NO. 16 = SURVIVAL
A ‘Schindler Jew’ tells her story of redemption and rebuilding

30 The North: In dire need of more bomb shelters
Halina Silber tells her story of being saved via Schindler’s list and rebuilding her life in America

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Halina Silber, who was No. 16 on the now-famous Schindler’s list, said it never occurred to her that antisemitism would reveal its ugly head once again in her lifetime.

But the 90-year-old Baltimore resident is optimistic despite the recent antisemitism occurring in the United States and throughout the world.

“At that time, wherever Jews lived, no matter what European country you lived in, we had to depend on the government,” she recalled.

In the 1930s and 1940s in her native Poland, most Jews didn’t carry guns. “Weapons were very strange,” she said.

Because of this and other factors, “Hitler had a very easy time to completely disarm us and do whatever he wanted to do with us.”

But life is different in America, Silber stressed. “Here, we live in a different world. We have a lot to say. There are Jews in government; we have a say.”

When she was growing up in Krakow, Silber never could have imagined that one day there would be a home for the Jewish people, and that home, Israel, would be “able to survive with millions of enemies around us.”

But then again, there were times when she wondered if she would survive the Holocaust.

That Silber attributes to a German industrialist and member of the Nazi Party. Oskar Schindler is credited with saving 1,200 Jews during the Holocaust, and Silber of Baltimore was one of them.

By bribing SS officials during World War II, Schindler ensured the safety and survival of his Jewish workers. He also got them extra food.

When she was only 10 and living in Krakow, Silber moved with her family to a nearby small town rather than enter the highly controlled Jewish ghetto – the only two choices they had at the time.

When rumors began circulating that the Jews in their new town were to be rounded up, her mom knew she had to act. Her older two children already were in a forced labor camp back in Krakow. So she packed a suitcase for Silber and told the young girl to remove her armband with a Star of David that all Jews were forced to wear under penalty of death. Her mother then instructed her to go to that same camp where her siblings were at.
She was 13 years old that day when she waved goodbye to her mother. She never saw her again.

Shortly after she left, her parents and two younger siblings who remained in the small town were murdered. They were just a few of so many Polish Jews who were murdered during the Shoah. According to Yad Vashem, on the eve of the German occupation of Poland in 1939, 3.3 million Jews were living in Poland. By the end of World War II, only about 380,000 Polish Jews were alive.

When she left home that day, Silber hitchhiked to Krakow and joined her older sister and brother at the camp. Soon after, she was taken to Camp Plaszow to work in the laundry.

A few women from the laundry, including Silber, later were chosen to work at Schindler’s enamelware factory.

“Oskar Schindler was just a decent man who could not tolerate injustice”

“My job was to carry the heavy pots and pans to the oven to bake in the enamel,” she recounted. “The heat and the weight were unbearable. I didn’t believe I would survive for very long,” she said in a way that made it seem like she was reliving those days. They clearly were quite fresh in her mind.

Schindler spotted her struggling with her heavy load and changed her job to cleaning offices in the factory.

Soon, that factory was moved to Czechoslovakia, and the workers, including Silber, were sent by train to the new location. However, they ended up at Auschwitz concentration camp.

Arriving there, it was late at night and quite dark. Still, she was able to see enough of the camp where she would be living to dread it.

“I saw endless rows and rows of barbed wire. I could smell the stench of burning flesh,” she recalled. “I felt to myself, there is no more room here for hope. There is no more room here for miracles.”

After months of deprivation and despair, Schindler was able to discover what had happened and intervene. He wrote a now-famous list of the names of his employees, and a German officer received it. Silber and the others on that list were rounded up and sent to his new plant in Czechoslovakia, where they were supposed to have ended up all along.

The new plant where she was to work made parts for ammunition.

While she was relatively safe inside, thanks to Schindler, horrible things were happening right outside the door. All over the area, the Germans busily and brutally forced Jews from their homes and sent them away or murdered them right on the spot.

Schindler saw firsthand the horrible treatment and murder of the Jewish people and decided he could not participate in such inhumane treatment. Instead, Silber said, he decided “to use his power and risked his own life in order to save our lives.”

