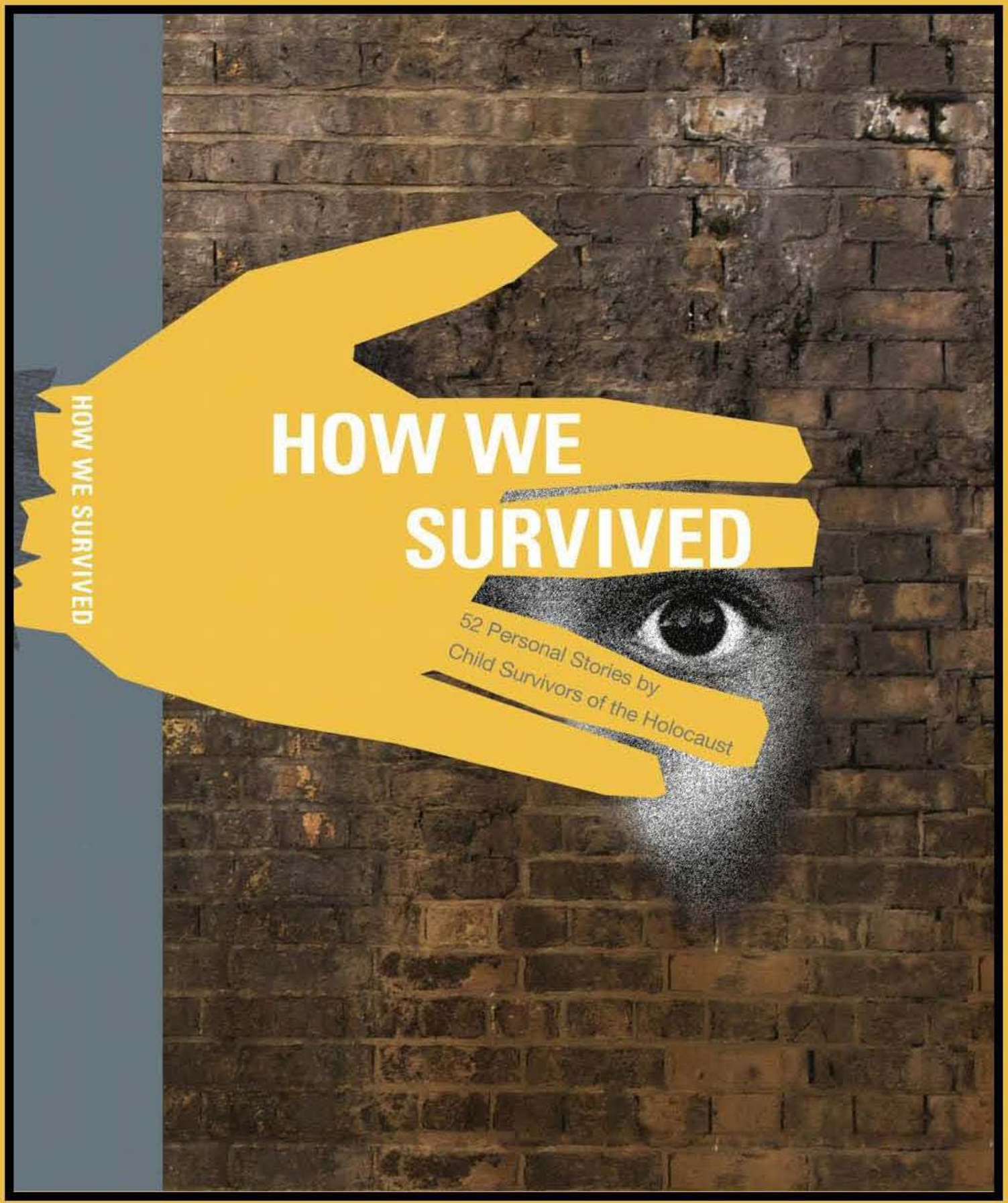
HOW WE SURVIVED
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52 Personal Stories by
Child Survivors of the Holocaust

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CHILD SURVIVORS OF THE HOLOCAUST, LOS ANGELES
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We dedicate this book to the memory of the 1.5 million children who did not survive the Holocaust.

Bertl (mom) and Mano (father) on their wedding day, Bielsko, Poland, 1932.

BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

Before the Holocaust:

I was born August 3, 1935, at 12 noon on a Saturday in Wroclaw, (Breslau), Poland. My mother (Bertha) Bertl was born 1912 in Bielsko, Poland. My father, Emil (Mano) Geminder, was born 1891 in Tarnow, Poland. My parents were married on March 13, 1932 in Bielsko. My brother George (Yaakov) was born May 31, 1933 in Bielsko. My father was very wealthy and owned many apartment buildings in Poland and Berlin. Our family of four lived very well and had a very good life.

During the Holocaust:

When I was four years old, our lives changed forever. It was 1939. The Gestapo came to our apartment and told us to take just a little luggage and follow them. They sent us by train to the Polish border along with hundreds of other people. In the border town of Zbonszyn, the Poles would not let us in and the Germans would not take us back. Eventually, the Poles had to let us in, since we were Polish citizens. "This was the beginning of the bad times" as my mother said in an interview years later. We moved from place to place and wound up in Stanislawow, Poland. Since my parents had money and jewelry, we could exchange these items for food and other necessities.

In May 1941, during the Blitzkrieg, my father, Mano, was overcome by fear and stress. While we were preparing for the bombardment and pushing a mattress against the windows, my father had a heart attack and died. He was buried in the old Jewish cemetery in the city of Stanislawow.

A few days after the Germans came into our city they demanded that all Jews come to the square in the center of town. They transported every one to a cemetery. It was October 12, 1941, and the Nazis shot thousands of Jews in Stanislawow, Poland. I was only six and I had to crouch

in a cemetery and watch as 12,000 people were executed and pushed into mass graves. However, my grandmother, mother, older brother and I survived. Since we got to the cemetery first, we were in the back among the 6,000 to 8,000 people that were left and were told to go home when it got dark and started snowing. When the Germans told everyone that they could go home, there was pandemonium and everyone ran toward the back to exit the cemetery. My brother, George and I were knocked down and separated from my mother. My grandmother fell to the ground. She started looking for her shoe. She recognized my coat and found George and me alive. After climbing a tall fence, we made our way out of the cemetery back to our apartment. Prior to leaving for the cemetery, my mother, at the advice of my grandfather, hid her diamonds and gold in a false bottom bucket, which was left untouched. Later these items were very instrumental in our survival.

The remaining Jews were relocated into a ghetto in the city of Stanislawow. The conditions in the ghetto were horrible. When I stepped outside of our very small apartment, I saw people killed; I saw babies being thrown against the wall, people hanged from telephone wires.

The Jews became the work force for the Germans. When the Germans searched our apartment for people who were not working, my grandmother hid us in a closet and placed wood in front of it. When the dogs sniffed the area, because of the wood they didn't discover us – that was the second time my grandmother saved our lives.

My mother was working for the Nazis outside the ghetto and came up with a plan to smuggle her family to safety when she heard a rumor that the Nazis were planning to kill everyone in the ghetto. I walked out of the ghetto under my mother's skirt, and my brother walked out of the ghetto under my mother's best friend's skirt. We escaped with my mother, brother and Emil Brotfeld, whom my mother had met in the ghetto and later married.

We traveled around Poland, living as gentiles with an assumed name of Kaminsky. My mother thought that all of us could survive being together. In 1943, my mother arranged to save my brother and me. She contacted a gentile family that lived on a farm near Krakow. The woman's name was Grochalova. My mother did not have money to pay this family; thus, she agreed to an arrangement whereby, if she kept us until the end of the war, our apartment building would belong to her.

After a few months, George had to go home because while we were in church, instead of taking off his cap, he put on his cap. The people immediately started suspecting that we must be Jewish. My mother came

to pick us up, but she felt it would be difficult and possibly dangerous to take us both. Thus, she took George and left me.

The family had to hide me and decided to put me in an attic in the house. Many times they forgot to take care of me and did not feed me. In the evenings, I would climb down the ladder or out the attic window and pick up the food that was left by the pig. When the chicken came up in the attic and laid an egg, I took the egg and drank it raw. There was a hatchet in the attic. Often I wanted to take the hatchet and put it in my stomach, but I was afraid it would hurt, so I did not do it.

After about three months, my mother came back to pick me up. When she climbed up the ladder, she saw this boy with long hair, and lice. My mother said I actually was talking to my shadow . . . to my own shadow. I hadn't washed in three months.

