

Norman Schindler

Title: *From Essen to Melbourne: One of twenty very lucky boys*

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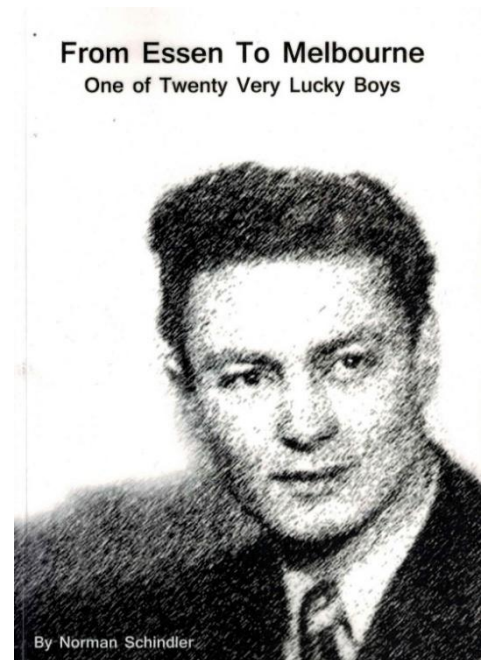
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Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Nazi Germany; Zbąszyń refugee camp; Jewish refugee; adolescent survivor.



From Essen to Melbourne is the 106-page memoir of German survivor of Polish-Jewish origin Norman Schindler, who was deported with his family from Essen to the Zbąszyń refugee camp in 1938. In May 1939, he became one of only twenty adolescent boys from Poland granted landing permits to Australia. After winning this “lottery of life” Norman reluctantly left his family, who later perished in the Bolechów ghetto despite Norman’s efforts to bring them to Australia.

Pages 1-22 describe Norman’s childhood in Essen. Pages 23-37 recount the rise of Nazism and antisemitism in Germany and the family’s brief interlude in Bolechów, Poland. Pages 38-53 cover the 1938 deportations of Polish Jews, life in the Zbąszyń refugee camp, and Norman’s emigration to Australia. Pages 54-76 describe his wartime and post-war years in Australia and marriage. Pages 77-106 offer reflections on family, overseas travel, and the fate of his relatives in Poland and America.

Norman Schindler was born on 22 February 1924 in the industrial city of Essen to Polish-Jewish parents Tilly Reiss and Leon Schindler. He had an older sister, Mina. His parents had moved from Poland to Germany in search of better economic opportunities, operating a modest dairy shop. Although observant Jews, the family had good relations with their Catholic neighbours; Norman attended a Catholic primary school until age six, when he transferred to a Jewish school.

In 1934, when Norman was ten, his parents no longer felt safe in Germany and returned to Poland, settling in Bolechów (now in Ukraine) with Norman’s maternal grandfather. Living conditions were primitive and after only four months the family returned to Essen, where Norman became active in the Zionist youth movement.

Back in Essen, the family lived in frugal accommodation. Leon supported the family through door-to-door sales and small trade work, often dealing with the wives of miners and steelworkers, many of whose men were arrested for communist leaning and interned in camps for “re-education”.

From 1936, the Jewish community organised free English lessons and vocational classes at the local recreation centre to help young Jews gain skills amid worsening restrictions. Norman spent several happy months attending these classes. However, as antisemitic restrictions intensified, the family grew increasingly concerned; storm troopers marched through the streets and Norman was frequently harassed by the Hitler Youth. The family sought to emigrate with the help of relatives in America, but were unable to secure the necessary papers.

In late October 1938, German authorities launched a large-scale round up of Jews of Polish origin. On 28 October, a police raid targeted Norman’s building: residents were arrested in the middle of the night, assembled in a schoolyard, and transported on sealed trains to the Polish border. The Schindlers narrowly avoided arrest, but the incident convinced them to leave voluntarily. After collecting money owed to him, Leon surrendered to the authorities and the family was transported in sealed trains to ‘no-man’s-land’ on the German-Polish border, escorted by police with dogs.

Polish soldiers, caught unprepared, hastily transferred the deportees to the nearby garrison town of Zbąszyń, where a makeshift refugee camp was established. Polish civilians and the Jewish community brought clothing and food, and a formal aid committee was organised. The Schindlers were housed in an overcrowded apartment with eight other people. Deportees were forbidden to leave the town, which was guarded by Polish soldiers. This was two weeks before Kristallnacht.

While in the Zbąszyń refugee camp Norman kept busy with short-term voluntary work and labouring jobs. One evening he learned of a scheme to send boys aged fourteen to sixteen to Australia, organised and funded by wealthy Jewish-Australian businessmen seeking to rescue young Polish-Jewish refugees and orphans. At his father’s urging, Norman applied for the scheme along with 150 others. After many interviews and medical examinations, he was one of the twenty boys selected – unknowingly winning what he later called the “lottery of life”.

The boys travelled to Danzig and boarded the SS *Batory*, crossing to London where they stayed for a week in a Jewish shelter. They then sailed to Australia on the SS *Oronsay*, arriving in Melbourne on 29 May 1939 after a four-week journey.

In Melbourne, Norman was taken in by the Bluthal family and lived with five other Polish boys. He struggled with homesickness and contacted the Jewish Welfare Society to obtain landing permits for his family, but the outbreak of war in September 1939 put an end to his efforts. His parents were released from the Zbąszyń camp and returned to Bolechow, which soon fell under Soviet occupation. Norman maintained correspondence with them until 1941, when Germany invaded the USSR. He never

heard from them again. In 1967, during a visit to Israel, he learned that his family had been murdered in 1943 in the Bolechow ghetto.

In Australia, Norman became deeply involved in the early Zionist movement and helped found Habonim in Melbourne. He later studied at the University of Melbourne and became an accountant. In 1952, he married Ruth Hayat. The couple had two children.

From Essen to Melbourne is a concise, lucid account of the author's life in Germany, Poland and Australia. It offers valuable insight into Jewish communal life in Essen, including relations between German Jews and Jewish migrants from Poland, and the religious, political, and cultural climate of the industrial Ruhr region. It also offers insight into Jewish deportations to Zbąszyń and life in the refugee camp, as well as wartime and post-war Melbourne. The book is self-published without professional editing. It was written with assistance from the Makor Jewish Library's "Write Your Story" program.