

Ursula Flicker

Title: *Ursula's Story: Bialystok, Siberia, Melbourne*

Author: Ursula Flicker

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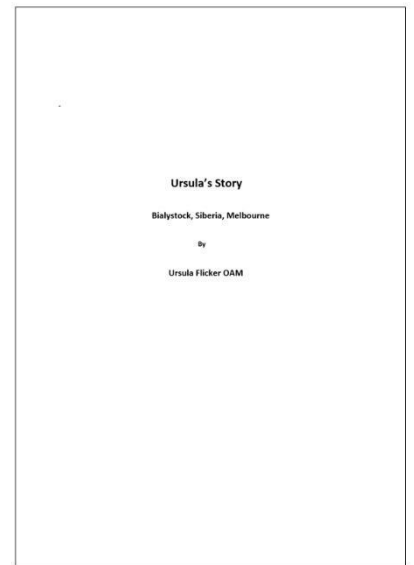
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library.

Cities/towns/camps: Poland: Lodz, Białystok, Warsaw; Siberia: Biysk, Altayskoye; Sweden; Malmo, Stockholm; Australia: Melbourne.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Soviet-occupation; Soviet collective farm



Ursula's Story is the 69-page manuscript of Polish survivor, Ursula Flicker, who was deported with her family to Siberia in 1941 where she survived in various state farms. After emigrating to Melbourne, Ursula spent twenty-seven years as a volunteer at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum where she became the founding archivist at the Research Centre.

Pages 1-11 provide a family history. Pages 12-24 recount the author's childhood and school years. Pages 25-33 describe the onset of the war, the Soviet-occupation of Białystok and the family's exile to Siberia. Pages 34-56 describe their life in Siberia from June 1941 until November 1945 and reproduce an article Ursula wrote for the *Australian Jewish Herald* commemorating her beloved grandfather. Pages 55-69 describe the family's return to Poland, the author's emigration to Sweden and eventually to Melbourne where she married her husband, Felix, and became an active member of the community.

Ursula Flicker (née Biskowicz) was born 27 October 1926 in Lodz, Poland, to educated and highly-assimilated parents, Helena Zaks and Aron Biskowicz. She also had a younger sister, Jareczka. Her father worked as a successful rag merchant, and she grew up in an upper-class family in Białystok. Although her parents were not religious, Ursula's paternal grandfather, a learned man, served as the state-appointed Rabbi.

In September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, and the family fled towards Lithuania, but returned to Białystok soon after the city was handed over to the Soviets. When they returned home, their housekeeper declared herself a communist and took possession of the property and their belongings. Fearing arrest as members of the bourgeoisie, they were forced to relocate to the home of Ursula's grandfather. Her father's business was confiscated soon after.

In June 1941, the family was arrested by Soviet authorities as 'enemies of the state' and exiled to Siberia. Ursula's beloved sister was away at a youth camp at the time and remained behind. She was never seen again. After enduring a gruelling, twenty-five-day journey aboard a cattle train with little food and inadequate sanitation, the Biskowicz family arrived in Biysk. From there, they were sent to a collective state farm where they were forced to work as labourers. Fortunately, after a few months, they were spared the worst labour after her father secured a position as an accountant and her mother as a secretary.

The family soon relocated to a rural locality in Altayskoye, where they rented a single room in a farmhouse. Without a labourer's ration-card, Ursula sustained herself by foraging for wild berries and mushrooms. Despite the difficult conditions, Ursula was able to attend trade school six days a week.

Throughout this period, the family remained worried over the fate of Jareczka. In the hopes of locating her, Ursula's mother and grandfather relocated to Biysk in November 1941, a city with a larger Polish-Jewish community and many orphaned children. Additionally, the Jewish community in Biysk sought a rabbi, and despite communist restrictions, Ursula's grandfather assumed the role of a religious and community leader, establishing a prayer house for the local population.

After four months in Altayskoye, Ursula also relocated to Biysk. To survive, she became involved in black market trading and supplemented her income by chopping wood in the surrounding forests. By June 1942, the JOINT began sending parcels containing essential food supplies which provided some relief. During this period, Ursula enrolled in a state school, attending night classes as her days were occupied with foraging, cooking, and cleaning. That same year, her mother began suffering severe psychological distress at the uncertainty of Jara's fate.

The family endured significant losses during this time. In March 1943, Ursula's grandfather passed away, followed by her father, who died of a heart attack in July of the same year. In October 1945, her senile grandmother passed away. Ursula supported her ailing family by maintaining a vegetable garden several kilometres outside of town and carrying water from the river – physically gruelling tasks vital for her family's survival.

After the death of her grandmother, the family returned to Poland where they were met with antisemitic abuse by stone-throwing Polish peasants. Tragically, they discovered that Jara had been interned in the Białystok ghetto with the rest of their relatives and was presumed to have been murdered in Treblinka. Similarly, their maternal grandmother, who was disabled and suffered from severe arthritis, had been murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau along with her devoted non-Jewish maid, Frania, who refused to leave her side.

Relocating to Warsaw, Ursula and her mother received assistance from the JOINT and the Red Cross. These organisations helped them locate Ursula's maternal aunt Mika who was recovering in a Swedish hospital following her liberation from Ravensbrück.

After securing Australian landing permits from a family friend in Melbourne, the pair travelled to Malmö and then to Stockholm to reunite with aunt Mika. Waiting a year in Stockholm for passage to Australia, they travelled to Marseille and boarded a ship to Melbourne, arriving in March 1948.

With assistance from the Jewish Welfare Society, they were housed at the Bialystoker Centre and Ursula began working in a radio factory. In December 1948, she met Felix Flicker and the couple married in May 1949. They welcomed a daughter, Helen Jara, in October 1950. Tragically, Ursula's mother passed away in June 1950 from health conditions brought on by extreme stress.

Tormented by the unknown fate of her sister, Ursula helped establish the Melbourne Holocaust Museum in the early 1980s. As the founding archivist at the Research Centre, she spent 25 years collecting and preserving materials from Holocaust survivors in Melbourne. Today, the Archival Collection bears her name in recognition of her dedication. She also served as a Polish and Russian translator at the Royal Children's Hospital. In recognition of her years of dedicated service for the preservation of Jewish history, Ursula was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in 2000. She passed away in 2024 at the age of 98.

Ursula's Story is the brief account of the author's wartime experiences. Deeply devoted to her family, Ursula writes with tender affection about their shared grief, enduring love, and remarkable perseverance. The memoir also reflects on Jewish religious and communal life in exile and under communist rule. It was written and published as part of the Makor Jewish Community's "Write Your Story" program and is available for viewing in the library as a spiral-bound manuscript.