During the war, in order to survive, George and I made cigarettes, and my mother went out every day and sold the cigarettes. This way she made some money and was able to buy some food.

At all times, we were forced to be on the move since people started to suspect we were Jewish. My hair was bleached blond so people would not recognize that I was Jewish. When Christmas came, we put a tree in the window, and left the window open so that everybody could see the beautiful tree.

In 1944, we were living outside of Warsaw. We could hear the Russians approaching the area. We went into the city of Warsaw and, at that time, the Polish underground tried to liberate the city from Nazi rule. The Polish underground consisted mainly of Jewish people that had escaped into the forest. The uprising lasted for three months. After the uprising failed, the Germans planned to eliminate the city's population. Everyone was loaded onto trains, which were headed to Auschwitz. We, as Jews, knew what was going to happen; we knew we were going to be killed. As we were waiting to board the train, my mother noticed that one of the cars had an opening on top, so we made our way toward that car. We were on the train for many hours. The train stopped for a red light. It stopped about 100 yards from the Auschwitz concentration camp. My stepfather, Emil, lifted me up over the open car and I was able to open the train car door. We jumped through the open door and escaped. I remember jumping from the train down the embankment. I was so scared to jump. When I landed, my leg hurt badly. However, I did not say anything. While we escaped, other people who were not Jewish, hesitated and then tried to escape, but by then the Gestapo was on top of the train and shooting. We were hiding on the side of the road under a

haystack. We laid there and waited for an opportunity to crawl out. When the light vanished, so did we. The train left and went in through the gates of Auschwitz. We stayed in a little village and waited for the Russians to come. We were liberated a couple of months later.

After the Holocaust:

In 1945, the war was over. We heard a siren that went on for hours and hours. My mother said, "I don't know another family that survived with two boys". Wherever we went, my mother left a note in the Jewish Federation. The note read, "Bertha Geminder is alive." We went to our hometown, Bielsko, with hopes that anyone from the family that did survive would also come to this city. Only one cousin (Joe Rottersman) survived. He went into the Russian army and he was able to follow us through these notes.

Life became much better. We had enough to eat as my stepfather was able to make some money. One day my brother and I went to a movie by ourselves. The movie was called "Gunga Din". After the movie we came home crying. The Polish boys threw stones after us screaming, "Jews go to Palestine." Following this incident, my mother decided to leave Poland.

We left Poland for Czechoslovakia. We could enter into this country, which was under Communist rule, without any difficulty. Then, we went to West Germany, the American part of Germany. We crossed the border in the wintertime climbing mountains and going through tunnels in the snow. We did this with the help of a guide who knew the way. When we crossed the border, we saw the Americans for the first time; we were in Regensburg. We ended up in an UNRRA displaced people's camp in Aglasterhausen, West Germany. The Americans treated us well, we ate well, and I learned some very important things; how to chew gum and blow bubbles, some English words, mostly words that I could not use in public.

In February of 1947, we took a boat to America and settled with extended family in Pittsburgh, Pa. Arriving in Pittsburgh, I quickly learned English. I graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1957 with a degree in electrical engineering. Following my graduation, I went into the U.S. Army and served at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.

When I was 21, I started a family tree and began to seek out other people with the name Geminder. All of my research was done using the telephone books wherever I traveled. I discovered over 200 Geminders and most are related to me. For example, in Israel, I found my closest

relative, my father's brother. My uncle was astonished at finding me alive having assumed that all other members of his family had perished in the Holocaust. I discovered other relatives in many countries, including Chile, Israel, Brazil, and the United States. I brought many people together who never knew of the existence of their relatives.

I was married in 1959 to Judy Strauss. We have three children – two daughters, Mindy and Ellen, and a son, Shia.

