

*Memoirs of a  
Holocaust Survivor:  
Icek Kuperberg*

*Written by Icek Kuperberg  
Edited by Abraham Kuperberg, Ph.D.*

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## Foreword:

My father was 17 years old when Hitler invaded Poland, starting World War II. From living the life of a small-town teenager, my father would now face the greatest of life's challenges, survival. Unbeknownst to him at the time, the next several years would be the defining ones of his life.

What must life have been like then for a 17 year old? Could he have known what was in store? Reading his memoirs, one realizes that nothing would ever again be taken for granted. He would have to use every ounce of courage and every shred of wit to outsmart his tormentors in the concentration camps and prevail, day by day.

I sometimes think of my daughter, his granddaughter, now also 17 years old. In my imagination I contrast the relative daily difficulties in her life with what my father had to face. She looks in the mirror and worries if she has gained a few pounds. He was not fed for days at a time and had to steal potatoes to avoid starvation. She buys a new pair of shoes whenever the fashion demands it. My father was nearly shot for trying to resole his leather shoes in an act that was not condoned by his SS guards. She places contact lenses in her eyes to see better. He was nearly blinded by dust that got into his eyes when he received inferior medical care. She looks forward to socializing with friends. My father looked forward to cleaning latrines so that his friend could sneak him six pairs of socks.

Of course, no one would begrudge my daughter the luxuries of modern life in America. In fact, my father would surely say that he suffered throughout the war and

avenged Hitler's plans by raising children and grandchildren who could enjoy the gifts life has to offer. He worked hard to compensate for his lost childhood so that his grandchildren could enjoy theirs. Still, it is hard to imagine that the anecdotes you are about to read took place in such recent modern times, little more than 55 years ago.

Growing up with my father, I rarely heard detailed stories of the horrors that occurred in the concentration camps. I often wondered whom he was trying to protect from these awful memories. Was it me or himself? As he grew into his golden years, however, I found that whenever we met there was a heightened degree of urgency in his wanting to convey his experiences. Although he felt most comfortable socializing with Holocaust survivors throughout his life, he never felt as compelled to tell his stories as he did in recent years. This past year, for example, he celebrated Yom Hashoa (Holocaust Remembrance Day) as the vice president of the Holocaust Survivors Club in Boca Raton Florida, on a stage with two United States senators and the Governor of Florida.

In keeping with his wish that his stories be remembered, he began dictating them in 1998. As the project to preserve these anecdotes gained momentum, he enlisted the aid of his friends, neighbors, my mother, my sister and me to write these memoirs down and edit them to help impart his emotions and experiences. He consulted with fellow survivors, relatives in Israel, the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem and the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. to authenticate his stories and help publish his memoirs so that he too could "stand as a witness."

Below is a table of the various concentration camps in which my father was interned. Since Poland was the first country invaded, the Jews therein were interned the longest and suffered the greatest casualties. From a pre-war population of more than three million Jews, fewer than 5,000 Jews live there today.

<b>Approximate Dates</b>	<b>Internment Sites</b>
October 1940 - Nov. 1940	Camp Auenrode
November 1940 - March 1941	Camp Dorflies
March 1941 - June 1941	Camp Gross Sarne
June 1941 - May 1942	Camp Brande
May 1942 - November 1943	Camp Graditz
November 1943 - May 1944	Camp Faulbrick
May 1944 - September 1944	Camp Annaberg
September 1944 - Oct. 1944	Camp Auschwitz
October 1944 - April 1945	Camp Niederorshel
April 1945- Liberation	Camp Buchenwald

It is my hope that the reader is able to identify with my father as he describes day-to-day life in the concentration camps. These anecdotes may sometimes be told in a dispassionate manner but, no doubt, this too was done to protect himself from dealing with the day-to-day horrors which would be unimaginable today. While he can now look back and say "Life is Beautiful," at the time he had no cause for optimism and certainly was in no position to even assume he would survive with his life.

In fact, all four of my grandparents as well as numerous aunts, uncles and relatives did not survive. While the grammar might not always be perfect, it preserves the realism of what my father's existence was like at the time. Lastly, it is meant to convey to my daughter, the other grandchildren and the general reader alike what it meant to be a Jew and the sacrifices one had to endure during those dark days.

