

# *Reluctant Hero*

A Holocaust Survival Story



The background of the slide is a solid blue color with a wavy, layered effect at the top, creating a sense of depth and movement.

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This is the story of perhaps the bravest combatant of World War II that you have never heard of. This is a story of resilience, vengeance, survival, decimation and hope. This is the story of a man who doesn't consider himself a hero yet embodied the truest definition of the word.

This is the story of Chaim Engel



# Early Life

- Chaim Engel was born on January 10, 1916 in Brudzew, Poland.
- His parents were Samuel and Frieda Engel. Nine years later, the family welcomed a second son.
- The Engel family moved to Lodz, Poland in 1921.





# Lodz

Lodz is a city located in central Poland, about 75 miles southwest of Warsaw, Poland.

The Jews of Lodz formed the second largest Jewish community in prewar Poland, after Warsaw.



# Lodz

By 1904, Lodz had emerged as a manufacturing giant, gaining the moniker, "the Manchester of Poland" (Kazez). In 1931, Lodz had "a Jewish population of 202,497 - a third of Lodz's total population of 604,470" (Kazez).



# Early Life

Even in his formative years, Engel recalls the racial strain remembering, “We lived in an area with all people but the contact we had mostly with the Jews because you were resented very much by non-Jews. Very seldom did you have a non-Jewish friend”.

In 1931, Chaim graduated middle school at the age of 15. Lodz was a top textile manufacturing hub at this time so Chaim decided to go to work.





## Early Life

Chaim obtained employment at the textile factory his uncle owned, making stockings. He would work there for the next five years. In the year 1936, Chaim lost his mother to an undiagnosed disease. It is now believed she died from bronchitis.

Chaim was 20 years old.

# Early Life

Chaim would later describe this time of pre-war unrest: “You always were aware you were a Jew because the laws that were there or the surroundings of how they acted and reacted with you being a Jew” (Oral History).



# Military Service

Chaim Engel was 20 years old in 1936. In Poland at this time, it was required by law to serve a one and a half year stint in the Polish Army.







# Military Service

As his one and a half years of duty neared conclusion, Chaim's scheduled discharge date was set. It was September 15, 1939.



Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939 initiating World War II.



# NAZI INVASION OF POLAND



# Military Service

Only two weeks from the completion of his service, Chaim was thrown into the throngs of war because, as he stated, “I ended up being a soldier when the war broke out” (Oral History).





# The Nazi Invasion of Poland

September 1, 1939





# Military Service

During this time of war, Chaim found the Antisemitism as rampant with his countrymen as he did from the invading German forces. He recalls of this time: “When I was in the army and was in the war, I was just as afraid of my comrades and my Sergeant as I was of the Germans. I didn’t trust them” (Oral History).

Poland was the first victim of the Nazi war machine.



# Military Service

Amid the German Blitzkrieg, Poland stood no chance. After a few insignificant weeks of resistance, Chaim Engel was finally captured by the Germans.



# Military Service

It was late September, “the 25<sup>th</sup> or the 27<sup>th</sup>, whatever it was” as Chaim stated. “Anyway, they took us as prisoners of war. They kept us for two days outside in a field, it was cold already! Then they sent us to Germany as prisoners of war” (Oral Histories).



# Military Service

The end of 1939 finds Engel in Germany as a Polish POW. Not knowing anything of the fate of his family, the frightened Polish Jewish soldier was sent to the German city of Leipzig to do forced labor.

Chaim was 23 years old.



# Leipzig

Leipzig sits about 100 miles southwest of Berlin and was vital to German logistics during WWII due to its railroad conversions.



# Military Service

Chaim held no fondness for his POW experience as he stated, “It was very bad. I got sick. There was hardly enough food. And maybe I needed some medicine, or whatever? I didn’t get anything” (Oral Histories).





# Lodz

On November 7, 1939 Lodz was officially annexed by the Nazis who changed the name of the city to Litzmannstadt. The Ghetto in Lodz was established April 30, 1940. Approximately “164,000 Jews were interned there” (Yad Vashem).





# Military Service

In March of 1940, Nazi mandate stated that Jewish Polish POWs in Germany were to be sent back to Poland. In Chaim's words "They figured for the Jewish prisoners of war still has more privileges than a Jew in Poland, and they wanted to get rid of the Jews. That's the reason they sent us back" (Oral History). Chaim made his way back to the familial home, only to find out that his father, step-mother and little brother had been moved to the city of Lublin in December of 1939.

