

**MICHAEL BORNSTEIN
AND DEBBIE BORNSTEIN HOLINSTAT**

SURVIVORS CLUB

**THE TRUE STORY OF A VERY YOUNG
PRISONER OF AUSCHWITZ**

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From the Preface: "This picture is taken from movies made by the Soviet army after they liberated Auschwitz on January 27, 1945. Nowadays, you can easily find snippets from these films online. In the image, I am with a group of children (front row right) and we are showing the cameraman the inmate numbers tattooed on our arms when we arrived at the camp."

A SURVIVORS CLUB PHOTO ALBUM



Sophie Jonisch Bornstein with Michael in Żarki, Poland, after the German invasion.

Michael's father, Israel Bornstein.





Prewar photo of Żarki's main synagogue and adjoining square.



Before the war, workers outside the Jonisch family's leather-curing factory in Żarki, Poland.



The Friday market in Žarki in the 1930s, with the Catholic church in the background.



Undated photograph from 1930s Žarki. From left: Unknown, Esther Jonisch, Hilda Jonisch Wygocka, possibly Joseph Wygocka (Hilda's first husband), Sophie Jonisch Bornstein.



Ruth's cousin Eli Zborowski (left) was photographed disguised as a woman on the streets of Żarki. He used this disguise regularly to sneak out of hiding and is pictured here alongside Jozef Kolacz, a farmer who helped to hide Eli and other relatives.



A group of Jewish men and older boys report for work inside the Žarki ghetto.



Even on his wedding day in 1942, Michael's uncle David Jonisch was forced to wear an armband identifying him as a Jew in Žarki. From left: David; his mother, Esther; and his bride, Gutia.

New arrivals
at Auschwitz
disembarking
from the boxcars
of the transport
trains. On the
horizon, the
chimneys of two
crematoria are
visible to the left
and right.



The selection process under way at Auschwitz in 1944, separating those chosen for slave labor and those who will be executed in the gas chambers.



A Kommando from the Kanada warehouse, wearing a striped uniform (right), stands near this group of women and children, ready to begin collecting the belongings the new arrivals will soon be forced to abandon.



A view of the Auschwitz gate in the foreground with the sign reading ARBEIT MACHT FREI (Work makes you free), as well as the electrified fences. In the background, a view of the kitchen barracks.



An aerial view of Auschwitz barracks, c. 1945.



An Auschwitz women's barracks in January 1945. Women slept three to a bed-shelf.



Soviet soldiers captured this image of Bobeshi, Michael's grandmother Dora (center), carrying him out of Auschwitz in 1945.



This image of Michael (at far right) and other child survivors of Auschwitz is another still from film footage taken days after their liberation in January 1945.



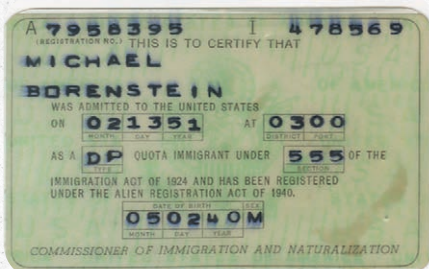
Michael and five other surviving family members photographed in Poland after the war. Top row: Cecia Jonisch, Sam Jonisch, Sophie Jonisch Bornstein. Bottom row: Michael Bornstein, Hilda Jonisch, Ruth Jonisch.



From left: Hilda Jonisch, Michael Bornstein, and Sophie Jonisch Bornstein, photographed together shortly after the war ended.



Undated photo of Michael, likely taken in Munich, Germany, in the late 1940s.



Michael's naturalization card, identifying him as a DP (displaced person). He arrived in America in 1951, essentially homeless.



The USS *General M. B. Stewart*, which carried thousands of survivors, including Michael and his mother, to the shores of America in the years following World War II.



Family members get together in New York City, May 1958. From left: Ruth Jonisch, Mullek Jonisch, Ola Jonisch Hafftko, Michael Bornstein.