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## Chapter One: In the Beginning...

My name is Icek Kuperberg. I was born in the small town of Szczekociny, located between Kielce and Zawiercie, about 50 kilometers North of Krakow in Poland. The population of the town consisted of approximately 1,500 Jewish families and 5,000 Gentile families. The Jews and the Gentiles had lived peacefully together.

Growing up, I had studied to become a mechanical engineer. I was also enrolled in a pre-military school. I belonged to several Jewish Zionist organizations. My parents were very active in Jewish communal activities. My father was the president of a small synagogue. In Yiddish the synagogue was called a *Shtiebel*. The Shtiebel was where Jews came, not only to pray but also to socialize. My grandfather was a president of what may today be called a small credit union.

In 1938, the political climate of our little community changed. Most of the Gentiles became openly anti-Semitic. In 1939 my schooling was interrupted when World War II broke out. Our town was bombarded and most of the town was destroyed. We escaped to the woods to hide from the Germans. When they invaded our town, they shot anyone who moved through the streets until they had full control of the town. After a few weeks we could not continue to hold out in the woods because of the nasty weather. So we raced through the woods and came to another town called Zawiercie which had a larger population and many more Jews. There the Jews

were restricted from going into many other public areas that included parks and theaters. The Jews were forbidden from leaving the town.

About six months later, the Germans recruited “volunteers” to work in Germany, supposedly for only three months. Since they did not have enough volunteers, they began to take hostages, including my parents, demanding that people volunteer. I had no other choice but to volunteer in order to obtain the release of my parents. I registered in my own name and also registered my two brothers. The next morning, my father, 48, and my mother, 47, were released.

By November 1940 I was only a teenager. We were assured that we would only work for three months in Germany. We were deported and sent to work at a camp called Auenrode. We were divided into various groups. The German camp leader appointed a Jewish captain (capo) to take charge of the Jews.

The next day, before we were fed, we received shovels and were taught how to use them. This training went on for two weeks, at which time we left for another camp, Dorfles, located in the Sudetenland. There were about 1,000 inmates with 20 girls assigned to work in the kitchen. Everyone was assigned to live in barracks. The barracks were furnished with bunk beds that were three levels high. A bundle of straw and two blankets were placed on every bed. The girls had the same arrangements in a separate barracks. On that first day in this new camp, we did not receive any food. The excuse we heard was that the camp leader did not expect us at

this time. He promised a meal toward evening. He asked for 50 volunteers to unload the truck when the food arrived. Unfortunately, the truck did not arrive until 7:00 p.m. The truck was finally unloaded at midnight. By then, the camp leader had decided that it was too late to eat.

The next morning we got up to exercise from 6:00 until 7:00. The girls went into the kitchen while the men washed themselves and then had to stay lined up for two hours. It was not until 10:00 that morning that we were able to pick up our food. This consisted of a bowl of soup and a half pound of bread. Nothing else was served. We had to carry the food into our barracks and eat on the bed. There was no other place to eat.

At noon time a roll call took place in order to explain the rules of the camp with an emphasis on how to be obedient and keep the barracks clean. If we did not obey the rules, we would be punished. "After you are dismissed, you should begin to clean up around the barracks," the German officer told us. We were given a shovel, a broom and a pail to do the cleanup job.

Early the next morning, between 6:00 and 7:00, we were called out again to engage in exercise which consisted of running and jumping like frogs. However, we had little strength to do this since, from the first day there, we were only fed once a day, in the evening, and lived on a meager diet of half a loaf of bread, a bowl of soup and two steamed potatoes with the skins on.

I recall vividly, too, that in September 1940 there

was a tremendous snow storm, with drifts as high as ten feet, blocking the roads from the camp to the railroad station. The peasants who lived there supplied us with shovels to remove all the snow surrounding the camp. This was a distance of some 25 miles that we had to shovel in order to make it possible for the food to be delivered. The weather was freezing, the barracks were without heat and we could not do any work for several weeks. Still, we had to get up at 6:00 a.m. for exercise each day.