# Lublin

Lublin is a city in central Poland located about 105 miles southeast of Warsaw. The Ghetto in Lublin was officially opened on March 24, 1941 with a population of at least 30,000 Polish Jews and untold numbers of Roma.



# Lublin

In 1939, Lublin had a Jewish population of about 45,000 individuals, accounting for roughly one third of the city's total population of 120,000. In the aftermath of WWII, "Only 230 Lublin Jews are known to have survived the German occupation" (Powell). Chaim's family was not among them.



# Farm Life

Chaim made his way to Lublin and miraculously, found his father, step-mother and brother. Here, his family experienced extremely poor living conditions, having very little food and possessing “whatever they had on their shoulders” (Oral History).

# Farm Life

Chaim knew that staying in Lublin was not an option for him so he decided to take a chance and ask surrounding farms if they were in need of labor.



# Farm Life

It so happened that on a farm, about five miles outside of Lublin, a Ukrainian farmer took Chaim up on his offer. When reflecting upon his days as a Lublin farmhand, Engel remembers his experience fondly, “They were very nice people. I cannot say that they mistreated me” (Oral History).



# Farm Life

The kind Ukranian farmer even agreed to take Chaim's 17 year old brother on as a worker. Chaim led a relatively safe existence on the farm, working there for a year and a half.



# Farm Life

This was still a horrifying and miserable time for Jews in and around Lublin. The Germans were in charge and there was absolutely no doubt about this. Of this time, Chaim states, “if a German saw you in the street and didn’t like you for whatever reason, he could shoot you. And there was no recourse. They had no laws to adhere to. ..You got used to it as normal. You just had to watch out you were not the one to get shot” (Oral History).

# Farm Life

In June of 1942, Chaim's father and step-mother were placed upon a transport bound for a concentration camp. He never saw either of them again.





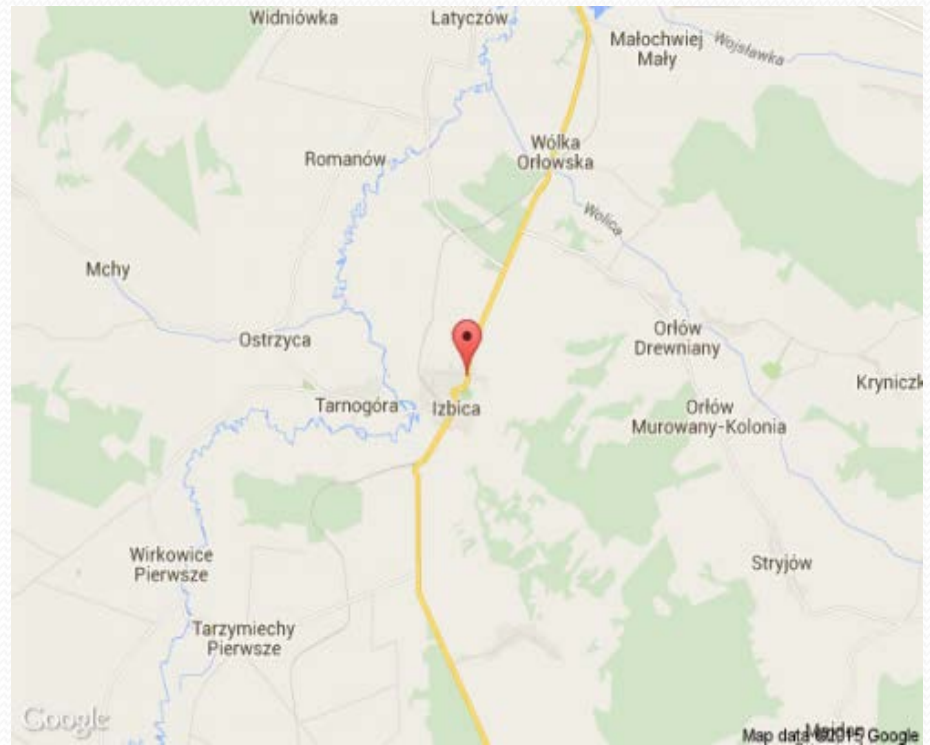


# Farm Life

Within a few months of his father's removal, the Reich handed down a decree that made it illegal for farmers to employ Jewish workers and as a result, all Jews were to be concentrated. Chaim, his younger brother, and his friend who also worked at the farm refused this fate. Their future was uncertain, but they were certain they didn't want a concentration camp to be a part of it. Instead, the three of them elected to escape into the woods. Chaim was 26 years old.

