

# Living the Holocaust

Second of a Series

By BARBARA BURSTIN

KL are the initials stamped on Jack Sittsamer's arm. They are the mark of the concentration camp, but he doesn't think about them. When somebody once asked him what the letters stood for, he replied they were the initials of an old girlfriend in Germany! And so it goes with this man whose eyes are bright and smile is quick, despite a tale of incredible hardship and endurance.

Sittsamer was a child of seven when war broke out in 1939, one of five children in his family who lived in Mielec, Poland, a town of 400 near Cracow.

"At first the Germans were friendly and gave candy to the children. They probably didn't know we were Jewish. But soon other Germans came and burned down the synagogues. On erev Rosh Hashana they chased the religious people from the public bath into the public slaughter house, poured gasoline on the building and burned everyone to death."

The Jewish community paid a ransom to avoid deportation. In March of 1942, however, when Sittsamer was only 12, but a big boy for his age, the Jews were ordered into the marketplace in the middle of the night.

"There was nothing we could do. There were thousands of SS on horses, motorcycles, in cars, with dogs. They were everywhere like fleas. They separated us right there. My older brother and me in one group, my mother and the three younger children in another. They killed my father right there after they had pulled the hairs out of his beard.

"They killed all the religious people, the Rabbis first. I tried to go with my mother, but they caught me and put me back in the other group. I got cards from her for two months from a place called Belgin. Then nothing."

Sittsamers's older brother was sent to a work camp and never heard from again, while he remained in Mielec working in an airplane factory. The town was turned into a concentration camp with thousands of workers being sent there from other Polish towns. During a typhoid epidemic Sittsamer lay insensible, burning with fever for 2-3 weeks.

A Jewish prisoner who was head of the barracks saved his life by reporting him on the night shift during the day and the day shift at night.

*(Editor's Note: In conjunction with community efforts in line with the NBC television three-day, nine-hour special "Holocaust", April 16-19, The Chronicle is presenting a series of personal interviews by Barbara Burstin with Holocaust survivors in the Pittsburgh area. Nationally, 15 major Jewish organizations are co-operating in the preparation of a special Holocaust kit of educational materials dealing with the Holocaust.)*

"I didn't know him. I don't know why he saved me, but he did and I survived. The whole thing was luck. But you had to fight too. I took a lot of chances. Why not? I was hungry so'd go out and try everything, steal. I knew if I got caught, I'd get shot. But I didn't care. What did I have to lose?"

"I would steal potatoes, fill up my pants and shirt and sell them for bread or shoes. I did this regularly. Not everybody did it, but a lot did. And one day when a friend who went with me got caught and was shot, I went back that same day to steal some more. I was hungry. I wasn't going to sit around, close my eyes and die."

From Mielec, Sittsamer was deported to Auschwitz where his train miraculously just sat for two days outside the gate. He never did get in and was shipped eventually to Leitmeriz in Czechoslovakia.

"The freight cars we travelled in were for gravel, cement. We were crowded in them like cattle. There wasn't much to eat, because they never stopped to give you food. You just sat in the car and waited to be unloaded. Everytime we went some place they would not open the cars until they had enough guards and dogs. Sometimes we had to wait for days."

Sittsamer finally wound up at the work camp of Gussyn II in Austria. It was worse there than any previous camp. "Even the Germans were complaining. For days we didn't get any bread. It was cold; shirts and pants fell apart. Some people were wearing cement bags.

"There were big transports of Hungarian Jews coming in who had only been out of their homes a few weeks, but they were dropping like flies. We had been working for three years; we were used to it, but we were very, very weak."



J. Sittsamer

In 1949, today.

In 1949 Jack Sittsamer arrived in Pittsburgh by train. The UJF had enabled him to come by guaranteeing his support should he not find a job. "I came with about 20 other refugees. They all had relatives or somebody waiting for them and I didn't. I was miserable. I couldn't even talk the language. I just sat at Penn Station and waited with three pennies in my pocket. The station filled and emptied twice and I just sat there. I didn't know what to do, where to go.

"Finally, a lady tried to talk to me. She must have figured out the problem, because she put me in a cab to the Federation office in the Keystone Building at that time. They explained to me that a volunteer who was supposed to meet me had confused the schedules. They were very nice and took me to my new apart-

ment on Denniston Avenue. While they got me a job, I got a better one doing sheet metal work with Tyson Metal Products and I've been there ever since."

In 1954 Sittsamer married Maxine Feldman, a Pittsburgh girl he had met at a Sunday night dance at the YM&WHA—now the Jewish Community Center. His daughter Paula, recently married Sanford Riemer of Pittsburgh and his son Murray, a recent graduate of Taylor-Allerdice is now at the University of Pittsburgh.

He is involved in the Jewish Community as an active member of B'nai Emunoh. While he came from Orthodox tradition and still belongs to an Orthodox synagogue, he admits he has changed a lot. "After what I saw, I wonder now, but I still have to believe."

He is not really sure why he allowed me to interview him. "I never told anybody what I'm telling you, not even my family. If somebody asked, I answered, but I never stretched it out. I never felt sorry for myself; I don't want anybody feeling sorry for me.

"When I first came to Pittsburgh, it was the worst time of my life, worse even than the concentration camps, because I was all alone. I had nobody. I was 19 and had no one to give me advice, no one to fall back on. I was young, what did I know? But now I have great satisfaction in what I have—a home, family, a good job, investments. I know I made it all by myself....I survived."

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Albert W. Bloom, Executive Editor

Albert D. Zecher, Business Manager

Joel Roteman, News Editor

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