

# The Only One

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*David Mermelstein's  
Memoir of Surviving  
the Holocaust*



as told to Bobbi Kaufman



# **The Only One**

## **David Mermelstein's Memoir of Surviving the Holocaust**

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On the cover:  
David Mermelstein is the first boy standing on the  
left. He is the only boy in his grade to survive the  
Holocaust.

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## DEDICATION

To the memory of my family, my wife Irene's family, and the millions of innocent victims murdered by the Nazis in World War II.

To the Survivors who arrived in new lands, started new lives, began new families, and shouted the words *Never Again* to generations to come.

With deep gratitude to the citizens and soldiers of United States of America who contributed to the defeat of the Nazi war machine. Without them, I would not be here.

*-David Mermelstein,  
Miami 2019*



## LIFE BEFORE THE WAR

I was born in 1928 in Kevjazd in the Carpathian Mountains of Czechoslovakia. My name is David Aaron, but I was always called Dudi. I had two older brothers: Samuel, a tailor, was five years older than me, and Frank, an apprentice to a tailor, was two years older than me. My sister, Anna, was two years younger, and my twin brothers, Chaim and Hirsh, were nine years younger. We lived in a big stone house with our parents, our aunt, and our paternal grandparents.

Our house had two front rooms: a kitchen and a room where my brothers and I slept, two to a bed. There were bedrooms for my parents and grandparents and a small room for my sister. There was no electricity and no indoor plumbing, just an outhouse. We got water from the well across the street; we carried it home in buckets. It was clean, cold water from the mountains. There was no way to take a bath at home, so I would either go with my father to the *mikveh*, or to the big public bath in our town. The bath house was like a hotel with private rooms and bathrooms. My friends and I would help clean the bathtubs so we would take baths there.

My mother, Helen Herskowitz Mermelstein, was from Loza, a neighboring town. She was always very busy taking care of us six children and cooking breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day. We were a

large family so my mother needed to bake a lot of bread. Friday mornings were for baking challah; Friday afternoons were for making *cholent*. Our home had a big oven for heating the house and another for cooking. Friends would bring their big dishes of *cholent* and put them in our oven to cook. They took some dirt and a little horse manure and sealed the oven to keep in the heat. Saturday after *shul* we opened the oven and everybody got their *cholent*. My mother's *cholent* was wonderful; she made it with beans, barley, and sometimes meat. She also made gefilte fish. There was a watchman for our fields who always had fish for us; we gave him beer and wine from our store and he gave us fish, sometimes it was still moving! The Carpathian Mountains had many streams and lakes that were full of fish. In the summertime we would swim in the lakes.

We would visit my mother's parents once or twice a year. My grandmother would always give me a little money and I would go to the store across the street and buy a little piece of chocolate, one little piece. I would share it with the boy who lived next door. His name was Jerry Liebowitz. I met him again in Brooklyn after the war. It was because of him that I met my future wife. One of my mother's sisters went to Canada before the war. Her other sister and her brother died in Auschwitz.



My father's name was Martin, Mordecai in Hebrew. My grandfather was Yakov Wolf. My father's brother, David, and his sister, Faiga (Engle), went to the United States before the war. His brother, Shea, survived the war then emigrated to the United States. His brother, Shimon, and a sister died in the camps.

My father's store was in our house. It was a specialty store that sold wine, whisky, beer, tobacco for pipes, and cigarettes, and other items that could not be bought in general stores. The store had benches and tables where people would sit and my father and aunt would serve them drinks. On Sundays, people would spend the day there drinking, singing, and playing cards. There was even a billiard table.

Behind our house was a big garden where my father grew radishes, turnips, onions, garlic, beets, and tomatoes. The beets grew so big you needed two hands to hold them. If I wanted a fast bite to eat after school I would take a slice of bread, go into the yard, take a tomato, wash it off, and eat it. When the garlic was young, before it grew too full, I just pulled it out, took off the skin, dipped it in salt, and ate it; the onions, too. We stored the beets and potatoes in our cellar to keep them fresh. In the summer we stored the beer and wine in the cellar to keep them cold.

My father was also a beekeeper. He had five bee hives. The bees wouldn't bother him. Me? They would sting me! Whenever I went into the room with them I had to wear a mask and gloves. I liked to pull out a comb, break off a piece, and eat the honey. We had something that looked like a washing machine that cleaned the honey out of the combs so the bees didn't have to make a new honeycomb - they could start making honey right away. We did not sell the honey, we gave it away. On winter nights we would drink tea with the honey.

We had a lot of land. We had farmers working in our fields growing corn, wheat, and potatoes. They would make two piles of the crops they harvested - we would pick the pile we wanted and they would keep the other pile. We grew more food than our family could use, so we just gave it away. My mother would tell me, "Go to so and so's house, knock on the door, give them the food, and leave." That is how I learned to be how I am.

We had chickens and geese. The geese were for two reasons: one was for food, the other was for their feathers. When a goose got old, my brothers and I would take it to the *shochet* to be kosher slaughtered. My mother would pull out the feathers and sew them into blankets for the winter. Because we needed milk, we had a cow. Every day I would get a cup, go to the cow, and drink a cup of milk. It

was wonderful! My mother and grandmother made our own cheese, butter, and sour cream. When the doctor told us my grandmother needed milk, but not from a cow, we got two goats specially for her.

Our town had cobblestone streets made with stone carved from the mountains. On the main street there was a glass business, tailor shops, shoemakers, and general stores. Our store was on the main street. The address was Kevjazzd 21. That's all; there was no street name, just the name of the town and 21. The post office had the only telephone in town. My father used it to speak to his brother who was in the United States. There was a movie theater in the next town. In the summer a wagon would come with ice cream. There was a bus to other cities that came every day. There was no hospital. My brothers, sister, and I were never to a doctor. Even when I was kicked in the face by a horse, I never went to a doctor. The only time we got shots was when we started school.

Growing up, I never had a winter coat. I had a jacket. I wore a long piece of warm cloth under my clothes that went all the way from my chest down to my legs. Every winter I got a pair of rubber boots and some heavy socks. I would take an old piece of clothing and wrap it around my feet so I never got wet or cold. I was the third brother so I always only had hand-me-downs. When I was twelve I said to myself, "I have to do something to get one new

piece of clothing for *Pesach* because I never get a new piece.” So I saved a little money, maybe half a krona, and bought pieces of rock that could be ground up to make dye for Easter eggs. I went up the mountain and sold the dye in exchange for rags. At the end of the day I had so many rags in my sack that I couldn’t carry it - I rolled it down the mountain! I sold the rags to a Jewish man who bought all the rags from everyone. I made enough money to buy some new clothes for the holiday.

Before the war, all the Jewish children went to public school with the Czech children. I never experienced any anti-Semitism. I never heard a bad word from the Czech people or the Christians - never. I was beginning my fourth year when the war began and Hungary occupied Czechoslovakia. When the Czech school closed we were sent to the Christian school. When the priests came to teach and asked if we wanted to stay for the lessons, we stayed. Nobody complained. When he started teaching about Moses and asking questions, the seven of us Jewish boys and girls put our hands up right away - of course we knew the answers! The priest’s son was my friend. In 1941 they closed the schools and that was the end of my schooling.

There were two synagogues in our town. One had an upstairs for the women. The second was more modern - we went to the more modern one. The ladies sat next to the men with a *mehitzah* down the

middle. There was a central *bima*, long benches for the younger people, and chairs with shelves for the older peoples' siddurs. The rabbi's name was Shachter. My father went to synagogue every morning and every night. He was observant, but he did not grow his beard. Friday night and Saturday morning we all walked to synagogue. I grew up this way; I was used to it.

I started *cheder* (Hebrew school) at age six. At six o'clock every morning I was at cheder doing the morning service. Then, at 7:30 I went home, had a bite, and went to public school from eight o'clock until three o'clock. At three o'clock I went home, had a bite, then went back to *cheder* until seven o'clock. We had to learn everything by heart. Each morning somebody had to lead the prayers without using a book. By the end of the year we had to know certain things or we couldn't go to the next room. There were three rooms. I never got to the third room. Before the war I believed in God; in the camps, no.

## THE WAR BEGINS

*On September 30, 1938, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, French Premier Edouard Daladier, and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain signed the Munich Pact, virtually handing Czechoslovakia over to Germany in a vain attempt to appease Hitler. On March 15, 1939, Hitler marched into Prague. The State of Carpathia was given to Hungary by the Germans.*

In 1939, Carpathia became Hungary and life changed. In 1939 a man and woman and their two children moved into half of our house and took over our store. The Hungarians just gave it to them. My brother Samuel was now back home because the tailor shop where he was working was closed, so now we were five boys sleeping in one bed. I would help the woman who took over the store carry the beer and wine up from the cellar and she would give me a little money and some flour or corn meal. Because I had to talk to her, I learned Hungarian.

