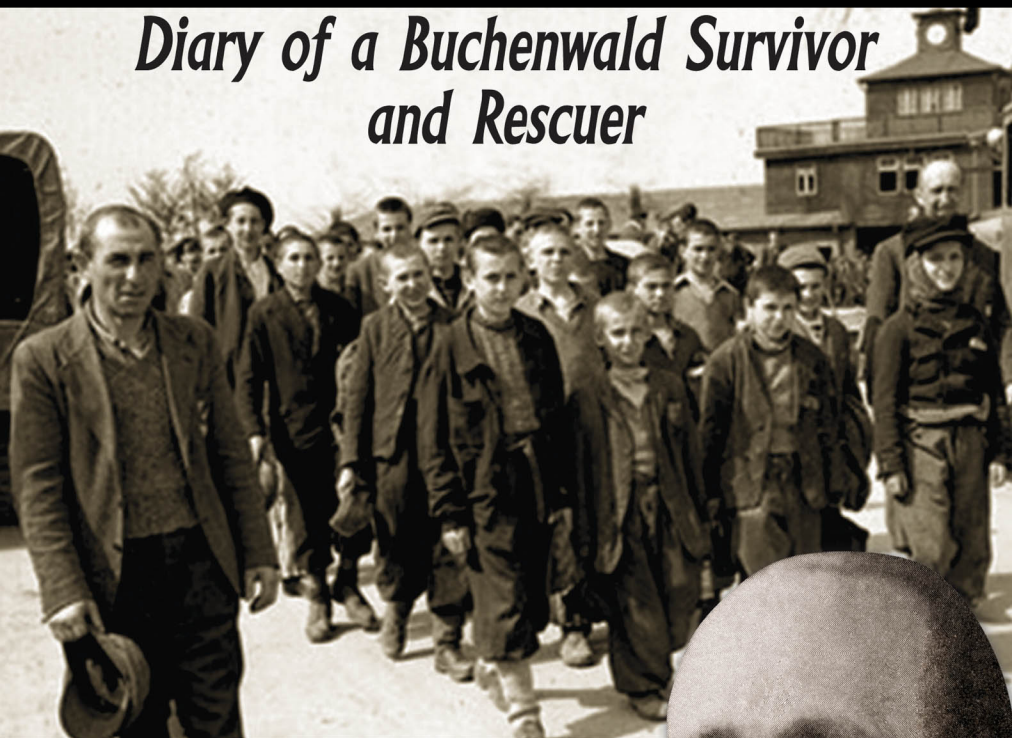


SAVING CHILDREN

*Diary of a Buchenwald Survivor
and Rescuer*



Jack Werber

With William B. Helmreich

With a new preface by William B. Helmreich
and a new afterword by Martin Werber



SAVING CHILDREN



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

SAVING CHILDREN

*Diary of a Buchenwald Survivor
and Rescuer*

Jack Werber

With William B. Helmreich

With a new preface by William B. Helmreich
and a new afterword by Martin Werber

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1996 by Transaction Publishers

Published 2017 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

New material this edition copyright © 2014 by Taylor & Francis.

Copyright © 1996 by Taylor & Francis.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 2013044866

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Werber, Jack, author.

Saving children : diary of a Buchenwald survivor and rescuer / Jack Werber with William B. Helmreich ; with a new preface by William B. Helmreich and an afterword by Martin Werber.

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-4128-5379-8

1. Jews--Poland--Radom (Wojewsdztwo Mazowieckie)--Biography.
2. Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)--Poland--Radom (Wojewsdztwo Mazowieckie)--Personal narratives. 3. Werber, Jack. 4. Buchenwald (Concentration camp) 5. Radom (Wojewsdztwo Mazowieckie, Poland)--Biography. I. Helmreich, William B, author. II. Title.

