

Survivor Bios

Aaron Elster

Aaron Elster was born in 1933 in the small northeastern village of Sokolow-Podlaski in Poland. Aaron lived in the Sokolow Ghetto with his two sisters, mother, and father until the liquidation of the ghetto in September, 1942. He escaped the liquidation and hid in various surrounding farms. Eventually, Aaron found refuge in the attic of a Polish family, where he hid for two years until the war's end. After the war, Aaron lived in several orphanages throughout Poland, and eventually was smuggled out of Poland to various DP camps in West Germany. Aaron Elster and his sister came to the United States in June of 1947. He was educated in Chicago and served in the armed forces in Korea. Aaron is married and has 2 sons and 2 grandchildren. He is an active member of the community, serving as Co-Chairman of the Speakers' Bureau and Vice President at the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center. Additionally, he serves as Chairman of the Speakers' Bureau for the Hidden Children Association. He is the co-author of *I Still See Her Haunting Eyes*, which chronicles his Holocaust experiences. Aaron continues to speak extensively on the local and state level about his experiences and lessons of the Holocaust.

Fritzie Fritzshall

Fritzie Fritzshall was born in 1929 in Klucharka, Czechoslovakia. After her town fell under Nazi occupation, Fritzie, her mother, and two brothers were deported to the Auschwitz – Birkenau extermination camp. She was only thirteen years old. Close to the end of the war, Fritzie was moved to a sub camp of Auschwitz where she worked as a slave laborer in a factory. In 1945, she was finally liberated by the Russian army, while on the death march from Auschwitz. After the war, in 1946, Fritzie came to the United States and was reunited with her father, who had been able to escape the Holocaust. Her mother, two younger brothers, and other family members all perished. Fritzie is an active member of the community, serving as President of the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center. Fritzie continues to speak extensively on the local and state level about her experiences and lessons of the Holocaust. In 2015, Fritzie was awarded the Bertha Honoré Palmer Making History Award for Distinction in Civic Leadership from the Chicago History Museum.

Samuel R. Harris

Samuel R. Harris (born Szlamek Rzeznik) is one of the youngest survivors of the concentration camps during the Holocaust. Born in Deblin, Poland, in 1935, he was just four years old when the war came to his town. Having lost his parents and most of his family during the Holocaust, Sam survived by hiding, from the ages of seven to nine-and-a-half, in the Deblin and Czestochowa concentration camps. Although an orphan when he arrived in the USA at the age of twelve, Sam was filled with hope about the possibilities awaiting him. Through the Jewish Children's Bureau in Chicago, Sam was adopted by Dr. Ellis and Mrs. Harriet Harris of Northbrook. He went to New Trier High School and was diligent in his studies and intense in athletic competition. College and a career, marriage and fatherhood followed, but in 1981 he reconnected with his past at the World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Jerusalem. Today he speaks to thousands of children and adults annually. Sam was an instrumental force behind the building of the 65,000 square-foot Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, of which he is President Emeritus. In 2014, Sam was the proud recipient of the Ellis Island Medal of Honor.

Janine Oberrotman

Janine Oberrotman, born in Lvov, Poland, was fifteen years old when the Germans invaded her hometown and when the pogroms, random killings, and round-ups began. Her father found her a job in construction to avoid deportation. But soon, that job could no longer secure her safety, and Janine was forced from hiding place to hiding place to avoid capture. For a few days she found shelter at the home of a kind Polish lady. Subsequently she hid at the German commandant's villa, which was under construction; in an armoire with a secret entrance to the underground; and under a dirt road beneath a camouflaged "patch." After her escape from the ghetto, while living in a Ukrainian village under an assumed name, Janine was denounced by a local woman and arrested, interrogated, and jailed. Subsequently, she was deported to forced labor in Stuttgart. Liberated in 1945, she hitchhiked to Paris and immigrated to the United States in 1953.

Adina Sella

Adina Sella was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1935. In 1939, her father was arrested by the Gestapo along with other Jewish men of Polish descent. Her mother, with Adina and her brother in tow, obtained transit visas for the family to go to Italy and secured her father's release. The family settled in Arezzo, Italy, and Adina and her brother began attending a convent school. The nuns began teaching the family Catholic practices and mannerisms, to help them blend into the Catholic town. When Italy joined the war with Germany, the underground moved the family to an abandoned house in a tiny farming village. The family remained there for several years, begging for food from the surrounding farms. In 1944, officers from the retreating German army set up camp in the farm house Adina lived in. They paid the family little notice beyond asking Adina's mother to cook for them. As the soldiers prepared to leave, they told the family that the house would be leveled as part of their retreat. The family fled to the woods, where they soon found themselves between the trenches of the German and British armies. A British soldier helped lead them into the British trench, where they were given bread and chocolate. The family returned to Arezzo and moved back into their apartment. Inspired in part by an encounter with the British Army's Jewish Brigade in Arezzo, the family moved to British Mandate Palestine in 1945. Adina moved to the US in 1963, living in Seattle and New York before coming to Chicago.

Israel Starck

Israel Starck was born in 1929 in the Carpatho-Ruthenia region of Eastern Europe, in the town of Podhoryan – Munkács, near the chain of the Carpathian Mountains, then a part of the Czechoslovakian Republic. In 1939 the region reverted back to the control of the Hungarian Empire. In March 1944 the country was occupied by the invading German forces. Israel – then just 14 years old – and his entire family were deported by the Nazis to Auschwitz-Birkenau just one month later. His parents perished in the camps. Over the next year Israel was interned in three more concentration camps: Mathausen, Melk, and Ebensee. He was liberated by the American armed forces on May 6, 1945, in Ebensee. Eventually he, together with other war orphans, was sponsored entry to the United States by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, and arrived to Chicago in 1948. Israel is the author of *A Boy Named 68818*.

Matus Stolov

Matus Stolov was born in Minsk, Belarus, in 1928, the son of Polish Jewish parents who had fled to Russia after the 1917 revolution to build a socialist utopia. When Germany invaded in June 1941, Matus, his

mother, and his older brother tried to escape eastward. They ran for a train and the two sons were able to jump aboard; when the mother couldn't make it, Matus jumped down and stayed with her. In July, a ghetto was established in Minsk containing 100,000 Jews from the region and later 35,000 Jews deported from Germany, Bohemia, and Moravia. By the fall of 1942, Matus' aunt arranged for false papers for Matus and his mother through the underground. Walking at night, they reached the partisans and were sent with a group of underground fighters into the unoccupied zone of the Soviet Union. Walking for over a month and eating whatever food they could find, they eventually crossed the front line and met Soviet soldiers who effectively liberated them. After the war, they returned to Minsk and Matus resumed his education. Despite obstacles because he was Jewish, he became an engineer. After deciding to emigrate as a refusenik, the family was increasingly persecuted until finally being allowed to leave. The Stolov family arrived in Chicago in April 1982 on the second day of Passover and celebrated their first Seder.