On December 21, 1941, the morning of my Bar Mitzvah, a train full of uniformed soldiers came into our town. This was the first time anything like this happened. They marched by the synagogue, singing in German. We hid under the chairs and tables until they passed. I started my part and all I heard from the congregation was *schnell, schnell!* Fast, Fast! That is all I kept hearing. I was not

reading with the right chanting, I just had to do it fast, fast. I skipped a line; nobody corrected it. We rushed through the rest of the service without stopping. There were no congratulations, nothing. We ran home through the back streets, hiding from the soldiers. The three bottles of whisky and the big, big cake meant for my bar mitzvah celebration went back home untouched. I didn't chant in synagogue for the next twenty years. I wouldn't even try. The *gabbi* at Temple Zion in Miami would try to make me do it, but I would break down just talking about it. Now, finally, after many years, I can do it.

In 1941 my father was sent to a labor camp. He worked behind the lines carrying equipment and digging ditches, foxholes, where the soldiers could stand and shoot their guns. After a year they brought younger men to replace the older men, and my father was sent home.

There were no printed announcements or newspapers in our town. Instead there was a man who was paid to make all the announcements. He would bang his drum and read the announcement. One day he announced that anybody who had gold, silver, or foreign currency had to turn it in and anybody who didn't would be shot. Everybody gave everything. My mother gave her wedding ring and her necklace. My father gave his wedding ring and his pocket watch. The Hungarians and Germans went house to house and took all the valuables from

every Jewish home. At our house they put a sheet on the floor, opened our cabinets, and took everything. They took the handmade tablecloths my grandmother had been saving for her daughter. They took the many pairs of candlesticks that had been in my father's family for generations.

People running from Poland were passing through our area trying to go to Ukraine and Russia. We would take people into our house. They told us stories of how the Nazis were treating the Jews, but we never heard anything about the camps. Nobody knew anything about them - never - because nobody ever came back from one. We knew people were being taken, but we did not know where. We thought they were being taken to work. That's all. The couple who lived in half our house purposely put their radio by the back door so we could hear it. When the Jewish men gathered every day to talk, my father always had some news from the radio.

One day, they announced that we had to wear a yellow star on our clothes. We made the stars at home from plain yellow fabric and sewed them on the left front side of our jackets. We wore them whenever we went outside. We had no choice; nobody took a chance. If we saw a German or a policeman we would walk behind the houses, not on the streets. The Germans and the Hungarian police would sometimes just take their weapons and hit people. They did not fool around. We couldn't



leave; where was there to go? The soldiers and the police watched every train, every bus. They were always there.

The Nazis took a big furniture and basket factory away from a Jew and gave it to a Hungarian man to operate. When they needed four more laborers to make baskets for the army, they called up my brother to work. Because he was earning some money as a tailor, I decided I would go in his place. I was fourteen. I got three of my friends, Herman Greenfield, Hirsh Farkas, and Mayer Moskowitz, and went and convinced the Hungarian to let us come to work. (Fortunately, I could speak Hungarian.) We worked for three months weaving the bottoms of these very tall baskets, but they never would let us learn how to finish the tops. The older workers would take our baskets, finish the tops, and get paid for the basket. We did not get paid because we never made a finished basket. My friends and I wanted to learn to finish the tops, so we asked the man in charge to let us watch the other workers to see how they did it, and then go to the factory on Sundays to practice and help each other to learn. He said okay, and after a few weeks we learned.

The older workers would sabotage us doing everything they could to ruin us. We needed a place where we could work by ourselves, so the four of us rented a room in a woman's home whose husband

was taken to slave labor. We paid her some money plus we gave her some scraps from the baskets to use as firewood. We would go to the factory, pick up our supplies, and once a month they would come and pick up the finished baskets. I worked every day from morning until night. My father would bring me food so I did not have to take time to go home to eat; I went home only to sleep. I was making more money than my oldest brother did as a tailor. I made baskets for about a year. Herman, Hirsh, and Mayer died in the camps.

## THE GHETTO

When the Hungarians took over city hall they fired the Jewish man, Max Nuhomovic, who had been working there. When the office became a mess, they rehired him to put it back in order. When he learned they were going to ship all the Jews out, he wanted to save us so he got a doctor to say there was a sickness in our town and we had to be quarantined, hoping the Germans would not want to enter there. As a result, our town was one of the last to be taken to the ghetto. Max and his wife, Serina survived the war and moved to Miami.

On the last night of Passover 1944, just before we went to sleep, there was an announcement that at eight o'clock in the morning we had to be ready to line up to go to the railroad station. That's all. We had no idea what was going on, where we were going, or what for. Trying to keep us calm, my parents reassured us we were just going to work, and the war wasn't going to last forever. My parents gathered up our best stuff and packed it in suitcases. I stuffed some clean clothes - nothing else - in a sack. I would wear my one pair of shoes. We prepared as much food to take as we could. In the morning they announced by microphone, "Be ready to start lining up!"

They went from house to house with a list of names. They were mostly Hungarians, but there were a few

Germans. They started at one end of town and came toward our house. They checked our names on the list. There were seven of us in our house including my father's sister and my grandfather. (My grandmother had passed away.) We walked together to the railroad station. While we waited for the train, the Hungarians shook out peoples' bundles to see what was in them. I saw pots and pans, dishes, spoons, potato peelers.... People didn't know what to take - what they would need.

The train was a regular train, not a cattle car. After about two hours we arrived at Beregszasz. When we got off the train there was a table where they took our names and address. All the Jewish people from our town, plus from several other towns, were there. They first took us to a building that had been a brick factory, but there was no more room there, so they took us to a big farm that had once belonged to a Jew. They took the horses and the cows out of the barns and put us in. It was very crowded. My family slept on the floor on a blanket we brought from home. There were outhouses and a well with a pump for water. Our only work was to clean the barn inside and outside. Our only food was coffee in the morning, some bread, and soup made from potatoes. My mother would cry because she couldn't feed her children. There was roll call every day - we lined up, five in a row, and they counted us. We couldn't do anything; there was no talk of resistance. We couldn't get out - there were guards,

soldiers, police, everywhere. We were under the gun constantly.

We were in the ghetto for a couple of months when they told us we were being moved. We gathered up our stuff and walked to the train. This time it was not a regular passenger train, it was cattle cars. As we watched people being loaded onto the cars we could see the soldiers locking the doors with big metal hooks. When our turn came we climbed the steps onto the train. My whole family was able to stay together. They squeezed in as many people as they could. We knew most of the people in the car - they were from our town. They gave us two buckets - one was for water, the other was for a toilet. They closed the door and locked it shut. There was a small window near the top, but it was too high for us to look out. The train pulled out right away. We had no idea where we were going. Whenever the train stopped they opened the door and got one person to take out the toilet bucket and another person to take the other bucket to get water. We rationed the water - we would take one small cup at a time. There were no fights; no one got hysterical. There was very little food, just what we brought with us.

About two and a half days later the train stopped. We took one strong guy and put another guy up on his shoulders to look out the little window. He read a sign, "Oświęcim," so we knew we were in Poland.



My brother, Samuel.



I am the first one standing on the left in the middle row. I am not wearing shoes. My hair is long because the barber was already taken for slave labor. Of the eight boys in my third grade class, I am the only one who survived.

## AUSCHWITZ

We climbed off the train and walked a little, not too far. We saw old people, men and women, walking with canes. We saw children - five years old at the most - girls playing with dolls, boys playing with balls. We couldn't talk to them because they were on the other side of the train tracks. There was a band playing Jewish music - not one song, they played many songs. It was all for show, all to keep us calm. We were at Auschwitz II, Birkenau.

My whole family lined up together. When our line came in front of Mengele he looked first at my grandfather and my parents and sent them to the left. Then he sent my sister and my little brothers to the left. I was looking at them so I wasn't watching when my older brothers started to walk to the right. Mengele must have signaled them to go to the right, but I didn't see it. I didn't know where to go - should I go with my brothers, should I go with my parents and the other children? My older brothers kept hollering, "Come on! We are leaving you! Come on!" I was standing there trying to decide where I was going when I noticed a guy coming with a hose to hit me. I started to run to the left past Mengele. When I saw an SS guy, I started to run to the right, to join my older brothers. I believe it was an angel who told me to go to the right.



Once we passed Mengele they took us to a room and took away all our clothes. Our shoes were all we kept. We went right into a shower. We just held our shoes out of the water. We did not have a towel, just a small piece of rag. First they checked us for lice, then cut our hair from all over our bodies. They gave us a cap, a shirt, and a pair of pants. My pants were too big for me but I was able to change with someone who had smaller ones. The pants had strings to hold them up. There were big numbers sewn onto the shirts.