DS134.72.W438A3 2014

940.53'18092--dc23

[B]

2013044866

ISBN 13: 978-1-4128-5379-8 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 978-1-56000-250-5 (hbk)

For My Children

Martin and Bracha	David and Ellie
and their children,	and their children,
Chava, Benjamin, and Talia	Shoshana, Tovah, and Joshua
and to all their future generations	



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

*Master of the Universe, send us our Messiah, for
we have no more strength to suffer. Show me a
sign, O God. Otherwise... otherwise... I rebel
against Thee. If Thou dost not keep The Covenant,
Then neither will I keep that Promise, and it is all
over, we are through being Thy chosen people,
Thy peculiar treasure.*

—The Rebbe of Kotzk,
from Chaim Potok's *The Promise*



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Contents

Preface to the Paperback Edition, by William B. Helmreich	xi
Preface, by William B. Helmreich	xv
Introduction	1
1. Growing Up in Radom	5
2. The Beginning of the End: Arrest and Deportation	25
3. Buchenwald: The First Few Months	33
4. Working and Surviving	43
5. Daily Life in Buchenwald	59
6. I Join the Underground	73
7. Saving the Children	91
8. Free at Last	111
Afterword, by Martin Werber	131

Photos

follow page 57



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Preface to the Paperback Edition

On May 11, 2010, fifteen years after the publication by Transaction Publishers of *Saving Children*, a conference was held at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Its purpose was to honor the memory of Jack Werber, who risked his life as a member of the Buchenwald underground to help save the lives of some 700 children between the ages of six and sixteen who had been incarcerated there. Dozens of “children” came to Jerusalem to commemorate what took place and to honor Jack’s memory as well as those of others involved in this heroic effort.

Speakers included Israel Meir Lau, former chief rabbi of Israel, chairman of the Yad Vashem Council, and himself a child survivor of Buchenwald; Avner Shalev, chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate; and Martin Werber, Jack’s son, whose moving and highly informative afterword also graces this new edition of the book.

Yad Vashem translated Werber’s volume into Hebrew after carefully reviewing it for historical accuracy and determining that it was a major contribution to the literature on the Holocaust. This decision gave the work a crucial new audience in Israel, including schoolchildren throughout the country. One of the goals was to make readers aware of the degree to which people were willing to risk their lives to save others.

The importance of this cannot be underscored, for once the spirit of altruism disappears the inner core of society becomes a hollow shell, one in which people care only about themselves. Werber and others like him demonstrated that even in the darkest of times, there are those who step forward and sacrifice themselves so that others may live. Samuel and Pearl Oliner examined the lives of hundreds of people who acted in similar fashion during the Nazi era. They concluded, in their book, *The Altruistic Personality*, that the major factor in their decision to do so was based

on how they were raised by their parents, the values that were transmitted to them as children.

This is why it is so important that stories like Jack's have as wide a distribution as possible. When children today read about these role models they can be inspired to emulate them. When they don't, then instincts of self-preservation predominate. And when that happens society is greatly diminished, with its very existence threatened. We need to challenge the popular notion that people are basically out for themselves.

Yet the justification for helping others isn't only altruistic; it's pragmatic as well. In a landmark work, Terence DePres, author of *The Survivor*, demonstrated that those who helped others had a better chance of surviving because their actions infused their own lives with meaning and increased their ability to withstand the horrors they experienced. Indeed, Jack Werber explained that helping the children when they arrived at Buchenwald gave him a purpose to live when he learned, after years in Buchenwald, that his own wife and child had perished in the Holocaust.

Two years ago, I received a very strange email. It was addressed to me as "Helmreich" and signed "Avner," meaning Avner Shalev, Yad Vashem's director. The gist of it was that one of the book's photos was not accurate and that if "we are going to be able to continue perpetrating our lies about the Holocaust, we need to do better fact-checking." After doing some fact-checking of my own, I discovered that the letter was a complete fabrication. It had been sent by Holocaust deniers based in England with the purpose of creating divisiveness between myself and Avner Shalev.

This incident highlights one of the major problems we face today. There are many Holocaust deniers out there intent on persuading people that the Holocaust is a myth invented by Jews and their sympathizers. As such it is critical that the deniers' lies be challenged and exposed. That's why an eyewitness account by someone like Jack Werber is so important, all the more so because it gives actual names and many details that only those present could have known about. When I interviewed several hundred survivors for my own book on the Holocaust, *Against All Odds*,

I made certain to use real names, so that the accounts could not be easily challenged.

One significant development since 1995, when *Saving Children* first appeared, is that centers, museums, and educational programs devoted to the Holocaust have continued to grow and proliferate. They have ensured that the Holocaust remains a potent educational tool for new generations who might otherwise have little awareness of what transpired during those terrible times.