Some of the Survivors Club, plus fellow revelers, at a New York City family occasion in the early 1960s. Top row, from left: Michael Bornstein, Elsa and Mullek Jonisch. Top row, far right: David Jonisch. Bottom row, far left: Aleksander Hafftko. Bottom row from right: Moniek Jonisch, Ola Jonisch Hafftko. Bottom row center: Sophie Jonisch Bornstein.



Michael's high school graduation photograph.



In college, Michael was allowed to sleep in the infirmary at Fordham University when the school learned he had no place to live.



Sophie Bornstein with her second husband, Chaim Nepomechie, in 1984.



Michael returned to Auschwitz for the first time in 2001 with his wife, Judy.



Michael in 2001 at the Žarki cemetery, the site of mass murders during the Holocaust.

Michael in 2015, speaking about his wartime experiences and showing his number tattoo.





Michael and Judy Bornstein surrounded by their four children, children's spouses, and eleven grandchildren. New York, November 2015.



The Bornstein family kiddush cup, once buried underground in Żarki, Poland.

A BORNSTEIN FAMILY WHO'S WHO

Dora Bornstein: Mother to Israel Bornstein; Michael Bornstein's grandmother, whom he called Bobeshi (see glossary) or Grandma Dora. Dora remained with her grandson throughout the Holocaust and ultimately brought him safely back to Żarki, Poland, after the war's end.

Israel Bornstein: Michael Bornstein's father. As the head of the Żarki Judenrat, Israel was able to shield many of his family members from death and make conditions more bearable for numerous Jews during the Holocaust. Though his wife, Sophie, and his son Michael survived, Israel and his elder son, Samuel, both perished at Auschwitz.

Michael Bornstein: Born in the open ghetto of Żarki, Poland, on May 2, 1940, eight months after the German invasion; liberated from Auschwitz in 1945 as a four-year-old boy. After the war, Michael and his remaining family immigrated to the United States, where he earned a PhD and worked in pharmaceutical research. Today, Michael speaks at schools, sharing his experiences of the Holocaust.

Samuel Bornstein: Michael's older brother, who was murdered at Auschwitz in 1944. He died years before he reached the age of thirteen, the age required to become a bar mitzvah. On June 18, 2016, Michael's granddaughter Maddie chose to place an empty chair on the bimah as she became a bat mitzvah. That chair held a place for Samuel, the great-uncle Maddie never got to meet. She shared her blessings that day with him.

David Jonisch: Michael's uncle, married to Gutia. Michael and Sophie stayed with David and Gutia when they were getting settled in America following the war.

Sophie Jonisch Bornstein: Wife of Israel, mother of Samuel and Michael. Known by her children as Mamishu, Sophie protected Michael and survived the Holocaust. After the war, she worked making hats and corsets, eventually immigrating with Michael to America.

Esther Jonisch: Sophie's mother, Michael's grandmother. Esther taught Sophie to "always look forward." Sent to the Treblinka concentration camp when the ghetto in Żarki was cleared out, she perished there. Esther and her husband, Mordecai, had seven children: Ola, Sophie, Hilda, Moniek, David, Sam, and Mullek.

Hilda Jonisch: Sophie's younger sister. Hilda's first husband, Joseph Wygocka, left for America before the war, so Hilda

stayed in Warsaw and worked at a bank. She was eventually sent to a series of several concentration camps and later to Buchenwald. After surviving the war, Hilda made her way to Cuba, where she married José Robinsky and had a daughter named Estee. Hilda and her family settled in America after the Cuban Revolution.

Ruth (“Kristina”) Jonisch: Daughter of Cecia and Sam Jonisch, cousin of Michael. Ruth was born on August 1, 1939. When Sam and Cecia went into hiding, Ruth was taken in by a family friend and renamed Kristina. Later left outside a Catholic orphanage, she was raised by the convent’s nuns as a Catholic before being reunited with her parents following the war.