Then - it was my luck - there was a Jewish man in charge of directing us to line up. He said to me in Yiddish, "How old are you?" I said I was fifteen. He said, "No, no! Don't tell them fifteen; tell them seventeen. And stretch out, look tall. Pinch yourself." So, when I got to my brothers I used my head and I stepped on their shoes so I would look taller, and went between the two of them. I pinched my cheeks even though I didn't know why.

We came to a table where we gave our name, where we were from, and how old we were. I knew what to tell them - they couldn't prove I wasn't seventeen. The number that was on my shirt became my number. (They were no longer tattooing at Auschwitz.) I knew my number until I fell last year and hit my head so badly that I forgot it. Next, we went to the barracks. My brothers and I went to the same barracks.

The first morning at Auschwitz we went out of the barracks and lined up for roll call. We asked, “Where are our parents, where are our brothers and our sister? When can we see them?” They told us, “You smell that smell? You see the smoke from that chimney? You have no parents anymore.” That is how we found out what happened to our family.

Every morning and every night we lined up and they counted us. They would count us over and over. It was hours and hours of standing. People were being beaten. If you made one step out of line they would hit you. People were dying. People I knew from my town were dying because they wouldn’t eat the food because it wasn’t kosher. I would say to them, “Why do you care anymore? You know you have to eat; if not you are not going to live. God doesn’t want you to die.” But you couldn’t tell them.

People told us to stay away from the electrified fence. They said people would touch the fence to kill themselves. My oldest brother took the two of us and made us promise we would never do anything to help them kill us. He said, “It will be hard enough to try to make it. Do the best you can, but never do anything to help them.” So, we never did. Even when we figured we had maybe five days left to live, we never came to that.

## GROSS ROSEN

They picked people with trades: carpenters, tailors, bakers. My brother Samuel was selected and taken away. The rest of us they shipped to work in factories or at different camps. They just came and said, "You guys on this truck." My brother Frank and I were taken by truck to Gross Rosen Concentration Camp where we worked digging the ground for the railroad tracks. At first we got shovels, then we had picks. Later I had to use a jackhammer.

We sometimes went to a nearby camp to get supplies. One day, when some people from my camp were sent there to pick up cement, they recognized some people they knew from home. The next day, I went to the guard in charge of us and told him that some people who went yesterday to get cement found family. I said, "I was separated from my oldest brother in Auschwitz and maybe I could find him there. I would like to go there." He took me over to an old soldier, luckily he wasn't SS, and told him, "He is going on the truck this morning. When he gets there, give him a minute to see if he can find his brother." When we got there, I went to the door of the train car where the workers were unloading bags of cement. I saw one guy come with a bag of cement on his shoulder - the bag was hiding his face so I couldn't see him. When he dumped it I could see it wasn't my brother. The

second one, no; the third one, no; the fourth one, no. The fifth one dropped the bag and I saw it was my brother. I called his name, Samuel. I went up on the wagon and we were able to talk. I gave him the piece of bread I had in my pocket. I stayed until the old soldier made me leave. That was the last time I ever saw my brother. After the war I traced him. I learned he left that camp on a death march and there the information stopped.

There were two old German civilians in charge of us. One walked with a cane, the other had a big stomach. One day I walked over to the one with the cane and told him his leather boots were very dirty and I could make them nice and clean. I had *chutspah*. He looked at me and gave me the nickname Fitsco Fatsco - a slang name you might call a naughty boy. (He did not know my name because we were not supposed to have names, we were just the numbers on our shirts.) He took me into his office which was in a trailer. He left me to clean the two pair of knee length boots. It didn't take very long, so I just sat there rather than go back to work. When he came back, he handed me a note, and said, "Walk down to the last barracks, give them this note and they will give you our two lunches." Every day for three or four months, I went to get their two lunches. They always left over a little bit for me. I made sure not a drop of that food was left in my dish.

One morning I woke up with a fever. I didn't want to go to the hospital. We called the hospital the death house because people who went there never came back. So, I went to work. I spent the morning in the trailer cleaning the boots then went and got their lunches. It was hard; I could barely walk. After lunch I was supposed to go to work but I couldn't go. I told my brother, Frank, I couldn't stand up so I would go hide in the shed where we kept the tools. I told him he should be the one to bring the shovels into the shed when they stopped work and to wake me if I was sleeping so I would know to come out. When he came and got me I started to walk, barely, and I collapsed.

I woke up in the morning in a bed - it was only boards - covered with a piece of cloth. I was in the death house. I figured that was the end, right there. One morning I heard a knocking. I didn't know what it was. Then I heard, "Fitsco Fatsco," and I realized the knocking was the German civilian's cane hitting the floor. I was shocked when I saw him coming in the door with the camp commander; I had never before seen a civilian in a room in a camp. How he got in, I don't know. He came to my bed and said, "Oh, you are here! Get out! I need you to work!" He told me to go grab a shirt, a cap, and a pair of pants. I went fast! That is how I got out of the death house. How did that happen? How did he get in? Nobody could tell me. After the war I contacted the Red Cross trying to see if they could

find those two German civilians. I wanted to thank them for saving my life and to perhaps send them some money. The Red Cross said their area was now Russia and there was no information available.

## THE DEATH MARCH

When the Russians were starting to come close, the Nazis decided to march us west because they did not want us to be found and liberated. We began walking day and night - for how long I don't even know. I was with my brother, Frank. If we made one step out of line they would hit us. People were falling and dying; if they couldn't walk, they were shot. We were not allowed to turn around and look, but we heard the shooting very often.

We got to a big farm and stayed there for a couple of days. Even though it was very cold outside, because there were so many of us crammed inside the farmhouse, I was very warm. I opened a little window and tried to reach for a little snow. A guard happened to be walking by and he hit me on the hand. I passed out. After the guard left, my brother took a little snow and put it in my mouth and on my head. He kept doing it all night. In the morning they put us in an open cattle car. I remember it was very cold. We ended up Austria, in Ebensee Concentration Camp, a sub-camp of Mathausen.

## EBENSEE

At Ebensee we worked digging tunnels and loading the dirt onto trains. My job was to hook and unhook the train wagons. I had a little flag to tell the train when to stop so I could do the hooks. Trucks would come and dump coal into the train wagons. We had to stay away from the wagons - about 15 feet. As I was standing and watching them dump the coal, two pieces fell down and stopped, one on each side of my shoes. I said to myself, "How did this happen? Did God send me coal?" I looked around and when I did not see a soldier watching, I picked up the coal and put it in my pocket. I didn't know what I was going to do with it. That night when I told my brother, he took out his knife he had made from the handle of his spoon, and started to scrape the coal. And then he bit it. He said it was good, so I took a piece and bit it. It was so good that I said I would try to steal some the next day. When I had a chance to work near the coal I took my little stop sign and put it on the edge of the open train wagon to hide what I was doing. Then I reached in and took some coal. When we stopped work to eat some soup, I took out the coal and my brother and I each took a bite. The others tasted it, too. I ate coal many times until I got hurt. After the war, two of the guys I shared coal with helped save my life.

One day, when one train wagon did not stop on time, my hand got caught between the wagons. I



didn't say anything; I just kept working. I went to sleep that night and when I woke up in the morning; my arm was swollen and I couldn't move it. I stepped out of line and they sent me to the hospital. I went to the hospital and my brother, Frank, went to work.

There were three rooms in the hospital. When you first came in you were in the first room. If there was no room in a bed, you went under the bed. When there became space, people were moved to the second room and then to the third room. People in the third room were there the longest, so they were dying. If they needed the room, they threw people out the window. We heard it - we heard them crying as they were thrown out the window. There was a large stack of bodies there waiting to go into the crematorium. We figured when we got to the third room we had four or five days left to live. I was at the door ready to go into the third room. I couldn't walk; I couldn't lift my arms or my feet.

## LIBERATION: MAY 6, 1945

When I woke up the morning of May 6, 1945, there were no Germans. People in the first room went outside and came back in singing and dancing, and shouting, “The gates are open! There are no Germans! It looks like tanks are coming!” I was with three of my brother’s friends from my town, Lazar, Baruch, and Mordecai. I said to them, “We cannot just lay here and die. Nobody will know we are here.” So we decided to try to go outside. I had no strength to get up so I just turned and fell out of the bed. Everything was hurting. I couldn’t walk. I was pulling myself with my fingers and pushing with one leg. It took us hours to get outside. The American tanks were there; soldiers were throwing candies. The American in the tank was a black man - I had never seen a black man before.

We were lying there on the ground and the tanks and infantry were coming. With them was a doctor from Boston who got the soldiers to put up a big tent and put many cots in it. Then they made an announcement, but nobody moved because none of us understood English. Finally, they realized we didn’t understand, so they got soldiers who spoke different languages. They told us, “Those who could walk, go lay down. Those who can’t walk, we will pick you up.” They picked me up and put me on a scale. I saw 40. So I told everyone I weighed 40 kilos. The rabbi explained it wasn’t kilos.

