

Ahlem Survivor - BEN SIERADZKI



“Mr. Tott is an unusual, wonderful man. As twenty-year old, he had the understanding that what he saw at that moment was so important. I think he did understand that this was not just a war, this, this was cruelty from the highest ordered and he took on his, on his own, to take that little camera and click, click, click, click.”

BEN SIERADZKI Profile:

Ben was 12-years-old when Germany invaded Poland. He lived in Zgierz, a suburb of Lodz, with his parents, his two sisters and two brothers. Shortly after the occupation of Lodz, the Sieradzki family textile factory was taken over by the Germans. Fearing they would be rounded up for forced labor, Ben's two older brothers escaped to the Soviet side of divided Poland.

In December of 1939, rather than wait to be “evacuated,” Ben's family left Zgierz in the middle of the night and boarded a train for Lodz. After arriving in the Lodz Ghetto, the family moved into an old warehouse with no sanitary or cooking facilities. Ben went to work as an apprentice in a carpentry factory making furniture for the military. Ben's sisters also went to work, one as a kitchen worker, the other in a leather factory.

In September 1942, “Sperhe” or Day Curfew went into effect as part of the “resettlement” of 25,000 Ghetto residents under the age of 10 and over the age of 65. On September 7th, German troops surrounded the building where Ben's family lived and ordered everyone into the courtyard. Ben's mother and father were selected for transport to the Chelmno extermination camp.

Not long afterwards, Ben's sister, Bluma, fell

ill with tuberculosis and was also selected for “resettlement.” In August of 1944, Ben and his sister Anna were deported to Auschwitz. After arrival, Ben and his sister both made it through the selection process and were selected to work as laborers.

Ben was in Auschwitz for about three weeks when he noticed a group of men being selected for work. He managed to sneak his way into the line to take part in the selection process and was chosen with about 1,000 other prisoners (mostly from Lodz) to be sent to Stoecken, Germany to work in the Continental Rubber Factory. In November, the men at Stoecken, including Ben, were marched to Ahelm. Ben was put to work in an underground rock quarry.

When liberated, Ben weighed only 80 pounds and was suffering from tuberculosis, typhus and malnutrition. After several weeks of recuperating in a Hanover hospital, he traveled to Bergen-Belsen and several other places to search for his sister. He found no trace of her.

Swedish Red Cross agents asked Ben if he would like to go to Sweden. He spent more than a year in various hospitals and convalescent homes in Sweden. In 1946, he learned his brothers had survived the war and were living in Poland. Ben stayed in Sweden for eight years and trained as a mechanical engineer.

In 1953, he was granted a visa to come to the United States. He worked and went to school in Los Angeles where he met and married his wife Gloria in 1955. Ben became a citizen in 1957 and moved to Berkeley, California and raised two sons. He has three granddaughters, two of which are named after his sisters.

Ben and Vernon:

Ben and Vernon's paths would cross twice before they would finally have the opportunity to meet. The first time, of course, was on the day of the liberation of Ahlem. The second time their lives would intersect was in the early 1960s, when the Iowa Beef Plant built a large facility in Dakota City, Nebraska about 3 miles from Sioux City. As head engineer, Ben supervised the equipment that went into plant. In an ironic twist, Vernon lost his job in 1968 because of the modern plant that Ben helped build. Ben also did engineering work at Swift and Co. where Vernon worked for 37 years.

But it was Ben's letter in the Railsplitter that would lead to the reunion in Albany. The friendship begun in letters was cemented in an embrace on an August day in New York. Ben, the engineer from California, and Vernon, the Iowa meat-packing plant worker, formed a quiet bond and quickly became phone confidants, traveling companions and partners in a quest to find other Ahlem survivors. Ben would say Vernon helped him rediscover a part of himself he had locked away for years, and in Ben, Vernon found a friendship and a mission that would help sustain him as he began to lose his fight against cancer.

Ahlem Survivor - SOL BEKERMUS



I was thrilled to see there is something of my life the exact minute we were reborn. The Germans tried to destroy all the evidence. But these are the exact pictures. They cannot be destroyed.

Sol Bekermus - Profile:

Sol was studying for his Bar Mitzvah and living in the small town of Brezeziny with his father, mother and two brothers when Hitler's troops invaded Poland. Shortly after occupying the town, the Germans moved Jewish residents into the Brezeziny ghetto area where most went to work for the German tailoring company Gunter Schwartz making military uniforms.

In 1941, Sol's father died from injuries sustained from a beating he received by German soldiers who wanted his wagon. In April 1942, the Germans took all children under 10 years of age and women over the age of 40 from the city. Sol's younger brother Rachmiel, his grandmother and many members of his family were never seen again. A week later, the Brezeziny ghetto was liquidated and Sol, Abe and his mother were sent to the Lodz ghetto.