Mordecai Jonisch: Husband of Esther; father of Ola, Sophie, Hilda, Moniek, David, Sam, and Mullek; and grandfather of Samuel and Michael. Mordecai was killed at Treblinka along with Esther.

Ola Jonisch Hafftk: Sophie Bornstein’s older sister. Ola escaped to Japan during the war with her husband, Aleksander, and their daughter, Sylvia. Japanese statesman Chiune Sugihara arranged for their immigration, and Ola and her family eventually came to America. Sophie worked in Ola’s shop, Agnes Malone, when she and Michael arrived in New York.

Eli Zborowski: Kristina-Ruth's cousin and Michael's neighbor in Żarki survived in hiding during the war, along with his mother, sister, and brother. After the war, Eli met his wife, Diana, a fellow survivor, at a DP camp in Germany. Together, they immigrated to the United States, where Eli organized the first Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) event in the United States in 1964 and established the world's first professorial chair in Holocaust studies at New York's Yeshiva University. He did work on the world stage to repair relations between Jews and Poles, meeting with leaders including Pope John Paul II, and he became chairman of the International and American Societies for Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust History Museum. An advocate, entrepreneur, husband, father, and grandfather, Eli Zborowski died in 2012 at the age of eighty-six.

Moshe Zborowski: Ruth's uncle. Moshe paid teachers so that the children in the Żarki ghetto could continue their schooling during the war. Moshe died trying to escape down the river just before the last Jews in Żarki were sent to concentration camps. His wife and three children survived, including Eli and Marvin Zborowski—who ultimately provided much information for this book. Marvin Zborowski says the Judenrat bribery scheme and Israel Bornstein saved his life when he was jailed in the ghetto for missing work, the incident mentioned in chapter seven.

GLOSSARY

Allies: The alliance of nations fighting against Axis forces Germany, Italy, and Japan in World War II. The Allies included the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union.

anti-Semitism: Hostility or discrimination toward Jews.

Auschwitz: The largest Nazi-run concentration camp, where more than one million prisoners died during World War II. It was located near the Polish town of Oświęcim.

Bobeshi: Yiddish for “Granny” or “Grandma.”

Frau: German title meaning “missus.”

gentile: A non-Jewish person.

Gestapo: An abbreviation for Geheime Staatspolizei (Secret State Police), the police force of Nazi Germany, which served in territories invaded by the Germans such as Żarki.

Glossary

ghetto: An enclosed area where members of a minority group live, often involuntarily isolated from other parts of a town or city.

Herr: German title meaning “mister.”

kosher: Meaning “clean” or “pure,” describes food that is prepared following the rules of Jewish law.

Luftwaffe: The German air force.

Mamishu: A variant on the Yiddish endearment for “Mama.”

rabbi: A Jewish religious leader.

rations: Fixed amounts of food given to citizens to combat food shortages during wartime.

Soviet Union: The nation formed by the union between communist Russia and other countries under its influence; it existed from 1922 to 1991.

SS: The abbreviation for Schutzstaffel (protective squadron), the paramilitary organization that enforced the Nazi Party’s mission.

swastika: A hooked cross used as a symbol of the Nazi regime.

synagogue: A building used for Jewish religious worship.

Torah: The most holy book of the Jewish religion, outlining the laws of the faith.

Yiddish: The language spoken by many central and eastern European Jews; it is a hybrid of Hebrew and medieval German.

zloty: Polish currency.

Zyd: Polish term for a Jewish person.

NOTES ON SOURCES

In addition to Michael's own memories from this time period, we relied heavily on stories shared with us and other family members by Michael's mother, Sophie Bornstein. She told of forced contributions in Żarki, intimidation and thievery by Nazi guards, her efforts to save Michael's life at Auschwitz, and her astonishment at finding her youngest son had survived even after she was forced to leave him behind in the death camp. Her memory of being reunited with Michael in Żarki after the war was something she talked about often. She also described the shock of learning that the family's home was occupied by an interloper and that her only surviving son was living in a chicken coop. She was eternally grateful to her mother-in-law for keeping him alive.