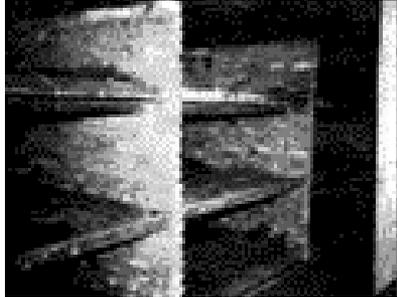
We were ordered to put on a Star of David on the front and back of our garments. Later, we had another roll call and the Germans checked to see that these stars were sewn on properly. If they were not, the Germans would cut the back of the garment and patch in a white Star of David.

Before we were dismissed, we were told to write only one post card home. After a couple of weeks I received an answer from my older sister. She wrote that a large number of people were forced to move away from their homes and leave all their belonging behind. It was very hard for them to buy any food. For example, she had to get up at 4:00 a.m. and stay in line for hours in order to buy one loaf of bread. A Jewish committee established a kitchen to help the needy. Every person in need had to go to the committee and register to receive a bowl of soup. Jewish people were not allowed to leave the town. It was hard to find work. My parents were afraid to walk in the street. My sister also said that at night the family hid in the basement because the police rounded up people in order to send them onto Germany.

In March 1941, a concentration camp official selected several hundred mechanics and deported them to another camp in Germany. I was among that group. Our destination was Camp Gross Sarne. There, we were divided in groups. My group was assigned to the Yecha company. This company's task was to build bridges. The combination of the work, breaking up the ground, and the freezing weather made conditions extremely difficult. If anyone stopped working for a minute, he was beaten by the soldiers. I complained to my foreman, who was a *Landsman* (countryman) of mine. He gave me another job to deliver bags of cement to the mixer. I had to carry about 180 bags a day by myself. After a few days I collapsed from the strain. My foreman told me to go into the rest room and relax. A few minutes later a soldier passed by and noticed me sitting and reported me to the camp leader, claiming that I was avoiding doing my job. When I returned to my job assignment, the camp leader called my name and ordered 25 lashes for me as a punishment for being "lazy." I felt as if someone was cutting my buttocks into pieces. It took quite a long time for my wounds to heal.

A couple of days later, I was transferred to another concentration camp, called Brande, in order to help build highways. There were already several thousand people there who were cleaning out the swamps. These swamps were about 15 feet deep and five miles long. A soldier gave me rubber boots that went up to the waist and said "Here you are going to work and die." Our every move was being watched.

This camp also had triple level bunk beds. We had to sleep in the nude in order not to attract lice. We slept under only one blanket. We were also being given the same food as in the other camp. On Sunday we were busy cleaning the barracks both inside and out. We also had to be properly dressed to be ready to appear for roll call where the rules of the camp were reviewed. Again, there were a few victims who received 25 lashes in the presence of everyone, so as to teach us a lesson.



*Triple level Bunk Beds*

Photo courtesy of Simon Wiesenthal Ctr.

One rainy Sunday we were counted and everybody was dismissed except the people of my barracks. We were punished with two hours of special exercises. Our barracks had not been clean enough. Two soldiers brought us to a wet field and we had to crawl, roll and jump like frogs. The clean clothes we wore were now soaked and filthy. There was no way to clean them and we had to throw them away. We had to run an hour and a half back to the camp. I was so exhausted, I could not even go for the evening meal. I did not have any food until the next evening when we again had bread and soup and a few potatoes with their skins. I ate them quickly, and was still as hungry as a wolf.

That same evening, we were allowed to write one post card home. Two weeks later my sister, Fela,

answered me. She stated that the Germans had picked up about 3,000 Jews, including my parents and grandparents. They were brought to a railroad station and deported to an unknown destination. My older brother, Eliyakum, and my younger sister, Sala, were taken to Germany. Fela and my younger brother, Shlomo Dovid, remained home. Referring to Shlomo Dovid, she wrote that “he hid in a cellar while I went to work in a factory making uniforms for the German soldiers. I received a loaf of bread for my day’s work which I shared with my younger brother. It was hard to buy food at any price. The rest of the people live in fear, not knowing what will come next.”

After that day, for the rest of the war, I never heard from anyone in my family again.



*Concentration camp prisoners standing in a roll call*  
Photo courtesy of USHMM



*Sally Kuperberg, Icek's sister, (right) with friend, Frimcia, wearing Stars of David in the woods near Zawiercie, 1940.*

Photo courtesy of Zelda & Dovid Wildman

## **Chapter Two: Surviving**

I continued working in the swamp, which was overrun by mosquitoes and flies. A few people had reported sick and I never saw them again.