In January of 1941, Sol's mother died of hunger in the Lodz ghetto. In January

1943, Sol and his brother Abe were sent to Auschwitz, then Stoecken, and on to Ahlem.

After liberation, Sol settled in Marburg, Germany and married his wife Gertrude (also formerly of Brzeziny) in 1946. He moved to the United States in June of 1948 and set up a sportswear manufacturing business in New Jersey. He has two sons and seven grandchildren.

Sol and Vernon:

"Vernon! My Angel!" That's how Sol Bekermus always greeted Vernon. Arms flung wide ready to embrace the man who stood a good head or two taller than him. Sol's feelings for Vernon were never in doubt.

Sol wasn't able to identify himself in any of Vernon's photos. His brother Abe is in three of the photos and Sol figures he may be one of those men standing in the background with their faces turned from the camera. He can't say for sure. But Sol didn't let that uncertainty dampen his support for Vernon's mission to find more of the survivors in his photos and to spread the word about what happened at Ahlem.

"When you see a man in Sioux City, Iowa, where there are not that many Jews, and this man goes around and teaches the Holocaust

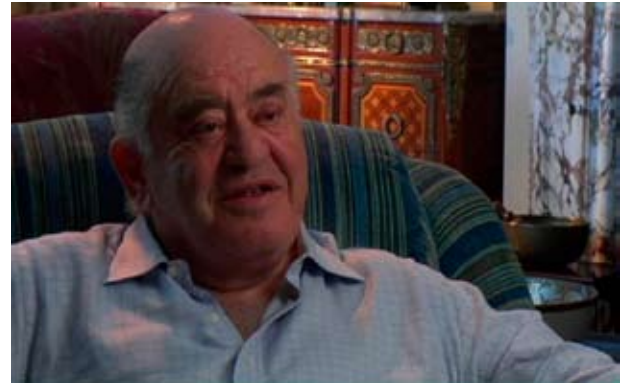
and shows it. He's an angel. It's beyond, there are no words to describe what a wonderful, wonderful thing this man has done."

While in Poland attending the 60th anniversary of the liquidation of the Lodz ghetto, Vernon found in Sol a right-hand man always at the ready. Whether it was pushing Vernon's wheelchair, adjusting Vernon's yamika at a ceremony, or translating Yiddish during a photo identification session with an Ahlem survivor, Sol was always there and eager to help.

Sol was deeply touched by Vernon's efforts to find survivors and his interest in not only hearing their stories, but preserving and sharing those stories with others. Sol simply said of Vernon, "He was a real mensch."



Ahlem Survivor - JACK TRAMIEL



“But here is a person who liberated me. It is the proof, because sometime you start doubting—‘were you in those camps?’ So proof like that, you can’t get. I’ll never forget him and my kids won’t forget him.

Jack Tramiel - Profile:

As a 10-year-old boy, Jack Tramiel was awed by the military spectacle of the German army as it marched into his hometown of Lodz, Poland. But the harsh realities of German occupation soon set in as Jack and his parents joined approximately 250,000 other Jews forced to reside in the Lodz ghetto. For five years, the Tramiel family lived in one small room in the Lodz ghetto. His father went to work as a shoemaker, while young Jack worked in a pants factory.

In 1944, Jack and his parents were herded into a railroad car and sent to Auschwitz. Upon arrival, Jack and his father were separated from Jack’s mother and lined up for the selection process. Spared the gas chamber, and deemed fit for work by Dr. Josef Mengele, the Tramiel’s were first sent to the Stoecken labor camp and then on to Ahlem.

Shortly after their arrival in Ahlem, the elder Tramiel’s health began to fail due to malnutrition. He was moved to the infirmary where he soon died. But while malnutrition may have sent his father to the infirmary, Jack believes he actually died from an injection of gasoline into his veins.

The following spring, a 16-year-old Jack Tramiel hid beneath a pile of clothing, watching warily, as Vernon and the 84th Infantry entered the camp and liberated Ahlem. After liberation, Jack remained in Germany for two years, leaving only briefly for a return trip to Lodz to visit his mother who had survived internment at Auschwitz.

Jack married his wife Helen, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, in 1947, the same year he came to the United States. In 1948, Jack joined the army and was put in charge of repairing office equipment. After leaving the army, he worked for a typewriter repair shop before buying his own shop in the Bronx. In 1955, Jack founded the Commodore Company in Toronto and began marketing the first home personal computers in 1977.

Jack and Vernon

Vernon’s gift to Jack was liberation. Jack’s gift to Vernon was immortality. In 2003, at an event celebrating the 10th anniversary of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Jack and Helen Tramiel donated \$100,000 to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Vernon’s honor.