They washed us and gave us clean gowns. I had my own cot. They warned us not to eat too much. At first they fed us vitamins with a little spoon. Then they started feeding us a little soup and some soft food. Later they started to help me walk. I was there for six weeks or two months.

I wanted to find my brother, Frank. I found a friend of his from our town and asked him. From the way he talked I was sure that he didn't want to tell me what happened. I never did find Frank or learn what happened to him.

When I was able to walk I wanted to leave Austria and go to Carpathia, to my home town, to find my family. I was still with Lazar, Baruch, and Mordecai. The Americans helped us onto a truck and took us to a small city where the Red Cross would feed us and help us get further transportation. There, they made an announcement that anybody who wanted to leave could take any transportation they wanted - bus, train, taxi, buggy - and not have to pay.

We took a train from Austria to Prague, Czechoslovakia. Minutes before arriving in Prague, the four of us passed out. The next thing I knew we woke up in beds with white sheets and white pillow slips! "Where are we? Who did this?" The nurses heard us call. They said, "We are the Red Cross. We got you from the train, we bathed you, and gave

you some vitamins. Now you will have some food.” When we wanted to leave, they wouldn’t let us go. They said, “If you try to leave we will take away your clothes.” They wanted to be sure we were okay. We stayed another two weeks. When we were ready to leave, they gave us some clothes and a backpack and took us to the train. To get to the Carpathian Mountains we had to go either through Hungary or Slovakia. It was easier and safer to go through Hungary, so we took the train to Budapest. From there we took a train to our home town. My town was very far to the east.

## GOING HOME

When I got home, no one was there. No one in my family came home. The first few days were unbearable, unbearable. A few people in my town survived. I was the youngest.

I stayed in my old home with the couple who had taken our business and half our house. They gave me a room to sleep in, they fed me, and took care of me. They wanted me to go with them back to their home town, but it could take years to get permission papers and I didn't want to wait.

I went to a nearby city, Orshava (Urshava), where my cousin Yossi Schwartz lived, to see if anyone came back. His mother and my mother were sisters. When I got there he said to me, "You are just in time for lunch. There is a soup kitchen that gets money from America." When we went in most of the tables were full so we had to take a table in the back. Across the room I saw a girl who was serving the food. She was busy, working fast to give out the plates. I did everything I could to get her to notice me; I coughed, I smiled, but nothing worked. After lunch I went home to my town. I went back to my cousin's town three times trying to get the girl to notice me. My cousin said I should just stay at his house and not keep going home. I said, "No. I want to be home in case somebody came home, so they would find me." For three days I kept trying to get

her attention and didn't get it. So, that was it. I gave up and stayed home. I did not know at the time that her name was Irene and she would one day be my wife.

There were many Russian officers in my town, many with five stars on their uniforms. I think some may have been Jewish. We would invite them to the house, they would come, but they would never eat with us. One night we had chicken soup. I was given a plate, they were given a plate. They refused to eat the soup. I said, "I'll taste my soup. Then I'll give you my soup and you give me yours." We switched plates and then they ate the soup. They told us, "We were told not to trust anybody because they were going to poison us."

More and more Russian civilians started to arrive. Now the Russians were in control of the eastern parts of Czechoslovakia including Slovakia and Carpathia. Their first announcement was, "As of this morning the State of Carpathia is no longer Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, or Hungary - it is now Russia." The second announcement was, "You can change up to two hundred dollars to Russian money. The rest of your money you can throw in the garbage." I thought this was not good. I knew I had to leave right away. The western part (the Czech part) where Prague is located was liberated and controlled by the Czech people. I wanted to get to the Czech part.

## ESCAPING RUSSIAN OCCUPIED CARPATHIA

I went to apply for a travel permit. Luckily, the officer was a local guy. I told him I wanted a permit to go to the next town. He asked why I wanted to go there, who I wanted to see, and what I wanted to talk about. I said I wanted to see my cousin. I came prepared. I had money with me. I took a bill in my hand and dropped it. I figured if he arrested me for bribery I would just say I dropped it. He looked at it, looked around, didn't see anybody, picked it up and put it in his pocket. I got my permit.

I went by train to the town of Chop on the Carpathian-Russian-Slovakia border. When I got off the train there was a Russian officer with many stars on his uniform who checked permission papers. I was sure he was Jewish, but I couldn't say anything. I gave him my permit. He looked at it and he tore it up. He said, "Do you see that wagon there? You have thirty seconds to leave or you will go to Siberia for ten years." I knew there would be no trial. I left in a hurry.

I went back to the train station waiting room and sat there for hours. When I went out to the outhouse I saw cornfields stretching west toward Slovakia. So I thought and thought and I said to myself, "I'll wait until it gets dark and then I will walk straight down a corn row and I'll get to Slovakia." I went back into the waiting room and waited until it was dark.

Then I went outside and started to walk - crouched down. All of a sudden, dogs started barking and searchlights came on. I see them, they see me. “Stop! Put your hands up!” I put my hands up. Without saying a word, they came and grabbed me. They took me back into the station then to a room in the cellar that had a metal door, a concrete floor, walls, and a roof - nothing else. I went in and sat down. Soon they brought in two other guys. We spent the night sitting on the floor huddled together for warmth. In the morning the Russian special police came with machine guns and marched us to headquarters. He asked me what I had to say in my defense. I said, “I was going that way because they announced the train was not coming tonight, it was coming tomorrow, so I started to walk to the next house. It was dark and I got lost.” He charged me with treason for crossing the border illegally while carrying Russian money. I was sure he was Jewish. I knew the Russians had liberated some camps so I figured he would know about the camps. He looked at me and said, “Go home. Go straight home. Don’t let me ever see you here again.”

I went back home. One day, there was a wedding in town. Right after the wedding, the couple who got married and an engaged couple at the wedding said they wanted to leave Carpathia. I said, “Where are you going?” They said, “To the border at Chop.” I told them what happened to me there and said they should not go there. We talked and I decided to go



with them. If we couldn't go to that border, what were we going to do? We decided to go to the capital of Carpathia, Usharon (also called Ungar), thinking there would be some Jews there and maybe we could find someone who could help us. Luckily, it was only a couple of stops on the bus and nobody checked our papers. We walked around looking at faces and if we thought a person was Jewish we would say, "*Du redst Eyidish?*" ("Do you speak Yiddish?") If the answer was, "Zikher," ("For sure,") then we would ask for help. (That question and answer were understood all over the Jewish world.) We couldn't find anyone who could help us. We soon noticed that a man was following us. Fearing he was a Russian agent, we began to walk fast. He ran up to me, tapped me on the shoulder, and said, "I think I know you. You are Dudi! You gave me coal to eat! We were in the hospital together." We told him we were trying to find a way to leave the country. He told us that in a nearby town there was a Jewish man who came back from the camps who had had a bakery which he was able to take back. He would be the only person who could help us.

He gave us some bread and we left on the bus. When I got off the bus I went right into the bakery and said, "Do you speak Yiddish?" He said, "For sure." I told him what we wanted to do and he tried to talk us out of it. He said it was very dangerous, "Russian soldiers are in the mountains and at night

they shoot missiles to light up the sky so they can see people trying to cross the border and shoot them.” The two couples with me asked what I thought. I said, “Look, I’ve taken so many chances to get here, I will take another chance and try to make it. At least I will know I tried.” They agreed.

The baker told us there was a shepherd who brought his sheep up the mountain who had an in with the Russian soldiers because he would bring them drinks - vodka. He knew when the Russians were coming and when they were going. Maybe he could help. We went to him. He said he would take us across the mountains to the border, but he didn’t want Russian money, only dollars. Luckily, the engaged girl with us said she had five dollars and would give it to him.

Before the war, this girl’s father was getting American dollars from his two brothers in the United States. Before the family was taken away, the father said to his five girls, his boy, and his wife, “I am burying this little can here by the apple tree. Hopefully, we will all come back home and we will be able to use it.” Only one girl survived - the girl with us. In the little can was a gold watch, two rings, and five American dollars. That five dollars took us over the mountain and across the border into Slovakia.

The shepherd took us to the top of the mountain. He showed us that all we had to do was walk down. He said that at the bottom there would be water, but it would not be too deep and we should walk across it. We would then come to a town. He told us to go to a certain house and knock on the door. As I was going down the mountain, the sole of my shoe got caught and tore off, so I tied it with a string. It was dark when we got to the house. The guy came out and didn't say anything. He just went and got a bundle of straw, put it on the floor, and told us we should lay down and sleep there. In the morning his wife made us breakfast. We said we wanted to go to the next city, Sobrance, as we made our way to the Czech part and asked how to get there. We wanted to get far from the border because the Russians had ordered the Slovaks not to help people who crossed the border.