By the end of July, the soldiers called me to be interviewed by a German who asked me about my qualifications and my trade experience, if any. After speaking with him for a while, I was assigned to a machine that filled in and compacted the swamp with sand. The machine weighed about three thousand pounds and worked on electricity. I had to carry the battery on my shoulders. With a push of the button the machine's weight pressed the sand down. A soldier watched me and the only time I was able to take the battery off my shoulders was the half hour in which the soldier had lunch. I had no lunch myself as the only meal we received was the one in the evening. After a while the battery's weight hurt my shoulders. At night I could not sleep because of the pain. Over the next couple of days I learned how to cheat at work, making up excuses to take some time off. However, I still considered this better than digging in the swamp.

By the end of August, the rainy season began and we had to work outside in the rain. We became soaked. I was limping along when a soldier picked me up, along with two other boys and reported us to the camp leader. He said, "These two youngsters are able to work but are lazy." As for me, he said that I was willing to work but could not because of an injury to my foot. The camp leader ordered the soldier to bring these two youngsters

to Auschwitz, a death camp, where they would not have to work again. He told me to go to the doctor. "He will treat you."

The next Sunday there was a roll call. The camp leader announced that whomever was lazy would also be sent to Auschwitz, like those two youngsters who would be burned alive.

A couple of weeks later, a man escaped from the camp but was caught and brought back the same evening. He was displayed publicly on a table where all could see him. His leg had been broken and a sign on his body read "I could not run too far." We were very horrified by this harsh punishment. We were saying "The Germans are doing this just because we are Jews." We were depressed, but had to go to work in spite of our pain and hunger.

By the end of 1942, the weather was cold and we had to put on warmer clothes to do our work on the highway. Two high officers had then arrived in a jeep together with a truck filled with Gestapo agents. The two officers picked up those who worked with the warm clothes and placed them on the truck. One of the high officers ordered the Gestapo to take them to Auschwitz. The excuse was that "with warm clothes you cannot work." Later I found out that the officer was none other than the infamous Dr. Mengele. I was only a short distance away on my sand pressing machine and I could see what was going on clearly. I had to stop since the battery on my shoulder died. My guard called the boss and began punching me in the face and kicking me in the

stomach. He accused me, screaming "Kuperberg, it was because of you that the machine broke." He changed the battery and the machine started up. I continued to work.

The next Sunday we had another roll call. We had to appear undressed from the waist up. The camp leader had chosen the stronger people to step aside to be deported closer to the Russian border. They were assigned to realign the railroad tracks. My foreman took me out of this line since I had an important job to do building the highway. Very few people who were assigned to the railroad track job returned a few months later.

Those who returned told of how cruel the Germans were. They were treated like animals. If someone became sick, they beat them to death. Others died due to the freezing weather. The account they told was as follows:

"The SS, in black uniforms watched over us. If one of us made a wrong move, their dogs were let loose to attack us. Every morning we had to move on and leave the bodies behind us. They were never buried. Every day we received a pound of bread and nothing else. In the evening we were chased into a barracks with no beds and had to sleep on the floor. We had to get up at 6:00 a.m. and appear for a roll call. Those who were still behind in the barracks were beaten to death by the Gestapo with the barrels of the rifles."

One morning, we were assembled to be sent back

to our camps in Germany. The Germans had captured many Russian prisoners. They took over our work detail since they were in better physical shape. When we returned to our camps there were more than a thousand of our people missing. No one could understand the cruelty to which we had been subjected. It is unbelievable how one human being could treat another so cruelly. All this just because we were Jews.