Silber praised Schindler, saying he worked miracles. He remained a member of the Nazi Party, but “he chose a
different mission. Instead of killing, he chose his mission to protect Jews,” Silber noted. “He was just a decent man who could not tolerate injustice.”

Schindler was known to be a heavy drinker and a womanizer, but Silber liked to quote her late husband, who said, “One does not have to be a saint to do saintly things.”

When the war finally ended, she headed back to Krakow, hoping to reunite with her family. It took three months, but she finally found her brother.

“He decided we would stay in Krakow,” Silber remembered, and got a job as a watchmaker and jeweler.

But around the High Holy Days, the pogroms returned.

“Many Jews were killed,” she said. “When this happened, my brother said to me, ‘This is not what we survived for. We have to leave immediately.’”

They originally set their sights on Israel and headed to Germany first, successfully making it to the American side, she recalled. But their dreams took a while to come to fruition.

“We waited five years until the papers came” that allowed them to move on, she said.

While in limbo, her brother decided to head to America rather than to the Land of Israel, which was then controlled by the British. “We didn’t know what would be. Israel was not yet liberated,” she explained.

He left for the US, but she stayed in Germany close to another year, waiting to be allowed to join him.

Meanwhile, he opened a store in Des Moines, Iowa, and when she arrived she helped him there.

When asked how they ended up in the middle of the country, she replied, “The Jewish organization was trying to disperse Jews in different cities,” and that is where they were sent. She and her brother were happy to work, preferring not to be dependent on the Jewish organizations to make a new life in the US.

Her brother then found a new job in America’s heartland, in Omaha, Nebraska, and they both moved there. She, too, found employment there. Whenever she could, she took night school classes, learning all the English and history she could, she said. As a child in Poland, her formal education ended with the third grade.

Though she took numerous classes throughout her lifetime, Silber never earned a college degree. However, she and her husband always valued education and made sure their children did as well.

A few years later, she decided to move to Kansas City to join her sister, who was living there. While she enjoyed life there, she was lonely. One night, thanks to gentle prodding from her sister, Silber attended a Jewish social outing and met the man who would become her husband and the father of her three children.

With a smile, she noted that three men that night offered to take her home.

She and her husband moved to Baltimore, where she took a sewing course and began making clothes for her first child. “This was my hobby. She had a full closet,” Silber said.

She eventually opened her own business selling fabrics, advising her customers on the best ones to match their patterns and desires. The store catered to the upper class. “I was always able to guide them on which fabric would do well,” noted Silber, choosing the fabrics she sold carefully, sometimes even importing them from Europe.

She operated that shop “for almost 40 years, and I loved every minute of it.”

When she retells her life story, which she does often, Silber – who is now both a grandmother and great-grandmother – remains calm and collected. A few times during her tale, especially when she speaks of her murdered family members or her late husband, tears come to her eyes.

But the small, slender and well-dressed woman pauses only for a moment before continuing to speak of another horror or miracle she experienced throughout her lifetime.

She may be retired and in her ninth decade, but Silber – who frequents the gym three to four times a week and does not take any medication – is still going strong.

She not only has seen Schindler’s List – Steven Spielberg’s famed 1993 movie, whose Oscar-winning coproducer Branko Lustig died last week – she also had a minor role in it.

While not appearing on screen, she was interviewed for information in helping write the script.

She called the movie “very accurate, very accurate.”

When she first viewed it, “I was not sure if I was here or there,” she said, meaning in the movie theater or back in Poland.

While she only “helped a little,” she said with a smile, the information she provided led her to her brief moment in the spotlight.

When British actor Sir Ben Kinsley, who portrayed Itzhak Stern in the film, received the “Warrior for Truth” award from Algemeiner at its sixth annual “J100” gala in New York City in September, she was the one chosen to introduce him.

In her short speech, she praised Kingsley and Spielberg and thanked them for their hard, meticulous work.

“The film that you have made will carry our voices for eternity, and for that we are very grateful.”

“We are the last generation sharing our voices of our various sufferings and miracles by which we survived the Holocaust,” she told the large audience. “Many Holocaust survivors have already passed away, and so when the rest of us will be gone, we hope that you will keep reminding the world of our past.”