# On the Run

The three men made their way on foot some 20 miles to the town of Izbica because it was rumored that they could unite with some partisans at that location. There had been validity in the rumors as Chaim and company did find a Jewish contingent in Izbica.




# On the Run

Unfortunately, the morning after arriving, the town was subject to a German raid. The men hid for three days but were finally discovered and herded into freight trains. After a hellish two days upon the rails, Chaim Engel would arrive at the location that would define the rest of his life's story.



In September of  
1942, Chaim Engel  
arrived in Sobibor.





Chaim was always careful to point out that  
“Sobibor was a death camp, not a concentration  
camp.”

# Sobibor

The killing place was established in March of 1942 and was the second extermination camp to be put into operation under the Nazi death plan “Operation Reinhard”.





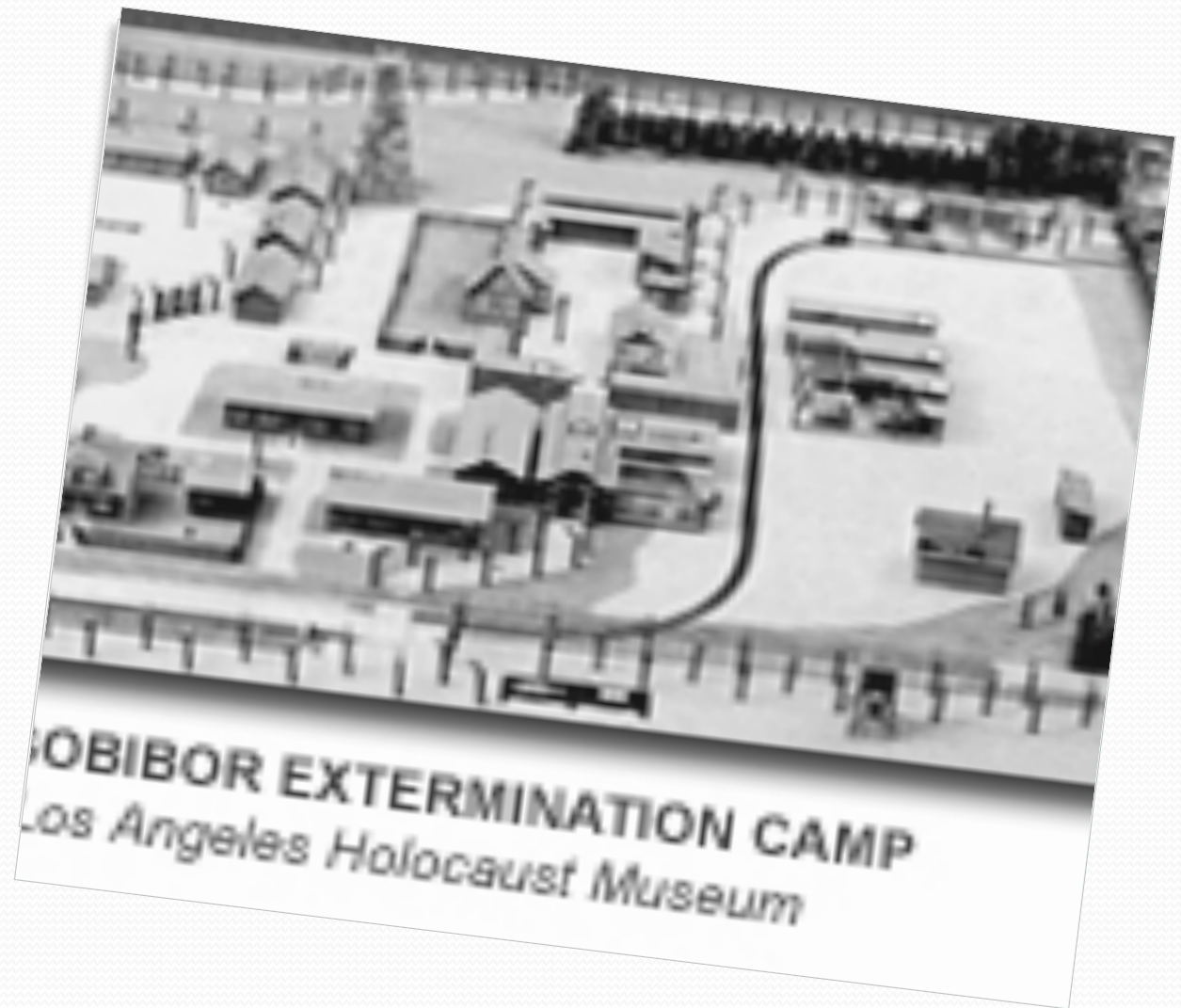
# Sobibor

Sobibor was strategically located “in relation to the concentrations of Jews in the Polish cities of Chelm and Lublin. From April 1942 until October 1943, approximately 250,000 people were murdered there, the vast majority being Jews” (Sobibor...). This is the world in which Chaim now found himself.



# Sobibor

The Sobibor death camp “measured roughly 1,300 by 2,000 feet, surrounded by a triple line of barbed wire fencing and guarded by watchtowers” (JVL).



# Sobibor

Chaim was one of about 800 people who arrived in Sobibor in his transport, along with his brother and friend. While the SS officers studied the new prisoners, occasionally, one would be taken out of line and made to report to a different location. Chaim was one of 18 people that got taken out of line. The reason soon became clear as it was revealed that Chaim was assigned work duty. He and his new coworkers were to assume the responsibility of sorting discarded cloths.



# Sobibor

By coincidence, Chaim found the cloths of his little brother, complete with a photo of his family. As Chaim painfully recalled, “I knew what had happened, that he went to the gas chamber with my friend. And here I am separating his cloths. You can’t imagine what went through my head” (Oral History).

DO NOT CONFUSE THE  
MURDERER WITH THE VICTIM



THERE WERE NO  
POLISH DEATH CAMPS

