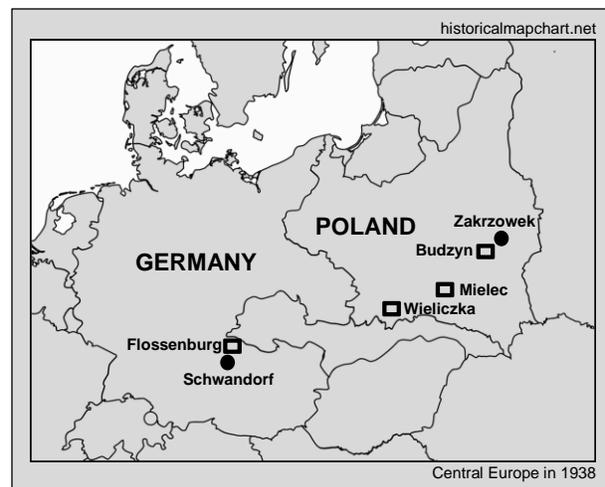
In 1942, they moved the camp closer to where most of us worked, about four kilometers from the old camp. It was a smaller camp but it was cleaner. A short time afterward they randomly selected a few hundred of us. They put us on trucks to the train station. They locked us in box cars without windows. I don't know how many days we traveled. We ended up in another camp near Cracow, a place called Mielec.

MIELEC _____ one year: 1943-1944.

There was already a camp there with Jewish men only. (In the first two camps there had been both men and women. In those camps, the women were kept in separate barracks with high barbed-wire fences around them.) In Mielec we worked in very big one-story buildings. We were building airplane bodies without the engines. In other buildings, they made the engines. The conditions in that camp were a little better because we had Poles and German civilians supervising and coming every day from outside, and they brought us some food scraps.

of the whole camp. Since I was caught by the Poles already once, I hesitated to escape, but it was on my mind for quite a while.

Then an epidemic of typhus spread in the camp, and I got infected too. We tried to be productive and go to work as long as we



In the first two camps, there were some of my relatives and some of my hometown people. Some of them were brought to the camp after I was, and I found out that my brother had been caught in the woods with a rifle and the Germans had executed him. Then my father got injured in a partisan operation against the Germans, and he went to stay with my mother and sister on a farm. One day the Polish police, together with the Gestapo, attacked the place and killed them all. My other sister was also killed while in the underground organization. That is all I know and what I was told by people from our hometown and relatives that came to the camp after me.

After all that, my personal life became meaningless, and I didn't care if I were to die today or live to the next day. Some days I wished to get it over with, all that suffering, but I didn't know how. My mind and my thoughts were occupied with how to fill my stomach because I was hungry most of the time. I had nobody to talk to. The people I came with were all strangers and so were the ones that were in the camp before us. And besides, everybody else's problems were similar to mine.

WIELICZKA _____ several weeks in 1944.

I was in Mielec about a year when they liquidated the whole camp to another place called Wieliczka. The camp wasn't far from the train station. Before we started marching they took a group of us and gave each of us five loaves of bread to carry to the camp. We were separated from the others. On the way, some of us ate some of the bread. When we arrived in camp, they checked everybody and whoever was missing even a piece of bread they locked up. The next

day they lined up the whole camp, brought us out, and each one of us got spanked 25 times on the bare butt, including me, with a special leather strap. The pain and suffering for a few days were indescribable.

In Wieliczka, we met some of the people from the first two camps. We found out that the reason they kept us moving was because the Russian army was closing in on us. We were in that camp about two or three weeks when they put us on trains again.

FLOSSENBURG _____ late 1944 until liberation in April 1945.

After a few days, in the winter of 1944, we arrived in Germany to a concentration camp called Flossenburg. In this camp there were tens of thousands of people from all nationalities, including Germans, Russians, Poles, Gypsies—mostly non-Jewish. There also was a crematorium where they burned the bodies of people who either died on the way from Poland to Germany or in the camp itself. Some of our people died so we had to carry them to the crematorium.