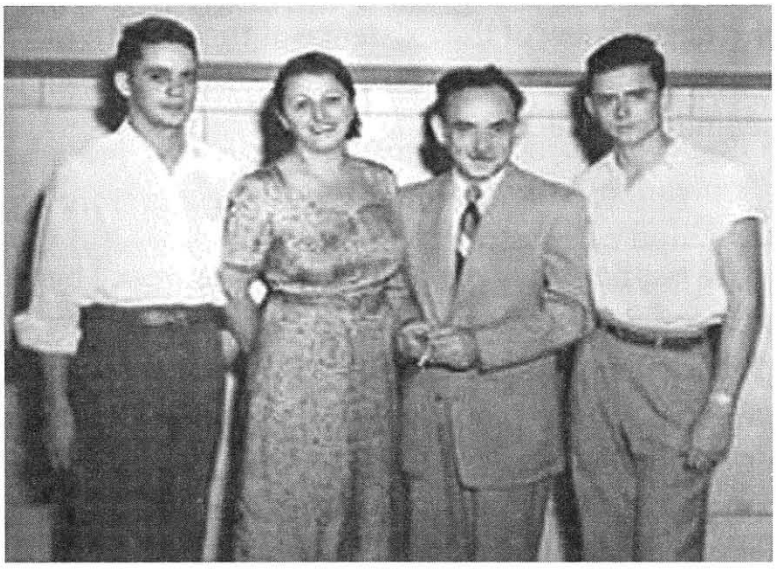
Reflections:

During the last five years of my engineering career, I began to reflect on what else I would like to do after leaving my profession as an engineer. The idea of retiring never appealed to me and is not part of my vocabulary. Rather, I spent those years considering how to transition into another career and I quickly focused on teaching.

For many years, I frequently thought of my survival as a Holocaust victim. I realized that young children were growing up in a world where the news and the memories of the Holocaust were slowly disappearing. I was determined to make certain that they would be aware that there was a Holocaust. Over the years, I have spoken about the Holocaust to thousands of middle and high school children. I thoroughly enjoy the interaction with them and have learned that many had never met a Holocaust survivor. When I began reflecting on another career I knew that teaching was my new calling.

In 2007, I received my teaching credentials and masters degree in education from Loyola Marymount University. Today, I am teaching math at Opportunities Unlimited Charter High School in Los Angeles. High school students are approaching a period of decision-making and need proper guidance. I feel I can make my greatest impact with them. I love teaching. Many friends are puzzled as to why I would devote myself to such a difficult and time-consuming profession at this stage of my life. I admit that the work is hard, much harder than my work as an engineer. However, I never measure my activity by the difficulty in doing it, but rather by the purpose and satisfaction I gain in what I am able to give to others. It is difficult to describe how much pleasure I derive from knowing that I am an important part in guiding children to prepare for the times when they will be adults.

I created my own Web site dedicated to the Holocaust, a tale of survival: www.geminder.us.



George (brother), Bertl (mom), Emil (stepfather), and me on the far right, Pittsburgh, PA, 1952.

At age 3 on the right with my brother George, age 5, Bielsko, Poland, 1938.

Geminder family: front: Judy and Bob; middle: Mindy and Ellen; back: Donella and Shia, Los Angeles, 2006.

HOW WE SURVIVED

"Meet the children from World War II's Europe who faced and survived the reality of Germany's decision to annihilate Judaism at its roots. Experience, through frightened eyes and terrifying memories, the remarkable first hand stories of survival by 52 people who lived as children through this most horrific event of the 20th century, the Holocaust. You will find yourself privileged to become a witness for posterity to these stories of Holocaust survival. REMEMBER – ZACHOR!"

Florabel Kinsler, Ph.D., MSW
Founder of many Holocaust programs in Los Angeles, CA.

"This volume of personal accounts represents the precious contribution of 52 authors who survived the Holocaust as children. Not many did. In Nazi-occupied Europe, 93% of Jewish children were murdered. Every surviving child needed a helping hand, a kind adult (or many), in order to make it. I know. Dutch Christians sheltered me. Without them, I wouldn't have had a chance. Heroism comes in many guises. It may require faith, morality, modesty, love, respect, and sacrifice. Whatever the personal ingredients, relatively few stepped forward. What did the children themselves contribute? Their silence, co-operation, intuition, facility with languages, suppression of grief and tears, delay of mourning enormous losses, the will to live. Astonishing. A child one day -- an adult the next. There could not be even one mistake. The penalty for any failure of judgment meant death. The reader should note that these traumatized children did not become killers or thieves. They struggled to become good citizens, raise families, and contribute to their communities. If survival itself was a miracle, so was surviving survival. Each one of the stories offers an opportunity to learn from a child's experiences with prejudicial hatred and pure evil, about personal fortitude and resilience, about rare individuals who helped children in need, and about courage - the courage of the survivor to share his or her story. The reader will be well rewarded."

Robert Krell, M.D.
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