Accounts by Michael's mother's sister, Hilda Jonisch Robinsky—including an audio recording made for the family on August 28, 1991—were also invaluable sources for this story. Hilda talked about her return to the Żarki ghetto, her escape from Warsaw, her survival at the Majdanek and Skarżysko camps, and her liberation from Buchenwald. Her return to Żarki, however, marked some of the most surprising moments of her life, she said—including her extraordinary conversation with the wagon driver related in chapter six.

We are very grateful to the family of a Żarki survivor who shared with us the private diary of his grandfather, who evaded deportation by hiding in a secret bunker from 1942 to 1945. This was an invaluable source of information about the treatment of Jews in the Żarki ghetto and the role Israel Bornstein played as Judenrat leader, and it lifted the veil on vague stories we knew about violent murders on Bloody Monday and in the days that followed the start of the war.

Another Żarki survivor, Marvin Zborowski, says he knew Michael's mother's family, the Jonisches, almost as well as he knew his own. Marvin, a voluminous source of information, generously shared stories about Michael's mother's and father's actions during the war. Marvin told us that he is among those whose lives were saved by Israel Bornstein. As mentioned in chapter seven, before the Żarki ghetto was liquidated, when a then-teenage Marvin was sentenced to be killed for missing a day of work, Israel bribed a Nazi official to secure Marvin's release. Marvin was there, too, when Michael's family members returned to Żarki one by one.

Marvin Zborowski gave testimony as part of the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation's project to collect and record Holocaust survivors' stories. That interview focuses on Marvin's own family's story, but it did include some important background on the invasion and liquidation of Żarki. The interview is available at [youtube.com/watch?v=7Zd9Eh-5m6Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Zd9Eh-5m6Y).

Eli Zborowski was a teenager when the war started. Decades later, his reflections on life before, during, and after the Holocaust

in *A Life of Leadership—Eli Zborowski: From the Underground to Industry to Holocaust Remembrance* by Rochel and George Berman (Jersey City, N.J.: KTAV Publishing, 2011) provide an incredible picture of the oppression in Żarki. We relied heavily on this source to confirm stories shared by other relatives.

We are grateful to Margalit Edelson for helping us translate a collection of reminiscences by Żarki survivor Yakov Fischer that were published in Hebrew. Fischer knew Michael's father well and detailed his influence over a particular Nazi guard. He provided more information and confirmation of the Judenrat's bribery schemes and also described in great detail the events of Bloody Monday in Żarki. Fischer's essays are included in *Kehilat Żarki: Ayara be-Hayeha U-Ve-hilyona (The Destruction of Żarki)*, edited by Yitzhak Lador and published by former residents of Żarki in Tel Aviv, Israel, in 1959. A scan of the text is available at yizkor.nypl.org/index.php?id=1328.

At the Jewish Genealogy and Family Heritage Center in Warsaw, Poland, we were astounded to discover letters signed by Israel Bornstein in 1940 requesting aid for the ghetto.

The following sources provided key background on life at the Pionki labor camp that helped fill holes that Michael's mother's stories and Michael's own memories could not: videotaped testimony by survivors Sam and Regina Spiegel that is archived at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.; *Looking Back* by Mania Salinger (Northville, Mich.: Ferne, 2006); and the testimony of an unnamed Pionki survivor recorded in

Trelleborg, Sweden, on May 22, 1946, and archived at the Polish Research Institute at Lund University.

Ruth Jonisch Hart's survival story was well-documented and -remembered in a private diary and by survivors Eli and Marvin Zborowski, and we also learned many details from stories shared with the family over the years by Ruth herself, Cecia Jonisch, and Esther Jonisch Flint. We are honored to be documenting Ruth's remarkable survival in this book.