On arrival, they put us in a big hall underground and ordered us to undress, completely naked. They gave us soap and we took a cold shower. They took all our clothing away and gave us uniforms like pajamas, with blue and white stripes, and shoes with wooden soles. Instead of a haircut, they cut a strip from the forehead to the neck in the back. They registered us and each one got a number with a colored triangle on it. We had to sew it on the jacket, on the left side of the chest. My number was 16335.

We got assigned to different jobs. I worked on body parts for Messerschmitt airplanes. Others worked on engines or in stone mines. My job wasn't too hard. I worked with an electric drill all day and every day, but the marching to work and back with the wooden shoes took its toll. In the winter the snow got stuck to the soles and in the summer we got blisters.

The food was terrible. In the morning they gave us a loaf of bread, two pounds for ten people. In the evening, we got soup, which was like hot water. Sometimes we found a piece of potato in it. After a while, we looked like skeletons: skin and bones. Each morning there were dead people in the bunks who died from starvation. We had to report it to the authorities and bring the bodies to the crematorium to be burned.

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A French survivor shows the Flossenburg crematorium to a photographer after the camp was liberated, May 1945.



The airplane factory near Flossenburg where Morris and other inmates worked, May 1945

This last camp was the worst of all. The food was the worst, no doctors, no medicine. If somebody got sick they continued working until they dropped dead.

LIBERATION _____ April 1945.

In the beginning of 1945, we started seeing American and English planes overhead. Then they flew over us almost daily. Then, in March, they ordered only Jewish people to line up in the middle of camp. They marched us to the train station where the box cars were waiting for us.

Their purpose was to transfer us to Dachau where there was a large concentration camp with a gas chamber and crematorium. They loaded us on the train with two engines, one in the front and one in the back. As soon as the train started moving we were attacked from the airplanes. The planes made a few circles from the front train engine to the back engine, shooting at us and bombarding the railway.

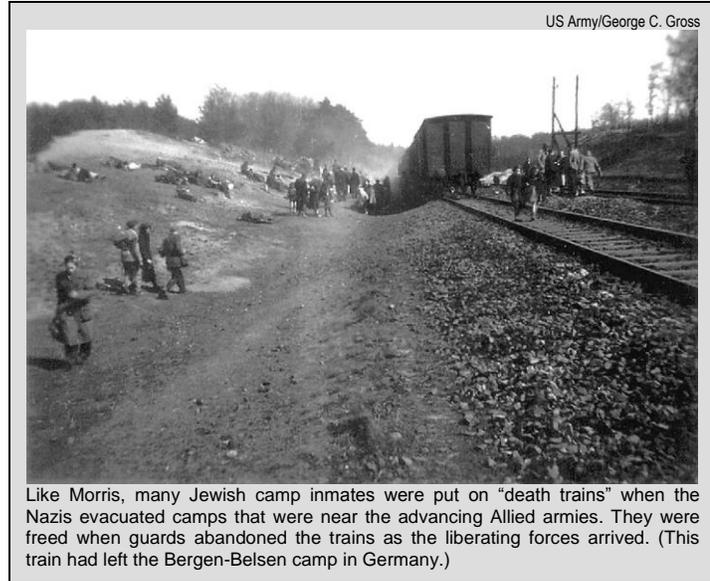
The German guards, who had been watching us standing on the train, started to run for cover in between the train cars. We broke loose to try to escape. But after the air raid was over, the guards started collecting us back to the train. People all over were dead or injured from the raid. We were ordered to bring all the injured to one spot, and they all were killed. They marched the rest of us to the woods and kept us there for the rest of the day. In the evening, they marched us all night.

That was how a new ordeal started for us. To avoid all the air raids we marched at night and rested in wooded areas at day. Anybody who fell behind from exhaustion was killed. We passed some villages on our way. The German people just stood on the side roads looking at us. Some days they brought us some food scraps or some water and some days nothing. We ate grass, roots, even leaves: anything that was chewable.