Yet even this trend cannot address the long-term problem—as time goes on, the memory of the Holocaust continues to fade because the generation that experienced it is dying out. This raises a crucial question: How can we perpetuate the importance of the Holocaust? Elie Wiesel posed this dilemma in the form of a double-edged sword (I’m paraphrasing here): If the Holocaust is unique, then what can the world learn from it? And if it isn’t unique why focus on it so much?

The answer lies somewhere between the two, I think, but that is a different subject. The real question is how do we keep these and other issues surrounding the Holocaust alive? The only choice is to be much more inclusive, to include more and more peoples like the Tutsis, Hutus, animist Sudanese, Copts, and the earlier cases of the Armenians, Biafrans, Cambodians, and Bosnians in the general discussion. Unless this is done, the genocide against the Jews will be a sidebar 100 years from now. Even today, the Jewish community has difficulty making these events relevant to many of its grandchildren and certainly great-grandchildren. In practical terms, this means that Holocaust-based organizations will need a more inclusive and broader philosophy and will have to bring in other groups and give them decision-making roles on boards and committees.

Only if they work together can oppressed groups raise the level of consciousness of the world.

William B. Helmreich
August 2013



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Preface

This is a remarkable story of survival, resistance, and courage. Jack Werber spent five and one-half years in Buchenwald, one of Hitler's most notorious camps. More than 56,000 inmates were put to death there and, out of 3,200 Polish prisoners who entered the camp together with Werber, only eleven were alive by war's end. Of those, he was the only Jew.

Survival alone in the face of such overwhelming odds would be enough to qualify Werber's story as unusual. But there is more, far more. Jack Werber spent most of those years as an active member of the political Underground. Buchenwald was established in 1937 as a men-only camp for non-Jewish German political prisoners and for professional criminals. These two groups fought for control of the camp throughout the war, with the politicals finally gaining the upper hand in 1942. Most of the Underground members were German socialists and the majority were not Jewish. Werber was one of a very small group of Polish Jews who were invited to join.

Werber was married when the war broke out in 1939. He lived in Radom with his wife and fourteen-month-old daughter, working in a family business. By the end of that year he had been deported to Buchenwald. Until 1944, he had no idea as to what became of his family. Then, one day, a Polish prisoner who knew Werber from before the war arrived at the camp. He told Werber the terrible news. His wife and daughter, his parents, and all of his remaining brothers and sisters in Radom had been deported and gassed in the Treblinka extermination camp. And they had died believing that Jack Werber was also dead, because the Nazis had perpetrated a cruel hoax by selling his "ashes" to them early

in the war.

Throughout the long years in Buchenwald, Werber had clung to the hope that the members of his family had, by some miracle, survived. Now that hope was shattered and he fell into a deep depression. It seemed there was no longer a purpose to life.

That is, until he saw the children.

In late 1944, transports from other concentration camps and from various ghettos began arriving in Buchenwald. Included among these new arrivals were perhaps 700 children, ranging in age from six to sixteen. Seeing them re-awakened a spark in Werber. He decided to become involved to see if he could somehow help them avoid the fate of his beloved daughter. That was the day his life changed.

Together with several other members of the Underground, he developed a strategy to save these children. They were hidden in various barracks, given false working papers, and protected, at great risk, by the Underground. Because of these heroic efforts, almost all of them, including Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel, were saved.

Feeding and sheltering them was not enough, however. These were children who had seen death every day and their souls needed to be nourished if they were to survive as human beings. And so, a school was established, right under the noses of the Nazis! Incredibly, classes were set up in the barracks where Jewish history, music, and the Hebrew language were taught by inmates who risked their lives daily for the children.

It is hard to imagine that such activities could go on in a camp where hundreds were dying every day, but they did. Remarkably, there were choir performances, plays, and poetry readings. The children stood up and acted, usually on top of several tables that had been put together, and the inmates were their audiences.

Jack Werber lived two lives. The first began on September 28, 1914, in Radom, Poland, where he was born and raised. The second started on April 11, 1945, the day of his liberation from Buchenwald and the day he ceased to be inmate #7197. In this context it needs to be emphasized that, contrary to popular opinion, it was the members of the Underground and not American