We had no Slovak money for a horse and buggy, so we started to walk. For food we had a piece of bread and a bottle of water. When we stopped on the side of the street to eat, the border police came by. They started to talk to the two couples calling them black market racketeers. I went over, took my backpack off, showed them our bread and water, and I showed them my shoe. I said, "If we were black market racketeers would I be walking like this? With only water and a piece of bread? Be walking instead of taking a wagon?" He figured we were coming from the Carpathian and asked where

we were going. I said we were going to the next city on our way to the Czech part. He said, it was a long way but the street we were on would take us there. We thanked him and we walked.

When we reached the next city we were able to exchange some cigarettes for some Slovak money. Then I went to the flea market because I needed a pair of shoes. Once again we had to find somebody who could help us. We would look at people's faces, looking for someone who looked Jewish. I found someone and said in Yiddish, "Do you speak Yiddish?" He answered, "For sure." I asked if there was a Jewish community there. He said, "Yes. Follow me." I saw women sitting outside cleaning chickens and putting salt on them - koshering them. That was something Jewish women often did on Thursdays, so I knew it was a Thursday. They told us to go into the synagogue where they were *davening* already. We went in and stayed in the back. I saw one man was looking and looking at us. He came over and said, "I think I know you from the camps. You gave us the coal to eat." He said he would like to keep us there but it was too dangerous. This was the second time sharing the coal helped save me!

He said to one guy, "Go get some train tickets to the farthest city in Slovakia closest to the Czech border." To another guy he said, "Go get a horse and buggy to take them to the train. Don't let them

off the buggy until the people are off the train so they will get off the buggy and go right onto the train.” It was dangerous for us to be in Slovakia because we had no travel papers, we were not Slovak citizens, and the Slovaks were friendly with the Russians. I did not have a ticket so wherever the conductor went, I went the other way. Later, one of the girls gave me her ticket saying, “They know I was here, they may not know that you were here.” So I put her ticket in my pocket. When we crossed the border into the Czech part they changed conductors and we didn’t have to worry anymore. We were sitting there, all of us, when the conductor came by looked at us and said, “I think I know who you are.” I said, “I’m sure you do.” He didn’t bother with tickets.

## PRAGUE

When we got off the train in Prague, the Red Cross gave us a bread, jelly, and coffee. Then we took a train to the city where the couples' cousins lived. We no longer had to worry if we didn't have tickets; the Czechs never bothered us. When we got to the city where the cousins lived it was very dark. We walked to the end of the town where there was a camp for German prisoners. Two guys with guns stopped us, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" Then one of them said, "Do you speak Yiddish." We said, "Sure we speak Yiddish." He asked who we were looking for. We told him the name and address. He called out in Yiddish, "Does anybody know this family?" One guy said he did, and he took us there. We walked in and everyone was very happy to see us.

The first thing they asked was did we reapply for citizenship when we were in Prague. We said no, we didn't know. They said we had to go there in the morning because we could get money, a card for food, and a place to stay. They would give us whatever we needed. In the morning we went. We got in line and each of us went to a different window. We got papers, we filled them out. I gave the man my papers and he said, "You must have a father." I said no. He said, "You must have a mother." I said I didn't have a mother. "An older brother?" I said no, nobody survived. He didn't tell

me why he asked and I didn't know. He said he was sorry but he couldn't help me. So I left. Even though I was denied Czech citizenship, I could still get food. I could go into any restaurant and they would give me mashed potatoes and gravy.

In the street I was always talking to people, asking if they knew anyone from my town. Whenever any of us met a survivor we would ask three things, "Where are you from? What camps were you in?" and "Do you know anyone from my town?" One man said, "You are Mermelstein?" When I said yes, he said he knew of a man in Liberec who was from my town that he believed was my uncle. I started walking to Liberec, a town just outside of Prague, hoping to find my uncle. On the way I sat down on a bench and fell asleep. When I woke up, a guy said good morning to me in Czech. He asked to see my papers to be sure I wasn't a German trying to pass as a Czech. I showed him my application for citizenship and told him I was going to find my uncle. He told me, "Walk on the main street and on the right side you will see a store with a Jewish name. Go in and he will tell you how to find your uncle." A man who was walking on the other side of the street recognized me and came running over. It was my cousin from my mother's side, Yossi Schwartz, whom I had last seen in Orshava. I did not know he was here. He took me home and told me to eat and rest. When he got home from work we went to the synagogue to find my uncle. As I

was walking up the steps to the synagogue, a woman recognized me. She asked if my uncle knew I was here. I said no. She went to my uncle and said, "I know you had a brother in Kevjzsd. Did anyone in his family survive?" He said, "One nephew survived. My daughter was going to get him but the border was closed and she couldn't get to him." My uncle Shea was sitting and looking down at his prayerbook. The woman said to him, "Turn around and see if you recognize who is here." "Ah!" was all he could say. He couldn't talk. He tried to stand up, but he couldn't. I went to him and sat down. His first question was, "Who survived?" I said, "You are looking at him."

Shea was my father's brother who used to be in the wood business in Munkacs. He would bring us oranges when he would come visit his parents. His daughter, Rebecca, was my age. We were very close as children. When we would go to look at the bees I would make very sure she was covered up.

I went to live with my uncle. I was still did not have Czech citizenship. There was a woman from the Red Cross who I thought could help me. At first she wouldn't talk to me, so every morning and every night I would be waiting for her. I didn't give up. She got tired of me, I think, so she took me to the counsel where I learned the reason I didn't get citizenship before was because I was young and I didn't have an older relative. I got my citizenship. I



got my card for food and then I could get anything I wanted: milk, eggs, seltzer, too. I was living with my uncle so all the food had to be kosher. But I would eat anything; when you are hungry, you eat.

When they announced they were going to take 600 people to England, I decided I would try to go with them. Everybody went to the synagogue and lined up five in a row. Three rows before me they had the 600 and they couldn't take any more. (I didn't know it at the time, but the girl I saw at the soup kitchen, my future wife, Irene, was one of the 600 to go to England. She was in the front on the line so I didn't see her.)

## LANDSBERG DP CAMP IN GERMANY

They announced, “Next Tuesday we are going to take only children, and no limit.” They didn’t say where they were going to take us. On Tuesday, 150 children showed up. We lined up and they put us on a train to Germany. There were four men and one woman who were our leaders. When we got close to Munich, they announced, “We are getting off the train. Please hold hands because we don’t want to lose anybody.” It was the beginning of December; it was dark and cold. There was snow. We held hands and we walked practically through the night. When it started to get light, I looked and recognized the girl I was holding hands with as a girl who had been in the soup kitchen with Irene. She did not know where Irene was; everyone just ran wherever and whenever they could.

We went into two big waiting rooms full of people. Our leaders told us to sit down wherever there was an empty seat but the Germans hollered at us saying, “That seat is taken, that is taken.” When we sat down anyhow they went and got the German police. The German police came in hollering, taking out their sticks. They said, “Everybody go stand against the wall.” None of us moved. Two of our guys took chairs and threw them at the police. The police ran out. A few minutes later they returned with the American military police. The Americans had big guns. They told us to go against the wall.

Again, none of us moved. We were kids. Then they said, "If you don't go against the wall, we are going to do something you are not going to like." One of our women leaders started screaming at them in Yiddish. When they realized we were Jews, they went and got a rabbi who came and told the Americans to get us some soup. Then he arranged for a train to take us to Landsberg.

Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp had once been a concentration camp. It now housed Jews from all over Europe. They didn't want to take us in at Landsberg because there were all adults in the camp and we were all 15, 16 years old. So they found a nun-house (convent) right outside of Landsberg, took over a floor, and brought us there. We were 150 children. Because they wanted to claim there were more than 150 of us so we would get more food rations, they had us register more than once, using a different name each time. My cousin Yossi Schwartz was with me and so were two friends from my home town. We had Jewish men as guards so no Nazi could ever come into the convent.

ORT (the Organization for Reconstruction and Training) set up schools, training us as mechanics, tailors, and farmers; I was in agriculture. They were training us to work on kibbutzim in Palestine. Because the British were not letting the ships into Palestine it was too dangerous to risk sending us children. They promised us we would go soon,

soon. But, after two and a half years when I saw we were not leaving, I said to my cousin and my friends, “Tomorrow morning I’m going to get dressed like every day when we go to work, and I am leaving. I don’t know where or how or what, but I am leaving.” They said they were going, too.

I walked to the DP camp at Landsberg. I got to the gate and the guard stopped me. I started to talk and he said, “Where do you come from? You sound like someone from my neighborhood.” He was from Usharov, the capital of Carpathia. He took me to register and get a meal ticket. Then he took me to my room. There were six men living in there already.

After a while they started sending people from Landsberg to Venezuela, Brazil, Canada, Australia... One day they chose twenty people to go to the United States. I was lucky to be one chosen. The next day my cousin, Pincas Herskowitz (his father and my mother were siblings), was selected to go to Australia. My two friends were sent to Israel on a boat that was caught and sent back.