This suffering went on for about two weeks. All that time we saw planes and heard bombardments, especially at night when it was quiet. Then, one day after we marched all night and we lay down to rest on the ground, they lined us up again and left us standing in a wooded area. All the guards left. We waited for a while and they didn't come back. So we started to disperse in all directions.

We heard intense shooting and bombardment very close to us. Some of us started going in the direction where the shooting was going on. Others went the opposite way. On the way, we saw German soldiers running away in the fields everywhere. When we came to the first houses in the village, women and children greeted us with food and water and told us the Americans were here.

After a few minutes we reached the main streets of the town where we found hundreds of tanks and other vehicles full of U.S. soldiers still fighting some German resistance in the streets. When they saw us with the camp uniforms, they bombarded us with food, cigarettes, chocolate, everything, they threw at us! Food we never saw in our lives! People



Like Morris, many Jewish camp inmates were put on "death trains" when the Nazis evacuated camps that were near the advancing Allied armies. They were freed when guards abandoned the trains as the liberating forces arrived. (This train had left the Bergen-Belsen camp in Germany.)

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started eating and getting sick from all that food that our bodies weren't used to. In the first few days, some died from overeating. And we found out, after we were liberated, that some German soldiers were searching in the woods and shot whomever they found. That march before the liberation lasted from the middle of March until April 23, the day of liberation.

There was such confusion! Unbelievable! We didn't know what to do and where to go. We formed groups of three or four and slept in barns, thinking all the time this can't be true, that it must be a dream—and afraid that soon Germans would come and get us back to camp or kill us. In the meantime, the U.S. Army moved forward and we were left to ourselves. There was no law or order anywhere. Some individual German soldiers who were hiding in some homes or in the woods came out at night and shot some of our people whom they found.

After a few days, the U.S. Army and an organization called UNRRA* started to get us organized and help us with daily needs and problems. They gave us identification cards stating that we were D.P. (Displaced Persons) and ordered us to leave that town and go to the next bigger town—Schwandorf, in the region of Bavaria. When we got there, they concentrated us in a camp that had been a military base. UNRRA didn't force us to obey their orders, but they explained that having us in one place would make it easier for them to take care of us.

On the way to Schwandorf, we saw some empty houses that some German families deserted. We went inside to look for clothes to get rid of our camp uniforms so the Germans wouldn't stare at us. We occupied one of the houses. It is hard to believe that some of the houses we went in looked like palaces with the most valuable things imaginable. Our group of boys, 14 to 16 years old, weren't interested in material things. We looked like skeletons—skin and bones—and it took a while to realize that all this was real and the German army would not come back after us.

All those years in camp I never thought about freedom or ever getting out. It seemed that my destiny and that of the others would end in one of the camps, either getting killed or dying from starvation.

UNRRA, in addition to giving us identification cards, took pictures with our names on the picture, to be sent all over Europe to look for relatives. They formed a kitchen in the camp and whoever wanted could come three times a day to get food. But we had no transportation, so most of the time we skipped the free meal. The four of us (we lived in one house) realized we had to find a way to survive. Sometimes one of us went to the camp and brought a meal for all four of us.

Except for a place to live in and the clothes on our bodies, we had almost nothing. What we did have was a couple of pistols and a gun that we found in the unoccupied houses. We went to the end of town and we would hide on both sides of the main road waiting for German ex-soldiers walking or riding bicycles on their way somewhere. We would stop them, search them, take their



Morris holds a placard with his name (Moszek Sztajnkeler) issued by UNRRA after liberation. Many such photographs were taken to help reunite survivors with their families.

* UNRRA: The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (1943-1947) was founded by 44 nations, and primarily funded by the U.S., to aid the millions of war refugees in Europe. It established nearly 800 resettlement camps, providing shelter to about seven million people.

bicycles away and if we found watches we also took them. We occasionally saw some of them walking on dirt roads in the fields. Those were mostly ex-SS men. We tried to stop them too, but a couple of times they shot at us and we shot at them. They were more experienced with weapons than we were, so we abandoned the whole adventure.

