

Israel Arbeiter's Biography



Israel “Izzy” Arbeiter was born in Plock Poland in 1925, the third of five brothers. Shortly after the start of World War 2 in September 1939 Plock was occupied by the Germans. In February 1941 (when Izzy was 15 years old) his family was deported from their home in Plock to a ghetto in the town of Starachowice in central Poland.

In October 1942 the Starachowice Ghetto was liquidated by the Nazis. Izzy’s parents and 8 year old brother were sent to the gas chambers at the Treblinka death-camp. Izzy and two other brothers remained at Starachowice in a slave labor camp where they were forced to work in a German ammunition factory.

While at Starachowice, Izzy contracted typhus and was held in a quarantine barracks along with several dozen other sick prisoners. On his second night there, all of the sick prisoners were removed from the barracks one-by-one and shot. Izzy survived by climbing out a window in the confusion and hiding in a nearby ditch. He was later found by his two brothers who kept him hidden and nursed him back to health with the help of another prisoner – a young girl from Lodz named Chanka Balter.

With the approach of the Red Army in July 1944, the Starachowice slave labor camp was closed and the prisoners were sent to Auschwitz where Izzy received tattoo number A-18651 on his left arm. He was

assigned to a slave labor detail that shoveled human sewage from the camp’s cesspools and carried it outside the camp.

Izzy was transported from Auschwitz in late 1944 and spent time in three additional concentration camps including a small camp at a Luftwaffe airfield in Germany near the town of Tailfingen. On 25 April 1945 (Izzy’s 20th birthday) he was liberated by allied soldiers while on a death-march in southern Germany.

Shortly after his liberation Izzy learned that Chanka Balter, the girl who had helped save his life in Starachowice had survived and was living in a displaced-persons camp in northern Germany. Izzy tracked her down and they were married shortly thereafter. Their first child was born in Germany in 1948, and soon after they received permission to immigrate to the United States. They arrived in Boston in May 1949 on a U.S. army troop transport ship that had been converted to bring European refugees to America.

In Boston Izzy established a tailoring and dry cleaning business that he ran until his retirement in 1995. He currently lives in Newton, Massachusetts with his wife Chanka (Ann). They recently celebrated their 68th wedding anniversary with their 3 children, 3 grandchildren and 2 great-grandchildren.

Throughout his life Izzy has played a leading role in Holocaust commemoration and remembrance in Boston and in the wider community. He founded the American Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors of Greater Boston and served as its president for over 40 years. He also helped found the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston and was instrumental in establishing the annual Community Holocaust

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Commemorations at Boston's Faneuil Hall and at Brandeis University. He has also spoken about his Holocaust experiences at numerous schools, churches, synagogues, civic organizations, and military bases.

Izzy has also been a strong advocate and spokesman for the Holocaust survivor community. In the 1960s and early 1970s he was invited by the German government to return to Germany to testify at Nazi war crime trials. In 2001 and again in 2008 he provided testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives regarding Holocaust era life insurance claims. He also participates in the annual board meeting of the Claims Conference; a worldwide organization based in New York that negotiates compensation payments, aid, and property restitution for victims of Nazi persecution. Also, in conjunction with Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Boston, he helped establish the Hakalah Program that supplies food, medications, and other basic needs to elderly Holocaust survivors.

In 2007 the Israel Arbeiter Essay Contest was established to promote Holocaust awareness among middle school and high school students. Each year hundreds of students in grades 6-12 participate by writing short essays on various Holocaust-related topics. The authors of the top essays are recognized at Boston's community Holocaust Remembrance Ceremony and are invited to tour the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.

In 2008 the Israel Arbeiter Gallery of Understanding was established at the Kehillah Schechter Academy near Boston. Its mission is to provide a venue where people can learn about the Holocaust, explore the causes of hatred, and promote understanding between people of different beliefs and backgrounds. The gallery will be rededicated on 1 February 2015 at its new home on the campus of Gann Academy in Waltham, MA.

In 2010 Izzy was invited back to Germany to participate in the dedication of a museum and memorial at the site of the Tailfingen concentration camp. Since then he has returned to Tailfingen several times to speak about his Holocaust experiences at schools, churches, and various other German civic venues. He was awarded the Verdeinstkruz (Order of Merit, First Class) by the German government in recognition of his efforts to foster Jewish-German understanding.

In 2013 the World War II Foundation, a non-profit organization committed to documenting the stories of the WW2 generation, produced a 1-hour video of Izzy's experiences titled "A Promise to My Father." The story centers on Izzy's return to Poland and Germany in 2012 where he visited many of the sites associated with his wartime experiences. The story was also captured in a 3 June 2012 article in the Boston Globe titled "One Last Journey into the Night."