

Max Eisen: A Story of Courage and Gratitude

My octogenarian friend and Holocaust survivor Max Eisen maintains a schedule that most people half his age could not keep up with. In a given week, Max can be found speaking to grade school children, high school and university students, military officers, policeman, Christian and Muslim groups - the list is endless.

But Max's passion is educating young people. Over the past decade, he has crisscrossed the country telling his story to thousands of Canadian high school and university students and has participated in ten March of the Living trips to Poland and Israel. The students sit spellbound as Max shares his story, his wisdom, his insight and the many lessons he hopes they will glean from his experience.

Under the auspices of Toronto's Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre, Max is one of a group of Holocaust survivors who has dedicated the latter part of his life to teaching the next generation. They are not only survivors - they are educators, historians, philosophers, and, most significantly, imparters of critically important morals and ethics to the next generation

I remember being with Max at Queen's University for a March of the Living educators training weekend. As a Torah was being brought into the conference centre, Max noticed the perplexed student staff looking at this exotic, unfamiliar object, clothed in velvet with two wooded circular poles protruding from each end.

Surrounded by professional educators, teachers and rabbis, Max was the only one to speak.

“This is a Torah,” he patiently explained to the young students, “the Hebrew bible, the holiest book of the Jewish people and it’s written on parchment, on scrolls attached to these wooden poles inside. You know when the Nazis came into Europe, they burned thousands of Torahs, holy scrolls, just like this one. They say, when you first burn books, eventually you will end up burning people. And that’s exactly what the Nazis did.”

The students began to ask Max questions, and the conversation began – and once again these students, like thousands of others – were privileged to hear Max’s lessons about life.

I too have heard Max share his story on numerous occasions. While his story spans over eight decades, a few moments - among many - stand out.



Max Eisen

It was the spring of 1944, the first night of Pesach to be exact. Fifteen-year-old Max and his family were celebrating the Seder together in his home-town of Moldava (then part of Hungary), singing songs about the delivery of the Children of Israel from slavery to freedom. Hours later their door was kicked in by Hungarian gendarmes - they were thrown out of their homes and eventually deported to Auschwitz where almost all of Max's family and extended family, comprising some 60 souls, were murdered.

At this point Max always reminds the students about how fragile democracy is - in any country. "One moment we were free, singing songs about our liberation. And the next moment, we were in chains, with every single one of our basic human rights brutally taken away from us."

Max also recalls his beloved dog Farkas (wolf in Hungarian). This beautiful Alsatian was Max's most loyal friend. (To this day, Max cannot bring himself to use the term German Shepherd, the better known name for the breed.) During the entire process of their expulsion from their homes, the dog barked frantically, understanding something was desperately wrong. It was a bark Max would never forget.

Max was liberated from the Nazi concentration camp of Ebensee on May 6th, 1945 (two days before the end of the war) by members of the 761st Tank Battalion, comprised of African-American soldiers in the then segregated American army.

The troops were shocked by the piles of bodies they saw, and by the condition of the sick and emaciated prisoners, many of them dying in front of their eyes. "The black soldiers were horrified," Max recalled, "I'll never forget how big their eyes were."

Among the liberators was a young Sgt. Johnnie Stevens – who Max was reunited with more than 5 decades later, when Max was finally able to express his gratitude for being given his freedom.



Max Eisen and his Liberator Sgt. Johnnie Stevens

"Without the 761st, I would not be here to tell the story" he would say many times.

After liberation, Max returned to his hometown. His trusted (and sorely missed) canine friend was gone, but not the neighbours who had moved into his home and even refused to offer the frail 16-year-old Auschwitz survivor a glass of water. To this day, Max still thinks about his loyal dog and the contrast to his perfidious neighbors.

But Max almost did not live to see his day of liberation.

To survive the Holocaust, hundreds of doors had to open up for you, each in a specific order, at a specific time. If one of those doors failed to open – your life was over.

Here are two such doors:

Max arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau when he was only 15 years of age. He was immediately assigned to a work detail draining swamps in the vicinity of the camp.

Unfortunately, on one work detail, an SS officer beat Max unconscious. His fellow prisoners carried the inert boy to the Auschwitz infirmary where his fate was all but sealed.