When I heard such stories, I realized how lucky I was that I did not have to go to the Russian front. I continued to do my job on the sand pressing machine. An old German was then assigned to watch me. He was more friendly and trusting. He told me that his son-in-law was a high-ranking SS man and a leader in a camp consisting, not only of Jews, but high ranking Italian officers who were anti-Mussolini. He also said that this camp was not too far away. This old German officer related that in that camp there was a clinic with a height and weight scale next to the wall. The Italian officers, as well as the Jews, were brought in one at a time. They were told to step on the scale. Then, with a touch of a button their heads were pierced with a four-inch spring-pin type of spike which killed the man immediately. There was never a scream heard or a drop of blood. Within a couple of weeks all five hundred Italian prisoners were executed. "Twice a week I had to bring their corpses in a truck and unload them into a ditch which would be their grave," the officer told me. "A bulldozer buried them. After they were killed, my son-in-law was afraid others might know what went on in his camp. Therefore, he assigned me to watch over you." The old man was telling me about this because his conscience was bothering him

very much. He trusted me and even gave me a sandwich. He begged me not to tell anyone. Otherwise, I would be dead, too.

Next Sunday, as usual, we had a roll call. The camp leader told us that we had to take a very short haircut, no more than a quarter of an inch of hair would be allowed to remain uncut. He also directed us to shave our crotch, as the entire camp was infested with bed bugs and fleas. "You must keep yourselves clean in order not to attract lice. You must sleep completely in the nude, and your rooms will be inspected often. Lights out will be at 11 p.m."

A couple of nights later we had an inspection at midnight. The group leader slyly threw a match on the floor and claimed that he could have been killed. He then assigned four people, including myself, to pick up the match and, in a make-believe fashion, ordered us out. Outside we were told to run around the camp and sing for some two hours. The two soldiers who had escorted us said "this was a very beautiful show." The soldiers then told us to go to our beds, as tomorrow we had to work. We had very little sleep that night.

The next morning I heard that smoke had been coming out of the women's room. They looked for someone to clean out the chimney. I volunteered, and asked the captain to give me permission to do the job. Then I asked one of the girls what was the best time for me to come over. I was told to come on Sunday at 8:00 a.m. I appeared on time and it took me a half a day to do the job. In return the girls gave me a half of a loaf of

bread. Within fifteen minutes I ate the bread; it was my breakfast. We never got any food in the morning. We only received one meal at night. Then I asked the girls if they could help me out with a bowl of soup. One of the girls told me that the German chef put a special drug into the soup to make us impotent. They wanted me to know this. Nonetheless, I should bring a bowl with a cover to their room, and when all the people are lined up at the kitchen for their supper I should come pick up the soup every evening but make sure that no one sees me. It was a risky thing to do and I did this for quite a long time. In the meantime, a couple of thousand people arrived at the camp from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and all over Europe.

One Sunday we had a roll call earlier than usual. We were counted, but two people were missing. The German camp leader ordered us punished. He had us run and roll over as frogs. In the meantime a truck load of barbed wire arrived. We had to unload it and reinforce the fences all over the camp. The soldiers rushed us. Our hands were cut and bleeding. It was late in the evening by the time we finished our job. We were then gathered and counted. We had to wait for the camp leader a long time. When he arrived, he said "you Jews are just like birds. If the bird is useful, we keep her in the cage and take care of her. Otherwise we kill the bird just like we will kill you. You had better stay in camp and do the work that you are told to do. Do not try to escape. Remember that you are well guarded." He then stated that the two people who had escaped would be brought back. That night we had to go sleep without supper. Incidentally, the two people were never caught and, after

the liberation at Bergen Belzen, I met one of them. He had become a British soldier.

Since that day, we were punished. We had to get up an hour earlier to be counted. We stood outside, rain or shine, to make sure that we were all present. We had to run a half hour to get to work. We were exhausted due to the lack of sleep and food.

It was beyond any one's imagination to feel the pain and agony that we went through. It was horrible. We had no other choice but to work.

After we returned to the camp exhausted, we stood in line for at least three hours to get our evening bread and soup, which was left over from the day before. There was nothing else. We were still hungry and could have eaten at least 10 times as much. In the meantime I found out that three of the girls who worked in the kitchen did not do a good enough job. Their hair was cut to no more than an inch long. One of the girls, fearful of being punished, told me that I should stop coming to their barracks for soup because it was very dangerous. After a few days they were transferred to another camp and I never saw them again.

About two weeks later we again had a roll call. We had to appear at 10:00 completely nude. Two German civilians, plus several soldiers, the camp leader and the *Juden Eldester*, or the Jewish overseer, came to look us over as if we were cattle. They picked the stronger looking people and asked them to step out of line. The soldiers marked down their names. The rest of the