# Sobibor

Chaim was kept in the camp in a select work detail because the Nazis found it more efficient to maintain permanent workers than to have to keep training new ones. At first, Chaim could not accept the misery that had become his new reality. He told that “We didn’t want to believe it because it was so incomprehensible and so unbelievable that something like that can happen” (Oral History).



# Sobibor

When asked how he was able to survive amid such horrors, Engel stated, “Everything stopped on me. You stopped thinking. You stopped functioning. It is just like somebody hits you with a hammer in your head, something like that. But you had to do your work. You were not your own” (Oral History).



# Sobibor

As far as conditions, the workers were supplied with little more than shelter from the elements. Chaim's daily food rations consisted of rancid water, one slice of black bread and a soup made out of left over corn husks. Euphemistically referred to by the prisoners as "straw soup", the concoction was inedible.

# Selma

On April 9, 1943, a transport arrived that brought a 21 year old Jewish woman from the Netherlands named Saartje (Selma) Wijnberg to Sobibor.





# Selma

It was during her duty as a worker in Sobibor that she was befriended by another member of the Sonderkommando (prisoner worker) unit. That person happened to be a 27 year old Polish Jew named Chaim Engel. Chaim and Selma fell in love and it would last until each of their dying days.

# Sobibor

Chaim suddenly had something tangible to live for and to fuel his survival as he related, “We met and we stayed always together. That made it a lot easier subconsciously, easier for us to endure the camp because we had each other” (Oral History).

# Himmler's Orders

In July of 1943,  
Heinrich Himmler  
ordered that Sobibor be  
converted from an  
extermination camp to a  
concentration camp.





# Sobibor

The SS could not afford to leave any witnesses to the mass executions at Sobibor so this change in policy was effectively a death sentence for the members of the Sonderkommando. Chaim and his fellow prisoners knew it, as he said, “We were always knowing what was going on” (Oral Histories).

# Uprising

It was during late summer of 1943 when pockets of prisoners began to discuss the possibility of an uprising which would hopefully lead to escape. Only a small number of prisoners were kept in the loop for fear that the intention of uprising would be leaked. Chaim was one of these trusted prisoners, however, Selma did not speak Polish. Because of this, Chaim was not given a specific assignment during the uprising because he refused to leave Selma's side.