Even though I was chosen to go to the United States, I had a lot of trouble getting a visa. There was another Mermelstein who they had caught in a lie. They said they could not pass me unless I could prove I was not him by showing I was not from the town they had for him. I said, “If I go back to

Carpathia you will never see me again - it's Russia!" They said then they couldn't do anything. There was a woman from the American Red Cross who used to come every day to see the children. I hoped she would help me. Through a translator I explained that I couldn't go home to get proof of where I was from because it was now Russia and if I went in I could not get out. With her help I got the papers to go to the United States. I was able to leave within weeks.



With a friend at the DP camp in Landsberg, Germany. 1946.



At Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp. We had the only kibbutz in Germany. We named it for Hannah Szenes.



Fooling around with friends at the Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp.



At Landsberg DP Camp. I am on the left. My cousin Pincas Herskowitz is on the right. When I was chosen to go to the United States, he was chosen to go to Australia.

WASSHINGTON 1-14-47

33307 *lf.*

**UNITED STATES LINES COMPANY**

AGENCY

PASSENGER TICKET (Not Transferable)

CLASS *1st* Ship *MARINE FLASHER*

Scheduled to sail *2/27/47* (Passenger to be advised) or

At (Not known) From (Passenger to be advised)

FROM *BREMEN* (As shown) TO *NEW YORK* (As shown)

NAME OF PASSENGER	Sex	Age	Room	Stateroom	Cabin	Fare	Taxes
<i>MERTELSTEIN, DAVID</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>614</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>134</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>-</i>

1. *1st* Cabin *1st* Dinner *1st* Bed *1st* Breakfast

TOTAL OCEAN FARE *134*

HEAD TAX *8*

TAX *-*

TOTAL AMOUNT RECEIVED *142*

Printed at *BREMEN*

By *Dohle*

Date *2/27/47*

*Print*

**RECEIVED COPY**

*V*

By acceptance of this Contract Ticket, whether or not signed by him or at his habit, or of passage on the ship, the passenger hereby agrees that the following terms and conditions, which are incorporated herein by reference, shall govern the contract between him and the Company and the passenger in every possible contingency:

1. The Company's liability for loss or damage to the passenger's baggage is limited to the value of the baggage at the time it is received by the Company. The passenger shall be responsible for the value of the baggage at the time it is received by the Company. The passenger shall be responsible for the value of the baggage at the time it is received by the Company.

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(Contract Continues on Other Side)

I came to the United States on the *Marine Flasher* in February 1947.





In Rhode Island.

NOTICE OF CLASSIFICATION  
 David NMI Mermelstein  
 (First name) (Middle name) (Last name)

Selective Service No. 28 38 28 765 has  
 been classified in Class con't 3-A Until  
 19..... ) by  Local Board.  Appeal Board,  
 by vote of \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_  President  
 MAY 21 1954 (Date of mailing) (Date of appeal board cases only) (Member of local board)

*The law requires you, subject to heavy penalty for violation, to carry this notice, in addition to your Registration Certificate, on your person at all times—to exhibit it upon request to authorized officials—to surrender it, upon entering the armed forces, to your commanding officer.*

*For advice, see your Government appeal agent.*

The law requires you: (1) To keep in touch with your local board; (2) to notify it of any change of address; (3) to notify it of any fact which might change your classification; (4) to comply with instructions on the notice of classification part of this form.

Form No. 110 (Revised 6-8-53)

I had to register with the United States Military.

## LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

I went by ship from Germany to New York. There was plenty of food on the trip; that was the main thing we cared about then. One day they served us grapefruits. We looked, we squeezed them, and asked, "What do we do with these?" I used to get an orange once a year when my father's brother would come to visit, but I had never seen a grapefruit. We had to wait and see what would happen when somebody started eating one.

HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) came and asked if I had any family in the United States. I said I had an aunt and an uncle. They asked for their names, address, and telephone number. I knew my uncle's name because it was the same as mine. My uncle left Czechoslovakia shortly after attending my bris. He left because he would have had to go into the army. I did not know my aunt's last name. I said I thought they lived in New York. That was all I knew. They didn't tell me why they needed this information.

When I got off the boat in New York I was taken to a big waiting room. They were calling out the names of people who were waiting on the dock to pick up passengers. I didn't give any name because I didn't know if anyone would be picking me up. After a while, when almost everyone was gone, they took my name and announced it at the dock. A

man came running back saying, “David Mermelstein, your aunt is waiting for you!”

It seems that every morning on the radio in New York they announced names of people who were looking for each other, and a man heard that survivor David Mermelstein was looking for his uncle David Mermelstein. He knew my uncle so he called him in Providence, Rhode Island. My uncle could not get to New York in time to meet my ship, so he called his sister, my aunt Faiga Engle, to come and pick me up.

I stayed with my aunt in Brooklyn for a few months. I was still so weak I could barely walk. HIAS and Jewish Family Services arranged for me to see a dentist and a doctor regularly. They also got me good walking shoes. I went to night school to learn English. I did not make much progress because my aunt and her husband spoke only Yiddish so I had no one to practice speaking English with. I already spoke Czech, Hungarian, German, Ukrainian, and Russian, but now I needed to learn English. I was glad when my uncle sent me a ticket to go live with him in Rhode Island. He had three children and I wanted to talk to them in English. I went to night school there, too. I got a job pressing shirts for forty cents an hour. Then I got a job working for my aunt’s brother-in-law watching the convenience store in his gas station. I worked there for a year making thirty-five dollars a week.

A friend who lived in Passaic, New Jersey, told me they were always looking for workers there. One factory making men's jackets was owned by a Russian Jew and the foreman was a Hungarian Jew. I thought I would fit right in between them. When I went to see the foreman he asked if I could sew. I told him when I was a child at home waiting for breakfast or lunch I would go to my mother's sewing machine and play with it. He told me to come to work and someone would show me how to make a lining for a men's jacket. I sat down and sewed - I knew how to do it. After a while I asked the owner if I could work time and a half. I started working on Saturdays and was making seventy-five dollars a week. That was a lot of money then.

I met a friend from my childhood, Jerry Liebowitz, the boy who lived next door to my maternal grandmother. He would come to see me every Saturday afternoon. Saturday nights we would go to the East side where there was a Jewish theater and a Jewish movie. One Saturday he said to me, "I'm going to an old age home to see a man from my town which was also your mother's town. Do you want to go?" I said sure, I would go. The man we visited told me he went to school with my mother and they had gone out together. He told me things I didn't know about her. It was nice. I told him I would like to keep visiting him. He was getting letters from England. Because we already knew how to read English, my friend and I would open

the letters for him. One time, a letter came with a picture in it of a beautiful girl - it was the girl I had seen in the soup kitchen, Irene! He said it was his niece who was in England. Then a letter came and I happened to open it. It said, "I am sending you this letter, Uncle, to tell you I have two uncles in Miami and one in New York. They sent me a visa to come to the United States. I am going to stay with the uncle in the Bronx. I am giving you the address and the telephone number where I am going to stay."

What did I do with it? I took the letter and the picture and wrote down the telephone number. When I knew she was in New York, I called and I told her who I was. She wasn't sure if she wanted to see me; she kind of didn't remember me. I called a second time and told her I was going Saturday to see her uncle and I would take her, too, if she wanted me to pick her up. My second call did it! We went together to visit him. After two hours she said, "Uncle, we were here a long time. You need to rest. We are leaving."

I asked, "Where are you going to go? Home? No! The sun is still out. Let's go have a snack." She didn't say no, so we went. After the snack she asked, "Now can we go home?" I said, "No. The sun is still out, how can we go home? Let's go see a movie." So we went to a movie and then took the subway home. I said, "Next week, if you want I will be here." From then on, it was steady. I picked her

up one Saturday about three months later and said, “I came a little early because I know you like shopping. I’ll take you shopping.” I took her to a jewelry store where we stood outside and looked in the window. I said, “Come inside. Outside you only look, inside you can feel it.” We went inside and looked and looked and finally I got her to the ring department. She said, “Oh my God, look at the rings!” I said, “Let’s see which one you would like.” She picked one. I said, “Does it fit?” She tried it on and said it fit. I said, “Keep it on. We are engaged,” That was it.

We thought we would invite maybe ten people to our wedding so we would have a minyan. But Irene’s uncles said, “No. Our three sisters did not survive. Our niece is the only daughter to survive. We want to make her a big wedding.” I said to her, “You decide. If you want it, I want it.” We let them make the wedding. We invited everybody we knew.