But then a door opened up for Max. Dr. Tadeusz Orzeszko, the kindly Polish doctor in charge of the clinic, took pity on Max. He saved him from certain death, nursed him back to health, and engaged him to be his assistant. What Max did not know, was that Dr. Orzeszko was also a member of the Polish resistance, carrying on activities even in the heart of this notorious death camp.



[Pictures of Dr. Tadeusz Orzeszko from the Auschwitz Museum taken upon his arrival.](#)

One freezing night - on January 18, 1945 - Max and many of his fellow prisoners were forced to march out of Auschwitz, herded by SS guards with dogs and guns. Wearing only wooden clogs and slipping in the snow, many were shot when they could not keep up. Max walked for four or five days without food or water only managing to pick up a few handfuls of snow for moisture on the way. From time to time, a prisoner would just drop dead, but the guard would dispatch a bullet to the fallen body just to be sure.

Eventually they were loaded onto open metal boxcars. When they arrived in Plzen (in the western Czech republic) some kindly Czechs appeared on the overhead bridge, throwing pieces of bread into the open boxcars, but too far away for Max to reach them. The guards shouted: "Don't throw any bread. These are Jews." But the Czechs kept on throwing bread until the guards began to shoot at them.

For Max this was one of the most important moments of his life. After all he had been through, to learn there were still decent people left in the world – this began to restore the young boy’s faith in the humanity.

“It was like a hand reaching out to me...” Max recalled.

Max never forgot the goodness of the people of Plzen, the faces of the men of the 761st battalion, and the kindness showed to him by Dr. Orzeszko, for whom he felt a debt of gratitude every day of his life.

Max always wondered what happened to Dr. Orzeszko, if he had survived the war, and how could he ever repay him. On the 2008 March of the Living, Agnieszka Chrabolowska a young Polish student on our bus, approached Piotr Cywinski, the Director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, with a request for information on Dr. Orzeszko. A few days later, we were faxed a document from the museum containing the testimony of Dr. Orzeszko which he had submitted to the authorities in 1946. On the bus in Poland, Max learned that the good doctor had indeed survived the war, and had later passed away in 1974 in Radom at 67 years of age.

With the help of Polish Holocaust survivor and hidden child Renata Zajdman, we tracked down Dr. Orzeszko’s remaining family members. On a trip with the Simon Wiesenthal Centre last year, Max met the members of Dr. Orzeszko’s family for the first time. They had no idea about the heroic efforts of their father and grandfather in saving Max’s life, and were moved to tears to hear about his brave act.

On March 15th, 2011, Max received a phone call. (“It was my 28th birthday “ – Max recalled to me. “You see we Jews read from right to left, so that’s how 82 becomes 28”, he joked.) The call came from Rome, Italy. It was Dr. Orzeszko’s son, Jan Orzeszko, a retired diplomat for the Polish government, calling him to wish him a happy birthday.

Max was grateful, but also a little surprised. Sensing this, Jan said, “I am calling you on your birthday, because we are all family now.” Max could not hold back the tears.



Pictured are Holocaust Survivor Max Eisen (2nd from Right) with family of rescuer: Danuta Baluk, daughter Julia & Jan Orzeszko

The Nazis were intent on building the Third Reich – a vicious empire that was to last a thousand years. Their demonic plans have now been consigned to the dustbin of history.

But the courage of the members of the 761st Battalion, the kindness expressed by the people of Plzen and by a brave Polish doctor to a young Jewish boy, live on in the thankful eyes of Max Eisen every time he tells the story.

Our sages teach us that the deeds of the righteous continue to resonate long after their deaths. Our scriptures teach us that love can overcome even death. (Song of Songs 8:6).

Long into the future, the memory of these events and of one Polish doctor's noble deed will hold a treasured place in the hearts of the family of Max Eisen and of Dr. Orzeszko's descendants - and within the hearts of everyone privileged to hear this story of courage and gratitude.

Eli Rubenstein is National Director of March of the Living Canada, a program funded by UJA Federation and UJA Federations Canada, as well as founder of the Canadian March of Remembrance and Hope program.

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