# Uprising

The decision was made within a select few within the camp to go ahead with the uprising because they simply had nothing to lose. The problem was there was no precise plan to carry out such grand ambitions. This would change in September of 1943 when Sobibor received a transport of Jewish Russian POWs.



# The Escape Plan

As it was Chaim and Selma's job to sort the cloths of the Sobibor victims, they would find any valuables hidden among them. Because Chaim had the idea of escape in mind, he had the forethought to hide away the small amounts of money or gold that he would find. If the pair were to ever make it out of the gates, they would certainly need bribing funds to have any sort of a real chance of survival.



# Uprising

Among the transport, approximately 30 of the Russian soldiers were assigned to work alongside Chaim and his coconspirators. The Russian contingent wanted to attempt an uprising immediately upon arrival.

# Uprising

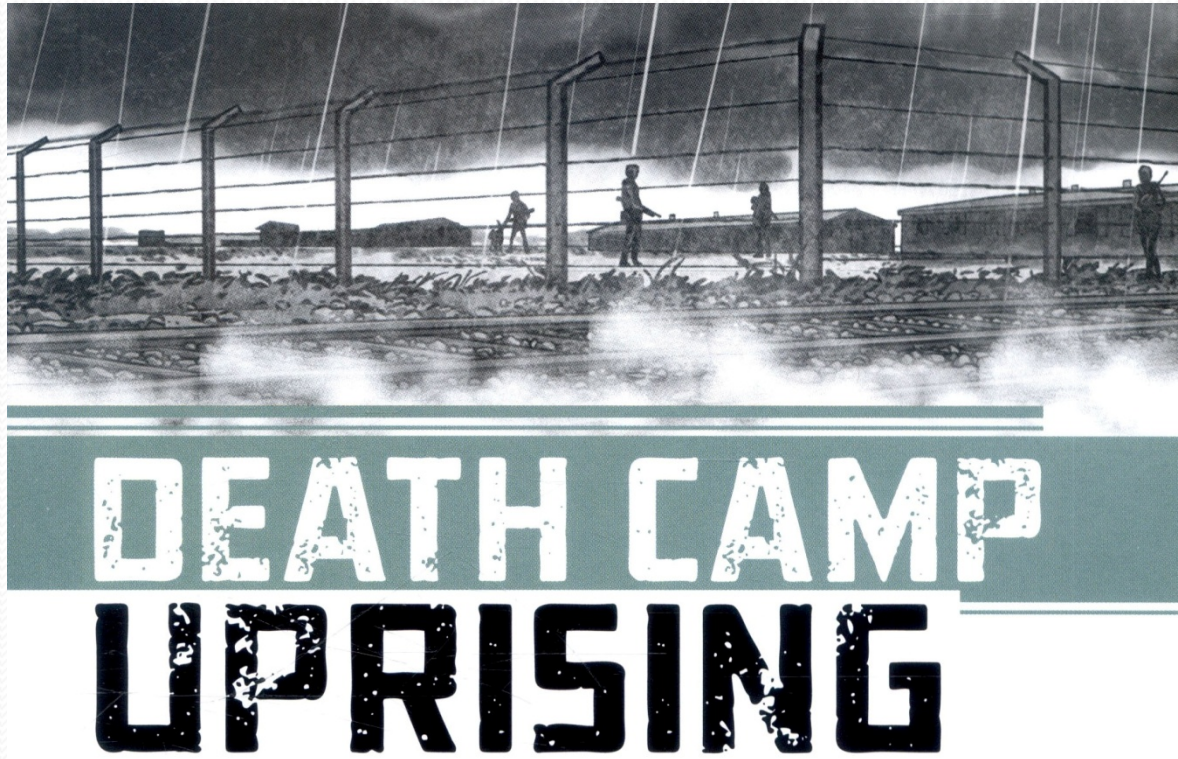
However, after learning that the established Sonderkommandos were also planning an escape, the decision was made to take a little more time and to work in unison to formulate the most successful plan possible.





# Uprising

October 14, 1943 was the day of the uprising at Sobibor.



# The Escape Plan

The plan entailed the killing of several SS guards with the Russian soldiers taking their uniforms to confuse the Ukrainian guards. At the 5 p.m. roll call, the plan called for the disguised and armed Russian soldiers to feign outside work duty and march the remaining prisoners out of the front gates. Needless to say, everything did not go according to plan.