Irene and I were married in the Bronx, New York, on December 2, 1950. I was 21, she was 19. After the wedding they announced that one of the relatives had a hotel on the next block where we could go and sleep. In the morning we were snowed in. We were supposed to go on our honeymoon to a tourist city in New Jersey, but no busses were running so we couldn’t go. An uncle from Miami who was at the wedding said, “Why don’t you come

to Miami Beach for a honeymoon?” I said, “What is Miami Beach?” He said, “No snow.” They bought us plane tickets and we went. After three days on the beach at the Beacon Hotel on 7th Street, I said to Irene, “You call up your work, I’ll call up my work, I’ll call my cousin and tell him to go to my room and clean out everything - we are not going back!” Irene said okay.

I went to work for Irene’s uncles, Harry and Isadore Herskowitz. They had a big laundry business in Miami. After working with the uncles for twelve years, I decided to start my own business. A big new shopping center was being built that I figured would be a good place for a cleaner. I wanted to do this on my own. It was hard, but I did it. I bought all new equipment and I fixed it up really nice. Irene took care of the front, I took care of the back. I did the cleaning, the spotting, and the pressing of the shirts. Irene was the seamstress for a while. After two years I had eight employees. I had that business for ten years. After I sold it I opened and sold several other cleaners.



Irene and I were married December 2, 1950, in  
the Bronx, New York.





My daughter Debbi, my son Michael, me, my granddaughter Lisa, Irene, my grandson Brian, my daughter Helene, my son-in-law Joe, my granddaughter Lindsay, my granddaughter Jenna, my son-in-law Mike, my great-grandson Eli.



My grandson Brian, my granddaughter Lindsay, my son-in-law Joe, my daughter Helene, my son-in-law Mike, my granddaughter Jenna, me, Irene, my daughter Debbi, my son Michael.



Irene is the most marvelous cook. The grandchildren recorded her cooking so they could learn how to make her recipes. Here we are celebrating Chanukkah.

## MY FAMILY

For many years we spent every weekend with Irene's uncles and their families. We would have picnics on the beach at Crandon Park, we would buy bread from August Brothers bakery and eat the whole loaf before we got it home, we celebrated holidays together. The *Pesach* seders would be one night at my house, one night at one of their houses, and sometimes even a third seder at another house. We sang and danced and enjoyed life.

Irene and I have three children. Our son, Michael, was born in 1958. He is married to Lisa. Our daughter, Debbi, was born in 1964. Our daughter, Helene, was born in 1952. Helene and her husband, Judge Joe Davis, have three children: Lindsay, Jenna, and Brian. Jenna and her husband, Michael Fox, are the parents of my great-grandson, Eli.

Irene and I never talked to our children about the Holocaust. We wanted to protect them from knowing what we went through. It wasn't until Helene's husband asked us that we began talking to our family about our experience. In 1981 I heard that a professor wrote a book denying the Holocaust and that Mel Mermelstein, a Holocaust survivor from Munkacs (who may be my father's relative), took the denier to court. That woke me up. I decided that I had a responsibility to speak out publicly about the Holocaust.

## HOLOCAUST EDUCATION AND ACTIVISM

Holocaust education became very important to me. When Florida passed a bill making Holocaust education mandatory in Florida, I was with the governor when he signed the bill at Century Village in front of a large group of Holocaust survivors. Right when I got home from the ceremony there was a call for me to speak at a Catholic school in Miami. I told them I would definitely speak to their students, that Holocaust education was for everyone. I began speaking at every school, synagogue, church, or organization that invited me. Today I speak at as many as three schools every week.

I began going on The March of the Living, an international program that brings Jewish high school students from around the world to view the death camps in Poland and then on to Israel. The trip is very difficult for me. Walking into a crematorium with the students, knowing what happened to my family there, never gets easier. I do it because it is important to me that each generation learn about the Holocaust and never forgets. I tell the young people that we do not bring them to Poland to teach them to hate; we bring them to teach them what hate causes.

Often on the March of the Living I was asked to recite the *El Maleh Rachamim* (the prayer for the

departed) at Auschwitz. I was always very upset that the prayer does not mention the six million who died in the Holocaust. It doesn't mention Majdanek, Treblinka, or Auschwitz. It doesn't mention the people who died in the ghettos or the partisans who gave their lives fighting. When Rabbi Farber heard me recite the prayer and include all of these, he hugged me and asked for a copy. Since then, more and more rabbis are asking me for copies of what I wrote in the *El Maleh Rachamim*.

I have been involved with the Holocaust Memorial in Miami Beach since the very beginning. I am on the Board of Directors and I serve as a docent. I lead tours and give talks to people from all over the world. When people from Germany come to the memorial I welcome them. I cannot forgive the Nazis, nor can I forget what they did, but I have no bad feelings for the new generations of Germans. Today, Germany assists Israel and gives reparations to Holocaust survivors.

I am very active in Holocaust survivor organizations and activities. I helped form the South Florida Holocaust Survivors Organization and was president of the Miami-Dade Holocaust Survivors Organization. I participate in educational programs at the University of Miami and at Miami-Dade Community College. I am on the Board of Directors of the Friends of the March of the Living. My friends and fellow survivors Herby Karliner, Joe

Sachs, and Alex Gross, and I help organize Cafe Europa, an annual luncheon for Holocaust survivors sponsored by Jewish Community Services with money from the Claims Conference.

I go with Jewish Family Services to the Claims Conference in New York every year to help explain the problems and the needs of Holocaust survivors in Miami-Dade County. I tell them that every year in Florida we need more money to pay for more hours of home health care for survivors. The Claims Conference then goes to Germany to ask for the money. When we were not getting the money we needed, I went to U.S. Representative Iliana Ros-Lehtinen who invited me to speak in Washington. With the help of our representatives, we got the increase in reparations we needed.

When I was back home to Kevjzsd after the war, I heard rumors that the Nazis had filled 24 train wagons with the valuables they took away from the Hungarian Jews and sent the train west to keep it away from the Russian army. Later, in the United States, I learned that in May 1945 the American army had seized this Gold Train in Austria, taken custody of the valuables, and refused to allow the Hungarian Jewish community access to the train to identify the valuables and return them to their rightful owners. When I learned that in 1998 President Bill Clinton created the Presidential Advisory Commission on Holocaust Assets in the

United States, which reported a multitude of "shortcomings" of the United States restitution efforts, I contacted Representative Iliana Ros-Lehtinen and an attorney who helped me send letters to the Justice Department asking for information about the Gold Train. The Justice Department replied that they could not tell me anything because the statute of limitations was up; we had not asked in time. I said, "We didn't ask because we didn't know about it. Now that we know, we want it." I then initiated a lawsuit in Florida District Court against the United States government for mishandling the assets from the Gold Train. It went to mediation and I was the only Holocaust survivor at the settlement hearing. When the lawyers asked me what I wanted, I said justice. The United States agreed to pay \$25.5 million into a fund to provide social services for needy Jewish Hungarian Nazi victims.

At 90 years old, I am still very active. I spend two days a week visiting other survivors, helping with shopping and driving them to appointments. I go to the gym where I do six machines plus the bicycle. I go to synagogue every Shabbat, the way I was brought up. I can chant the Haftorah with no notice, and I can lead the service without using a prayer book, the way I learned as a child.

I speak at every school that invites me, sometimes as often as three times a week. I want every child



today to learn from the lessons of my childhood; I do not want their future to be my past. I feel it is my responsibility to teach them to stand up against hatred and prejudice, to never forget the Holocaust, and to always pass our stories on from generation to generation.



With my very good friend, Congresswoman Iliana Ros-Lehtinen.



Survivor Herby Karliner, me, Iliana Ros-Lehtinen, Survivor David Schachter, Attorney Sam Dubbin.



Survivor Joe Sachs, Congresswoman Iliana Ros-Lehtinen, Survivor Herby Karliner, me, Survivor David Schachter, unknown, Survivor Alex Gross, Attorney Sam Dubbin.



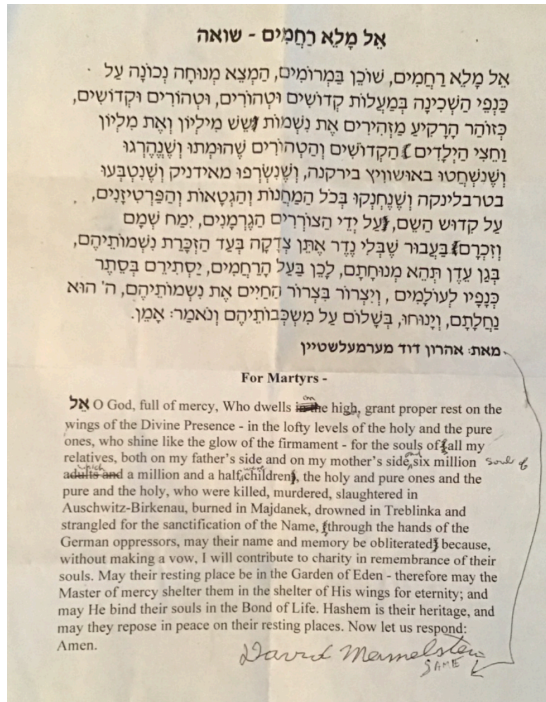
At the United States Senate.



