

Helen Lawner

Title: *Surviving the Warsaw Ghetto: A Three Generational Perspective*

Author: Helen Lawner and Miriam Tisher

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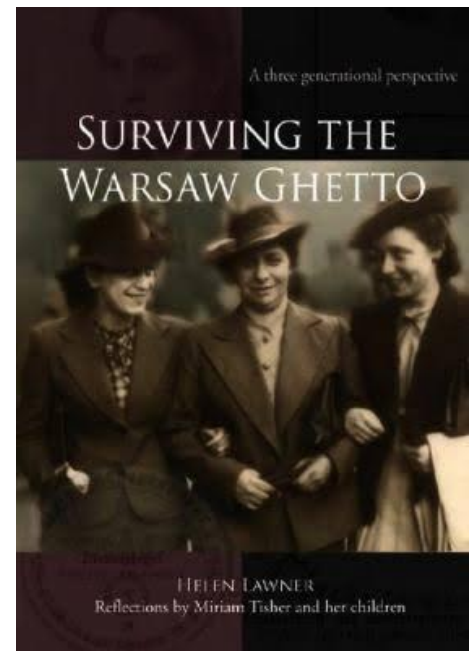
Location of Book: Monash University, Lamm Jewish Library, Melbourne Holocaust Museum, Sydney Jewish Museum and other public libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Poland: Warsaw; Austria: Graz DP camp; Italy: Rome, Naples; Israel: Tel-Aviv, Haifa; Australia: Melbourne.

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

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Warsaw ghetto; survival in hiding.



Surviving the Warsaw Ghetto is a 159-page multigenerational memoir by Warsaw ghetto survivor Helen Lawner, combining her first-hand account with reflective contributions from her children and grandchildren. The memoir records the family's escape from the ghetto, survival in hiding, and eventual emigration to Palestine and Australia.

Pages 1-16 include a prologue by Dr Miriam Tisher, Helen's daughter and a clinical psychologist, in which she reflects on her childhood and family heritage. Pages 17-84 present Helen's account of the Warsaw ghetto, her survival in hiding, and her life in DP camps and eventual emigration to Israel and Australia. Over pages 96-114 Dr Tisher resumes the narrative, describing family life in Melbourne and reflecting on the intergenerational legacy of the Holocaust for survivors and their children. Pages 121-59 conclude with a third-generation dialogue in which Helen's grandchildren reflect on their memories of their grandmother, alongside an epilogue and an appendix containing a family tree and historical documents. The narrative is interspersed with Dr Tisher's commentary and explanatory footnotes, as well as 52 historical photographs and documents.

Helen Lawner was born in Warsaw on 17 April 1918, the second child of Sara and Abraham Feurst, proprietors of a shoe repair business. She grew up with an older brother, Meir (Marek), and a younger sister, Leah (Lola).

Following the German invasion of Poland, Warsaw was subjected to heavy bombardment, during which the family business was destroyed. After the Nazi occupation, Jewish residents were harassed and forced to undertake physical labour. Fearing reprisals, Helen's fiancé Abraham (Adek) Knaster planned to flee Poland, but

his efforts failed when Helen's brother Marek refused to abandon their parents – a decision later credited with aiding the family's survival, but which ultimately cost Marek his life. Adek remained in Warsaw and married Helen on 18 August 1940.

The Warsaw ghetto was established in October 1940 and sealed the following month, trapping Helen's family. Severe overcrowding, starvation, and rampant disease became part of daily life, and corpses were frequently left lying in the streets, covered with scraps of newspaper and collected by carts.

Helen and Adek were fortunate to obtain work at a brush-makers factory, while the rest of her family was employed at the Nuss factory. This employment temporarily spared them from deportation. This fragile reprieve ended on 6 September 1942, when the family was rounded up and taken to the *Umschlagplatz*.

Helen and Adek survived the selection, but Marek and his wife Hela were deported to Treblinka with the Nuss factory workers. Hela was murdered on arrival but Marek was recognised by a *Kapo* who assigned him to a work detail. Determined to warn others that Treblinka was a death camp, Marek escaped by hiding in a train carriage filled with victims' clothing. He leapt from the train near Warsaw, and – with the help of Christian contacts on the Aryan side – smuggled himself back into the ghetto.

Following Marek's devastating report, a group of young men at the brush-makers factory, including Helen's husband Adek, began planning an escape from the ghetto. Over several weeks they dug an underground tunnel, made contact with Christian friends, and obtained false papers, enabling them to flee one by one and go into hiding. Later, Helen's parents and Adek's sisters also escaped, securing refuge in the Praga district.

Marek and Helen's sister Lola, however, failed to leave in time. Their planned departure on Passover 1943 was interrupted when German forces initiated the liquidation of the ghetto, triggering the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The revolt was brutally crushed and Marek and Lola were killed; Helen later learned that they had been suffocated with poison gas after their bunker was discovered.

On the Aryan side of Warsaw, Helen and Adek moved between a series of hiding places with the help of Polish Christians, often sheltering alongside other Jewish escapees. They lived in constant fear of denunciation and were often forced to relocate after being targeted for extortion by *szmalcowniks*. During a journey to visit Helen's parents, Helen was recognised by a Christian acquaintance, who connected her with members of the underground Polish Workers' Party. Through this contact, she received clothing, food, and medicine.

In August 1944, as the Warsaw Uprising began, Helen and Adek – together with members of their families and other Jewish fugitives – planned to take refuge in the ruins of a school on Prosta Street. Shortly before the move, Helen crossed the Vistula to Praga to deliver food to her parents, leaving Adek waiting her return. As fighting intensified, German gendarmes sealed the bridges, trapping Helen on the Praga side

and separating the couple. Adek never reached Prosta Street, where, on 10 September 1944, Polish nationalists discovered the hideout and murdered fourteen Jews sheltering there, including Adek's sisters, brother-in-law, and twelve-year-old niece. Praga was liberated by Russian forces on 22 December 1944 and Helen began working for the Jewish Committee. Adek was liberated a month later.

In May 1945, the NKVD began pressuring Helen to inform on her Jewish colleagues, prompting Adek, Helen and their parents to flee Poland, passing through a DP camp in Graz, Austria, before smuggling themselves into Italy, where their daughter Miriam was born on 18 August 1946. Assisted by United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and with Helen's father working for the JOINT, the family secured landing permits for Australia. Influenced by Helen's staunchly Zionist parents, they first travelled from Naples to Tel Aviv and settled briefly in Haifa before emigrating to Melbourne, arriving on 20 April 1948.

In Melbourne, they established a knitting business and Helen's maternal grandparents joined them in 1949. In 1951, Adek died tragically in a drowning accident. In 1954 Helen married Edmund Lawner, a fellow survivor from Poland.

In her later years, Helen wrote her memoir by hand and dictated it to her daughter Miriam to type. The memoir was completed in 1992, shortly before Helen was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. With the assistance of the Makor Jewish Community Library's *Write Your Story* program, Helen's manuscript was expanded to include second- and third-generation contributions and was published in 2006.

Surviving the Warsaw Ghetto makes a distinctive contribution to personal Holocaust accounts through its multi-generational structure, exploring themes of love, endurance, and the impact of trauma across generations. Building on her mother's first-hand testimony, Dr Miriam Tisher reflects on her own responses while examining her mother's experiences during and after the war. Her second-generation perspective – together with historical commentary and annotations – is interwoven throughout the narrative.