# The Escape Plan

On October 14, Chaim and Selma were working sorting cloths and at about 4 p.m., the plan called for the killing of SS soldier Rudolf Beckmann, the leader of the sorting detail. The prisoner who was originally assigned to kill Beckmann was simply too frightened and could not follow through with it.



# The Reluctant Hero

At this point, Chaim knew that anywhere from 10-12 SS officers had already been killed, there was no turning back. There would be no reprieve, as Chaim put it, “unless we get out, otherwise we are dead”.

# The Reluctant Hero

Chaim heroically did what was necessary. After Selma supplied him with a sharp pointed knife, Chaim and a fellow prisoner lured Beckmann into an office under false pretenses.



# The Reluctant Hero

Chaim Engel then stabbed SS officer Rudolf Beckmann to death. Chaim had not planned to kill anybody but in the act, he could not help but vent his unimaginable frustrations. Chaim recalled “With every jab, I said, That is for my Father! That is for my Mother! For all these people, all the Jews you killed!” (Oral History).



# The Reluctent Hero

Chaim's heroic efforts are undeniable but one would not know it to hear him tell it: "I don't think I was a big hero or a big courageous man, but I figured it was self-defense and survival. If I don't do it, it might spoil the whole thing. It's not a decision. You just react, instinctively you react to that, and I figured, Let us to do, and go and do it" (Oral History).

# The Escape

At the 5 p.m. roll call, chaos soon ensued and prisoners took off running in all directions. In total, 11 SS guards were killed along with several Ukrainian guards. As a result of the uprising, it is estimated that three hundred Jews made it out of the gates.

# The Escape

Amid the pandemonium, fleeing in the machine gun fire and avoiding landmines, Chaim was able to make his way into woods; all the while, never letting go of Selma's hand.





# A Couple in Hiding

Of the Jews that made good their escape from Sobibor, “dozens were killed in the mine field around the camp and dozens more were hunted down over subsequent days” (JVL). After running all night, Chaim and Selma found themselves in a small village some six miles from the death camp. Chaim bribed a homeowner to hide the pair for the day which he did. Others however were not so lucky.

# A Couple in Hiding

Chaim later found out that the SS had searched that entire village and found several escapees who were then taken back to Sobibor and executed.



# A Couple in Hiding

Finally, in late October of 1943, the pair found a farmer who operated a small isolated farm. The man agreed to conceal Chaim and Selma until liberation. In exchange for the rest of Chaim's bribe money, the farmer kept the young couple alive in his hay loft. The farmer was true to his word, Chaim and Selma were liberated by the Russians in June of 1944.



# Sobibor

As for the death camp, the remaining population of the camp was liquidated following the 1943 revolt. In an effort to mask their heinous acts, the Nazis demolished the entire grounds and planted numerous trees and crops.



# Sobibor

If not for the few survivors, the world most likely would have never been truly aware of the horrors of Sobibor. A small memorial now stands where so many were murdered.





# Post Liberation

After the pair was liberated, they were taken to Chelm in Poland. Selma was pregnant at this time and the pair stayed in Poland for about another six months, where the couple was also married.





# Post Liberation

While in Poland, the couple gave birth to a son named Emiel.



# Post Liberation

In June of 1945, Chaim and Selma arrived in Zwolle, the Netherlands via Lublin, Czernewitz, Odessa, Marseille and Tilburg. Sadly, their infant son had died at sea due to tainted powdered milk provided by the Red Cross. The couple, who would eventually have two more children, stayed in Holland for six and a half years, from 1945-1951.

# Making a Life Together

Chaim and Selma  
were able to add  
both another son  
and a daughter to  
their family while in  
Holland.





# Making a Life Together

But Holland was not where the family wanted to be. Chaim found the economic restrictions frustrating and Selma did not like the conditions. Selma convinced Chaim to uproot the family to Israel. However, the only place that Chaim wanted to raise his family and spend the rest of his life was America.

# Making a Life Together

Chaim and Selma moved to Israel in 1951. From day one, Chaim hated the situation. As he stated, in Israel, “I couldn’t live this life. All my private initiative went and I just couldn’t stand it” (Oral History).