The following sources were critical in helping to provide additional background on life inside Auschwitz, including details about life for children, like Michael, who managed to escape the gas chambers. Michael does not recall exactly what he ate or how the barracks looked, for instance, so this information helped us build an accurate picture:

Dlugoborski, Waclaw, and Franciszek Piper, editors. *Auschwitz 1940–1945: Central Issues in the History of the Camp*, Volume 2. Translated by William Brand. (Auschwitz, Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2000).

Langer, Emily, and Ellen Belcher. "Sisters Live to Tell Their Holocaust Story," a lengthy article in the *Washington Post*, April 7, 2013.

Megargee, Geoffrey P., and Martin Dean, editors. *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and*

Ghettos, 1933–1945, Volume II: Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2012).

Mozes Kor, Eva, and Lisa Rojany Buccieri. *Surviving the Angel of Death: The True Story of a Mengele Twin in Auschwitz* (Terre Haute, Ind.: Tanglewood, 2009).

Spector, Shmuel, and Geoffrey Wigoder, editors. *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust*. Three volumes. (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

Finally, we wish to express our gratitude to many sources for permission to reproduce photographs from their collections:

Page x: *Michael with other children showing number tattoos*: Courtesy of Pańtswowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau. Photo insert: *Żarki's main synagogue*: fotopolska.eu / *Jonisch family's leather-curing factory*: Courtesy of Sylvia Smoller / *Friday market in Żarki*: fotopolska.eu / *Undated photo from 1930s Żarki*: Courtesy of Sylvia Smoller / *German invaders*: Courtesy of ullstein bild/Getty Images / *Eli Zborowski disguised as a woman*: Courtesy of Marvin Zborowski / *Jewish men and older boys report for work*: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Leah Hammerstein Silverstein / *On his wedding day David Jonisch was forced to wear an armband*: Courtesy of Sylvia Smoller / *New*

arrivals at Auschwitz: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem / *Selection process under way:* United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem / *Group of women and children:* United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem / *View of the Auschwitz gate:* United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Instytut Pamięci Narodowej / *Aerial view of Auschwitz barracks:* United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park / *An Auschwitz women's barracks:* United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park / *Michael's grandmother Dora carrying him out of Auschwitz:* United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park / *Michael and other child survivors:* United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem / *Hilda Jonisch, Michael, and Sophie Jonisch Bornstein:* Courtesy of Estee Pickens / *Michael in Munich:* Courtesy of Estee Pickens / *USS General M. B. Stewart:* Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC (80-G-433593) / *New York City family occasion in the early 1960s:* Courtesy of Sylvia Smoller / *Michael in 2015:* Courtesy of Bruce Challgren, PhotoPixels, LLC / *Michael and Judy Bornstein surrounded by their four children, children's spouses, and eleven grandchildren:* Courtesy of Russell Starr. Photographs not identified are from the collections of the authors.

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We may be a father-daughter writing team, but this book is truly the result of a whole-family effort. Judy Bornstein stayed awake until 3:00 a.m. too many nights, chasing down online leads for new information. Her research skills and tireless resolve are unmatched. Her love and guidance as a wife and mother are unmatched, too. Lori Bornstein Wolf never stopped encouraging us until the last page was complete, going far beyond the call of duty for a daughter and sister. Steve Holinstat finished his own long hours as an attorney by day and coached sports for three busy kids over the dinner hour, yet never turned down a request to edit and critique by night. And Lisa Bornstein Cohn and Scott Bornstein cheered on this project from day one. Marvin Zborowski is not quite a cousin, but we consider him family for life. He is one of the last Żarki survivors still alive, and he spent countless hours sharing information. There are no words to express our gratitude and our deep respect for this courageous, kind, and generous soul. Cousins Sylvia Smoller, Esther Flint, and Estee Pickens shared their photos and their wealth of knowledge. We are grateful to have a family like this in our lives.

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