

Esther Pinskier

Title: *A Glass Half Full*

Author: Esther Pinskier

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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, Białystok, Lubawka; Russia: Sheksna canal, Voskresenskoe; Uzbekistan: Mizrachul; France: Paris; Australia: Melbourne.

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

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Jewish refugee; Soviet labour camp; adolescent survivor.



A Glass Half Full is the 114-page memoir of Esther Pinskier, describing her flight from Nazi-occupied Warsaw and subsequent exile to the Soviet Union. Following release from a Soviet labour camp, the family journeyed to rural Uzbekistan where fifteen-year-old Esther was forced to labour in the cotton fields and deal in the black market.

The frontmatter contains a foreword by Professor Marvin Zuckerman, a family tree and timeline of events. Pages 1-16 describe the author's childhood and Jewish cultural life in Warsaw. Pages 17-23 recount the Nazi invasion and her family's flight to Białystok. Pages 24-46 describe their subsequent exile to the Soviet Union in 1940 and return to Poland in 1946. Pages 47-58 recount her emigration to Paris and husband Leizor's wartime experiences. Pages 59-87 describe her emigration and life in Melbourne. Pages 88-114 include reflections by Professors Mark Baker and Marvin Zuckerman and writings by Leizor. The memoir also contains 45 photographs of the author and her family and historical documents.

Esther Pinskier (née Szuc) was born in Warsaw in 1926, the eldest child of Brucha Lewin and Sholem Szuc. She had a younger sister, Chava, and a brother, Moishe. Raised in a secular Jewish household, Esther's father was an avid Bundist and successful shoemaker. The family primarily spoke Yiddish, although the children were also fluent in Polish. In 1933, Esther began attending the local state school and spent her summer holidays at Miedzeszyn, an internationally renowned Bundist educational institution.

In September 1939, and German forces bombarded Warsaw, the Szuc family sheltered in their coal cellar. In October, the city fell to the Nazis and Esther witnessed German soldiers publicly humiliate and abuse Orthodox Jewish men. After six weeks under

German occupation, the Szuc family fled by horse and cart to Białystok. Along the way, they witnessed antisemitic persecution by German soldiers and Polish villagers, and sheltered with a Jewish family in the village of Andrzejiwo after armed Polish peasants robbed them of their possessions.

After reuniting with their extended family in Andrzejiwo, the Szucs relocated to Białystok and life regained some normalcy. However, in June 1940 they were arrested by Soviet secret police and deported to the Soviet Union. Following a gruelling journey in overcrowded cattle wagons, they were transported to a remote forest settlement near the Rybinsk Reservoir where they lived in primitive, overcrowded barracks. Able-bodied men and women were assigned to heavy labour felling trees in the nearby forest, while Esther and her younger siblings worked as domestic labourers, foraged for food, and traded with local villagers.

In October 1941, following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union they were freed from the camp. To escape the advancing German army – which arrived in the region just two weeks after their departure – they made the six-week journey via wagon, barge and cargo train to Aris, Kazakhstan where the younger children were briefly hospitalised due to sickness and malnutrition. Following their recovery, the family continued on to Uzbekistan, settling in the township of Mizrachul.

To secure food, Esther and her father moved to a collective farm, while her mother and siblings remained in the village. Aged fifteen, Esther worked long days in the cotton fields, labouring from dawn to dusk for a single meal. In extreme poverty, Esther and her sister often had to beg or steal food and their ten-month-old cousin died from pneumonia. By 1943 wartime deprivations were so dire that Esther was reduced to wearing a dress fashioned from a hessian sack and had no shoes.

To provide for the family, Esther and her father turned to the black market, purchasing corn from local peasants which they ground into flour. For a time, their resourcefulness significantly improved their lives. However, after an NKVD raid the flour trade became too dangerous and the family turned to smuggling fabric from Tashkent – an extremely perilous endeavour, as discovery could result in deportation to the Gulags. Eventually, her father secured work in a shoe factory and the family began producing and illegally trading boots.

In May 1946, the family was repatriated to Poland where they encountered antisemitic hostility and heard harrowing accounts of the Kielce pogrom. After a year in Lubawka, the extended Szuc family fled Poland, arriving in Paris in September 1947. Fifteen months later, Esther met Leizor Pinski and the couple married in September 1949. With the assistance of friends in Australia they secured landing permits and departed from Genoa aboard the SS *Cyrenia* in February 1950, accompanied by Esther's aunt, uncle, and cousins. Their passage was financed by the JOINT. Esther's immediate family followed in 1952.

Penniless and unable to speak a word of English, they were supported by the Jewish Welfare Society and a network of friends. Leizor became actively involved in the Jewish

Labour Bund and the pair worked in clothing factories, eventually establishing a successful business. Later, they contributed to the community by funding a scholarship for Monash University Jewish studies students. Esther and Leizor enjoyed a loving marriage until Leizor's passing in 2006. The couple had two sons, Nathan and Henry.

A Glass Half Full is a vivid and detailed memoir of the author's life, focusing on key episodes of her childhood and wartime experiences. It also briefly recounts the experiences of her husband, Leizor, and includes excerpts from his writings. Beyond personal history, Esther's memoir is an important tribute to pre-war Jewish Warsaw, offering rich descriptions of its cultural and social life. The book was published in 2014 by the independent press MoshPit Publishing.