# Making a Life Together

Chaim toiled in the holy land until 1957 at which time, with the help of an uncle, he and his family were granted passage to America.





# Making a Life Together

Chaim and Selma settled in Branford, Connecticut where they owned several businesses including a jewelry store.



# A Life Made Together

Chaim Engel died from a stroke on July 4, 2003 at the age of 87. Selma passed away in December of 2018 at the age of 96.



# Epilogue

Of the 300 prisoners to escape the Sobibor death camp, it is estimated that between only 47 and 50 survived to the end of the war. Chiam did not suffer from survivor's guilt that is common with so many Holocaust survivors.





# Epilogue

"We were all men and women on death row. The fact that some of us escaped, well, it just happened that way ... No, I don't feel guilty about surviving. Not at all".



# An Undying Love

Chaim Engel was a hero, even though he never described himself as such. However, his beloved wife Selma never failed to take pride in her husband's exploits.





# An Undying Love

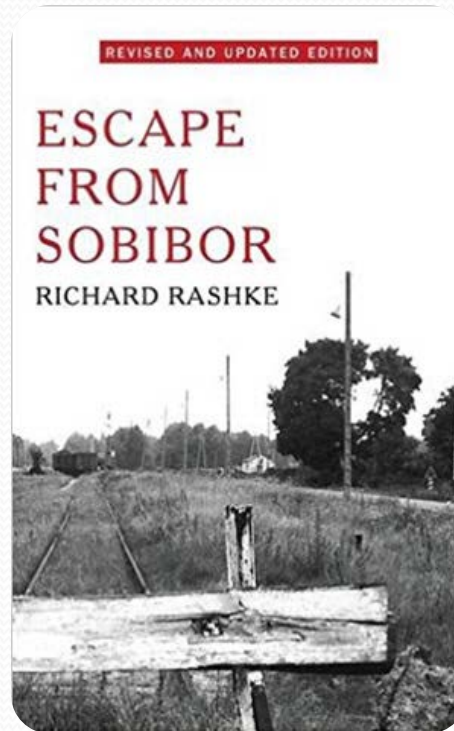
Speaking of Chaim, the love of her life, Selma was always quick to add, “He was the only man who took his girlfriend along”.





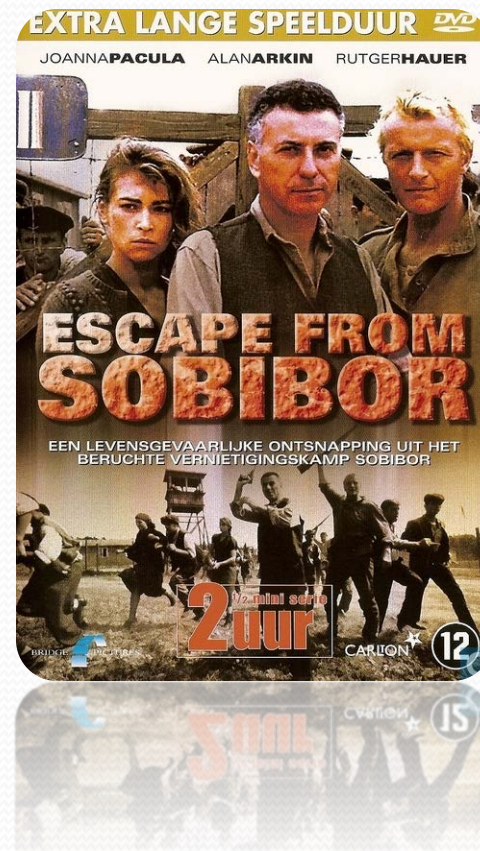
# Epilogue

Chaim and Selma  
were immortalized in  
Richard Rashke's 1982  
book "Escape From  
Sobibor".



# Epilogue

Five years later, “in 1987, Mr. Rashke's book was made into the television movie “Escape From Sobibor,” starring Alan Arkin, with Mr. Engel playing a minor role” (Martin).





# Epilogue

Later in life, Chaim and Selma both gave talks to local schools detailing their experiences as Holocaust survivors.





# Epilogue

The biggest piece of wisdom that Chaim felt necessary to impart to the younger generation was to “Always be alert when something happens. Don’t minimize it, because Hitler also started very small” (Oral History).



# Reluctant Hero





The End



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