By then, we had bicycles and watches. The bicycles we used for our transportation, and we sold the watches to other Displaced Persons in the camp. This way we had some money to buy food. In times when we had no money,

we rode out of town to farmers and we told them that we were in concentration camps and we asked them for food. Most of the time they gave us some. If one refused or didn't have any, we went to another farmer. Usually we brought back food for a few days. We also rode to the camp to get a hot meal in the kitchen almost daily. That is how we survived from day to day. Another way to survive was to live in the DP camp which we and lots of others didn't like. It gave us the feeling of the concentration camp again. The only thing missing in the camps was the guards.

After a while, in 1945, UNRRA registered young boys to emigrate to England. In the meantime, one of my friends and I decided to go to Poland and smuggle some watches and sell them for a big profit. We crossed the border from Germany to Czechoslovakia, then to Poland, illegally. We sold the watches within two days for Polish money, but when we tried to exchange the money on the black market to German money we got caught by the Polish police and put in prison. After a few days we were brought to court to be sentenced by a military court marshal. We were ready to get a harsh sentence because it was right after the war and mainly because it was now a Communist country. Luckily, when the judge started questioning us and I told him which camp I was in, he asked me if I remembered a certain name and I said yes. It turned out he was in the same camp I was in. Not only did he let us free, but he went around in the court house and tried to change some of our money into German marks!

After other close calls, Morris and his friend arrived back in Germany. In October 1945, UNRRA sent him, his friend, and other displaced young men to England. Morris was 17 when he arrived.

I described in brief the suffering in the camps. It would be too gross and too graphic to describe in details the killings, the beatings, people starving, others eating human flesh, and so on.

Every one of us survivors has suffered in those few years in camp more than anyone can imagine. Lots of times, even now, I sometimes wonder how different my whole life would have been if I had my parents and brother and sisters, and I had grown up in a family. But I guess I will never know.

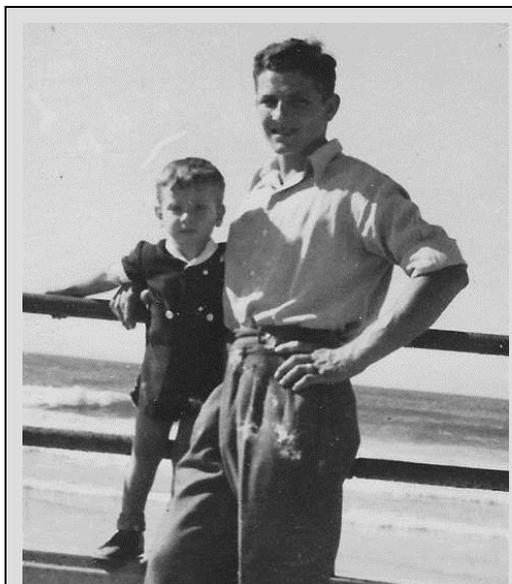
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Morris worked in England before moving to Israel, where he married Rivka Pichota in 1949. They moved to the U.S. in 1961 with their three children. When Morris became an American citizen, he changed his name from Moszek Sztajnkeler to Morris Stein (and Rivka changed her name to Michelle). With an uncle's help, Morris learned the butcher business. They lived in New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida before moving to North Carolina around 2005. They have eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Morris Stein, "Reflections on Hell," Holocaust autobiography, 1995
bit.ly/2mHx03r
- "Moszek Sztajnkeler [Morris Stein] Identified," U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016
rememberme.ushmm.org/updates/moszek-sztajnkeler-identified
- Forced Labor (USHMM)
encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/forced-labor-in-depth
- Displaced Persons (USHMM)
encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/displaced-persons
- United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration: UNRRA (USHMM)
encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/united-nations-relief-and-rehabilitation-administration



Morris with his young son Jack in Israel after the war



Morris and his family in Israel about 1960



Morris (right) with his wife Michelle and son Jack, ca. 2010

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