

Jakob Kryszek and Sala Sarna Kryszek Biographies of Two Oregon Holocaust Survivors

Oregon has a community of Holocaust survivors. Several survivors are active in the museum's Speakers' Bureau and share their memories as models of endurance, strength, courage and achievement. The stories below are two examples of such endurance and courage.

SALA SARNA KRYSZEK A Remembrance by Jerry Kryszek, Sala's son

Sala was born November 15, 1926, to Aaron and Esther Sarna. She grew up in the small town of Warta, Poland, with three brothers and three sisters. Life was difficult in pre-war Poland. There was a great deal of prejudice against Jews. Yet Aaron and Esther raised their children in an observant and loving Jewish home. Sabbath was a special family time when they shared Sabbath dinner, sang, and included less fortunate friends in their celebration. Sala loved to sing and dance, having inherited her beautiful voice from her father. Sadly, Sala's mother died when she was eight.

The Second World War began in 1939. Shortly after, her father remarried. At first the Nazis allowed the family to remain in Warta, but they were eventually forced to leave home and move into the Lodz ghetto. Everyone had to work hard just to survive. Fortunately, they had food, because her father and older brother worked in a bakery.

Later, the Nazis liquidated the Lodz ghetto. Men were separated from women, children. The sisters were torn from the rest of the family and found themselves on a torturous journey to the Auschwitz death camp. Sala and her sisters stuck together – their survival throughout the war seemed to depend on it. Yet they never revealed their true relationship to anyone for fear they would be split apart.

Conditions at Auschwitz were horrifying. The girls were housed in an overcrowded barrack near the gas chambers. They knew their existence was precarious. Sala was frequently beaten. Hunger was ever present. Food was so scarce that she risked

being shot to dig potatoes with her bare hands or scavenge food from garbage. She shared what little she found with family and friends in the camp.

The only way Sala could survive was to leave Auschwitz. Escape was impossible, but an opportunity appeared when a farmer came to find workers. Initially, Sala was selected but the other sisters were not. She took an unbelievable chance when she refused to go without them, and it paid off [and they all went together].

Life on the farm was difficult for the girls, but better than Auschwitz. Work in the fields was hard. They had little clothing and only rags for their feet, but were fed three meals a day. The sisters worked in many other places after the farm. Conditions were insufferable, but the alternative was worse.

When Germany's defeat seemed inevitable, Sala, her sisters, and many others were forcemarched through winter snows to a camp. The Nazis were preparing to kill them all when they were liberated by the Russian Army.

With the war still raging and persecution rampant, a Jewish Russian officer suggested the girls work in a hospital to avoid harm by soldiers or deportation to Russia. Sala worked as a nurse's aid until a doctor advised her sisters to flee to Poland for their safety.

After the war, Sala returned to Lodz searching for family. She discovered that her stepmother and a brother died in the camps. Another brother was shot at Bergen-Belsen two days before liberation. His "crime" was taking two potatoes from a cart to fend off starvation. Sala's father survived to see Bergen-Belsen liberated, only to die from typhus before doctors could help him.

Sala's younger brother was alive in Hanover, Germany. She followed one of her sisters there, where she met and married Jakob Kryszek. They lived in Hanover until moving to Portland in 1952, joining one sister and her brother. The couple arrived with few possessions and no knowledge of the English language. Jakob hoped to find work in the knitting industry, but economic conditions were tough. Sala was luckier, finding work first at Acme Rag and later in a cannery. Eventually, Jakob also found work and the other two sisters arrived in Portland. In 1954, my parents had my brother Albert. Three years later, they had me. From then on, Jakob and Sala worked very hard, in time building a family business.

Sala was generous, kind, and a loving wife and mother who cared about her friends, family and the community. She passed away in 1986.

Jakob Kryszek (1918 - 2019)

As Told by Jakob Kryszek to Selma Duckler

Germany invaded Poland in 1939 bringing at least three million Polish Jews under German control.

Twenty-one year old Jakob Kryszek and his entire family – brothers and sisters, mother, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins – were forced out of their homes into the Lodz Ghetto, one of the hundreds of ghettos created by the Nazis to control the Jewish population.

Jakob volunteered to work for extra food rations to help feed his starving family. Forced by the Nazis to work in Germany, he was assigned to a construction crew to build a super highway to Berlin. The crew was also forced to build factories and undertake repairs that were valuable to the Nazi army. They became experts in their work.

A tough and strong Nazi foreman oversaw the work, making sure that it was done properly and on time. In Jakob's words, "When he returned from his meals, he sometimes brought back some leftovers, perhaps a half sandwich, and hid it. With a gesture, I understood it was for me. Perhaps he did the same for others. I had no way of knowing, and I would never know. One would not dare mention such a thing because of terrible consequences. I developed some courage and said to him, 'Can I ask you a question?' He said, 'Yes.' Germany, I told him, is the smartest of nations; how could it have come to this? He replied, 'Germany went up a ladder. At the top there was no place to go, but going down happens very quickly.' In those terrible times, here was a man with compassion, feeling and courage."

Jakob survived five concentration camps, narrowly escaping death many times. At one point, the construction crew was sent to the killing camp of Birkenau, where they were put in line for the gas chambers. A Nazi official recognized their worth and pulled them out of the line so that they could continue working.

Another time Jakob remembers traveling on a packed cattle car train and being shot when bullets hit the train. He pulled himself under the train and could hear two dear friends calling, "Jakob, Jakob, where are you?" When they found him, he told them he was dying, and they must use this opportunity to run and to escape. But they would not leave him. They peeled wood from the sides of the train and made him a makeshift splint. They lifted him onto a truck that took him to a nearby concentration camp and hospital. A Polish doctor, who was also a prisoner, knew the Nazi doctor would select the seriously injured to be killed. Quickly before the Nazi doctor gave orders, he said, "I want to take a look at this fracture." This Polish doctor spared Jakob from being selected by the Nazi doctor. He, along with Jakob's friends, gave him the gift of life.

The Allies liberated Jakob at the end of the war from the German camp called Dora. Sick and on crutches, he was sent back to Poland where he learned that all of his family had been killed in trucks filled with deadly gas.

One of Jakob Kryszek's heroes is General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces of Europe, who went into the concentration camps after the war and ordered Allied military photographers to film and photograph the evidence of the inhumane conditions of the camps. This was compiled as evidence at the Nuremberg trials to show that the Nazis had perpetrated heinous crimes against humanity. Eisenhower placed himself in many of the films to prove the camps really existed, saying, "fifty years from now, they'll say, 'it never happened.'"

Jakob left Poland and went to Hannover, Germany to begin to heal and start anew. He married Sala Sarna, also a survivor of the concentration camps. They had a beautiful wedding and invited other survivors to celebrate their happiness at surviving the war.

Sala and Jakob moved to Portland in 1952 where they had two children and made a life for themselves. After Sala's death in 1986 Jakob began this art and writing contest to honor her memory and to promote Holocaust education and remembrance. Jakob was actively involved with the art and writing contest until his death in May of 2019.