With Mayor Bloomberg and Irene at the Claims Conference.



I speak with students as often as three times a week.



I wrote an *El Maleh Rachamim* to include praying for the victims of the Holocaust.



At Treblinka on the March of the Living.

## IRENE

*Adapted from an interview with Irene Herskowitz Mermelstein in 2012:*

I grew up in Orshava in the Carpathian Mountains where I lived with my parents and my younger sister and brother. In 1942 they took away our family business and they took my father for slave labor. I never saw my father again. The night after Passover 1944 they knocked on our door and said, "Pack your luggage and come with us." Before we left we buried some jewelry in our backyard saying that whoever came back should look for it. I was the only one in my family to survive; I never found the jewelry.

They took us first to a small ghetto, then by bus to a bigger ghetto that was a factory. We were there for about a month until they jammed us into a cattle train. There was one bucket for facilities and one bucket for water. The train stopped at Auschwitz. I was fourteen years old.

Mengele greeted us with his stick and white gloves saying, "You go this way and you go that way." I was separated from my whole family. I was standing, looking around, when my cousin came running toward me. She said, "Your mother told me to take care of you." After the selection we were taken into the shower where they shaved off our

hair. I had to throw my beautiful new coat on the floor and leave it there. The dress they gave me was too long, so my cousin tore off the bottom of my hem and made kerchiefs out of it - one for me, one for her.

Every morning we stood in front of the barracks while they counted us. If somebody was missing we had to stay on our knees until they found the person. Sometimes it was a whole day before we could get up. Whenever a transport was arriving, we had to be inside the barracks because they didn't want us to talk to the new people coming. One time when I didn't know a transport was coming I was walking on the street and a SS woman hit me on the back with an iron stick. I was bloodied.

When they selected my cousin for work and took her away, I was very upset - then I was really on my own. I was taken to work in a factory putting wire into glass tubes for radios. We slept in the attic of the factory which was a little improvement over Auschwitz. One day we saw a girl running and jumping and saying, "We are free! There are no guards!" We went outside and we started walking - we didn't know where we were, but we knew we wanted to go home. The Czech people were very good to us. They overfed us and I got very sick after not having eaten any normal food for over a year. The Czech people helped us find trains to our home.

The trains were full of Russian soldiers which made it very dangerous for us girls.

When I got to my hometown a young man was waiting at the station. He was always at the train station waiting to greet anybody who came home. He said to me, "There is nobody who came home from your family except your uncle, Aaron, your mother's brother." I stayed with my uncle and together we went to Prague where we lived in a farm house. One day, he saw a notice that they were taking homeless young teenagers to an orphanage in England. My uncle said to me, "It would be a good idea for you to go because from there you can get to America faster." I said okay. My three years living in England were very rewarding; I went to school and I learned English. My mother's brothers, who were living in the United States before the war, arranged for me to come to the America on the Queen Mary. I was nineteen years old when I married my husband, David, in New York and began a new life.





From left to right: Irene's sister Olga, her brother, Isador, Irene. Irene's aunt, Faiga, is standing behind them. Irene is the only one to survive the Holocaust.



Irene's mother.



Irene's father.



This picture is of Irene's uncle, Aaron Herskowitz's, family. The woman in the center is Aaron's mother (Irene's aunt.) The man wearing a hat is Aaron's father. Aaron is standing next to and slightly behind his father. Aaron's brother, Harry, is standing behind his mother. The two little girls are Aaron's sisters, Leah and Sara. Aaron's grandmother is seated on the left wearing a head scarf.



Irene and her uncle, Aaron Herskowitz, in  
Czechoslovakia after the war.

Registration Certificate No. 984533  
 ISSUED AT Ansley St. E7  
 ON 11/6/1946

NAME (Surname first in Roman Capitals) MARKOVIC-OVA Irene

ALIAS \_\_\_\_\_

Left Thumb Print (if unable to sign name in English Characters). 



Signature of Holder } Irene Markovic

Nationality Czecho-Slovakian  
 Born on 6/11/1929 Irsava

Previous Nationality (if any) \_\_\_\_\_

Profession or Occupation } Student

Single or Married } Single

Address of Residence } 63 Mansell St  
E.1.

Arrival in United Kingdom on 11/6/1946

Address of Residence outside U.K. } Prague

Government Service \_\_\_\_\_

Point to other papers as to Nationality and Identity.  
J.P. 237 Ser. 361000  
issued 10.1. Newhaven  
on 11/6/1946

ENDORSEMENTS AND REMARKS.


Serial No. H.Z. 74030  
Melo

Permitted to land in the United Kingdom on condition that the holder-

1. Registers at once with the Police
2. Emigrates from the United Kingdom on completion of training
3. Does not enter any employment paid or unpaid while in the United Kingdom


without the permission of the Ministry of Labour and National Service

221 Newhaven 11/6/1946



Occupant } Taxi driver

37A E. Dace  
47 Emerald  
on 17.9.46  
M.H.L.



Irene's permission paper to live in England.

Place and date of birth: *URSINA, CZECHOSLOVAKIA 11-1-29*  
 Lieu et date de naissance: *URSINA, CZECHOSLOVAKIA 11-1-29*  
 Occupation: *Domestic*  
 Profession: *Domestic*  
 Present residence: *LONDON N. ENGLAND*  
 Résidence actuelle: *LONDON N. ENGLAND*  
 \*Holder name and (names) of wife, husband (or sole marriage) and present (or last) address.  
 \*Nom et (noms) de l'épouse (ou du mari) (ou des deux) et adresse (ou dernière) actuelle.

DESCRIPTION SIGNALEMENT  
 Height / Taille: *5 ft 2"*  
 Hair / Cheveux: *Light Brown*  
 Colour of eyes / Couleur des yeux: *Grey-Blue*  
 Nose / Nez: *Normal*  
 Shape of face / Forme du visage: *Oval*  
 Complexion / Teint:   
 Special peculiarities / Signes particuliers:   
 CHILDREN / ENFANTS  
 Name / Nom:   
 Surname / Prénoms:   
 Place and date of birth / Lieu et date de naissance:   
 Sex / Sexe:   
 \*If the holder does not apply for the extension valid.  
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 Home Office  
 24 SEP 1947

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EXTENSION OR RENEWAL OF VALIDITY / PROROGATION DE VALIDITÉ  
 Fee paid / Taxe perçue: *5/-*  
 From / Du: *19-9-48*  
 To / Au: *18-9-49*  
 Done at / Fait à: *London*  
 Date / le: *29-10-48*  
 Signature and stamp of the issuing authority / Signature et cachet de l'autorité qui délivre le présent titre:   
 Home Office  
 29 OCT 1948

EXTENSION OR RENEWAL OF VALIDITY / PROROGATION DE VALIDITÉ  
 Fee paid / Taxe perçue: *5/-*  
 From / Du: *19-9-48*  
 To / Au: *18-9-49*  
 Done at / Fait à: *London*  
 Date / le: *31-10-48*  
 Signature and stamp of the issuing authority / Signature et cachet de l'autorité qui délivre le présent titre:   
 Home Office  
 31 OCT 1948

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Irene's passport issued in England.



Irene is fourth from the left wearing a skirt. This picture was taken while she was living as an orphan in England.



Irene in England.



On the Queen Mary sailing from England to New York. Irene is third from the left.





“When I got home, no one was there. No one in my family came home. The first few days were unbearable, unbearable.”

*-David Mermelstein*

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David Mermelstein enjoyed a happy childhood in the Carpathian Mountains until the morning of his Bar Mitzvah when the Nazis marched into his home town. They took his father for slave labor, took away the family’s business, and stole the family’s valuables.

The family was transported to the Bergase Ghetto where they spent months sleeping on the floor of a barn. When the ghetto was liquidated the family was jammed into a cattle car for a two and a half day journey to Auschwitz.

David and his brothers worked at slave labor in Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen before enduring a death march to Ebensee Concentration Camp where David was liberated. He was 16 years old.

David made his way home where he learned his parents and siblings did not survive. At a soup kitchen he saw a beautiful girl he tried repeatedly to meet, but she never noticed him. When the Russians occupied Carpathia, and the Iron Curtain fell, David knew he had to leave. Trying to cross the border into Slovakia, he was arrested and charged with treason. A second attempt at escape brought him to safety in Prague.

From Prague he was taken to a DP camp in Germany where he lived for the next two years. Chosen to go to the United States, David went to live with relatives in New York. There, by chance, he met Irene, the beautiful girl he had seen in the soup kitchen. They married in 1950.

David and Irene work tirelessly caring for Holocaust survivors, both personally and politically. They continually speak to groups of young people about their experience in the Holocaust always emphasizing the responsibility to stand up against prejudice and hatred.



*David Mermelstein is a docent at the  
Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach.*