

Alexander Lowy

Title: *I am a Survivor: A Memoir by Alexander Lowy*

Author: Alexander Lowy

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Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library, Sydney Jewish Museum, National Library of Australia and other libraries.

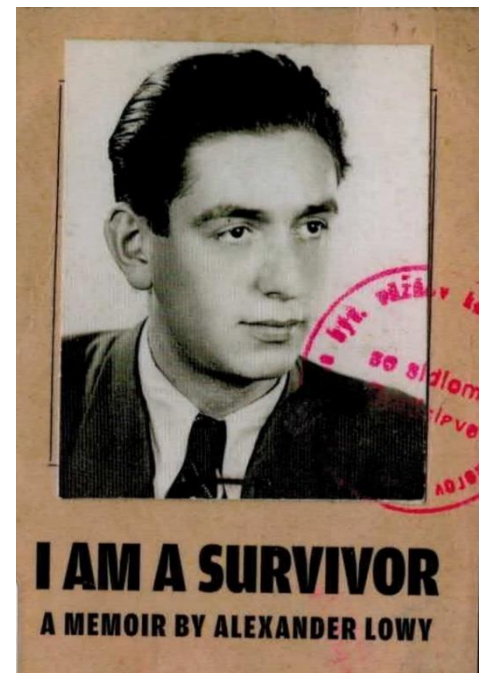
Cities/towns/camps: Slovakia: Filakovo; Hungary:

Budapest; Austria: Mauthausen; Australia: Sydney

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

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: Hungarian Labour Brigade; concentration camp; death march.



I Am a Survivor is the 186-page memoir of Slovakian survivor Alexander Lowy, who after being conscripted into the Hungarian labour brigade was deported to Mauthausen in 1944 and endured multiple death marches until liberation.

Pages 1–49 trace the author's family history and pre-war childhood and adolescence. Pages 50–88 recount the outbreak of war, his conscription into a Hungarian forced-labour brigade and the fate of his family, with the detailed account of his experiences in labour camps beginning on page 77. Pages 89–104 contain historical and family photographs. Pages 105–131 describe the final months of the war, including the death marches from Mauthausen to Gunskirchen, liberation, and broader reflections on the history of the war and the Holocaust. Pages 132–151 cover the immediate post-war period, his return to Hungary, reunion with surviving family members, and his subsequent life in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Pages 152–186 discuss his emigration and life in Australia.

Alexander Lowy was born on 13 October 1921 to Ilona Grünfeld and Hugo Lowy. The eldest of four children, he had a younger sister, Edith, and two younger brothers, John and Frank. The family was deeply religious and lived in poverty. After matriculating, he trained as a glazier.

In 1942, aged 21, Alex was conscripted into a Hungarian forced-labour brigade. While he was serving in the brigade his family relocated to Budapest. German forces occupied Hungary on 19 March 1944. The following day, his father left for the railway station to purchase tickets so that the family could escape, but he never returned. The family later learnt that he had been deported to Auschwitz and murdered.

Meanwhile, Alex's labour brigade was sent to the Hungarian–Romanian border, where its members were forced to construct an airfield and permitted to collect water from a well only once a week. They were subsequently transferred to Nadwórna, in German-

occupied Poland, where they built roads and dug trenches. The labourers also carried food and ammunition to German front-line positions where they were exposed to Soviet fire. They received grossly inadequate rations.

In late 1944, the brigade was transported to Austria, where Alex recalls that approximately 200 men were confined in a wine cellar outside an unnamed village. These details closely resemble the documented Donnerskirchen–Purbach forced-labour camp complex, although the location cannot be conclusively identified. The prisoners were put to work clearing snow and endured starvation, exposure and epidemics. Many died or were executed when they became too weak to work.

In March 1945, the surviving labourers were evacuated to Mauthausen. During this and subsequent marches, Alex witnessed repeated acts of brutality: wounded and exhausted prisoners were shot, and soldiers beat the passing column with rifle butts, killing many. On arrival, Mauthausen was so overcrowded that Alex's group spent its first night standing outdoors in the rain. After approximately a month, they were sent on another death march to Gunskirchen, a subcamp of Mauthausen.

Alex spent approximately three weeks at Gunskirchen, where prisoners received almost no food or water and were crammed into primitive, overcrowded huts. Diarrhoea and dysentery spread rapidly, killing hundreds each day. Every morning, survivors were forced to drag the bodies of those who had died overnight outside, where they were piled for collection and burial in mass graves. After the guards fled before the advancing Allies, Gunskirchen was liberated by the American army on 4 May 1945. Severely emaciated, Alex had collapsed and was mistaken for dead until he managed to raise his hand towards a passing American jeep. He was rescued and taken to the Alpenjäger Barracks, which had been converted into a temporary hospital and where he spent months recovering.

Once strong enough to travel, Alex joined a group of former Hungarian and Czechoslovak prisoners making their way eastwards. Travelling largely on foot, they received food and shelter from Polish and Czechoslovak villagers, some of whom allowed them to sleep in barns or transported them by horse and cart. After reaching Bratislava, Alex received assistance from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and boarded a train to Budapest, where his sister Edith was waiting for him. His mother and siblings had survived the war in hiding under false identities. They were shocked by Alex's skeletal appearance, while his mother continued to grieve for her murdered husband and siblings.

Several months later, the family returned to Fil'akovo and attempted to rebuild their lives. Drawing upon his earlier training as a glazier, Alex established a picture-framing business. In 1947, his brothers emigrated to Palestine. After Edith married and her husband obtained Australian landing permits through relatives, Alex and his mother also decided to emigrate. They secured landing permits in 1949 and settled in Sydney. Alex began recording his memories in 1989, completing a typescript entitled *Dedicated to My Children and Grandchildren* that same year. The manuscript, which is available at

the Melbourne Holocaust Museum, was later edited and published in 2011 as *I Am a Survivor* through the Sydney Jewish Museum's Community Stories Project.

I Am a Survivor is a wide-ranging autobiography that is rich in personal recollection but uneven in detail. It offers a candid portrait of the author's childhood and adolescence within the Orthodox Jewish community of Fil'akovo, as well as vivid accounts of the final months of the war, the death marches and liberation, although his experiences in the Hungarian labour brigades receives comparatively limited attention. The narrative is often episodic rather than strictly chronological, moving between wartime experiences, earlier memories, second-hand stories, and broader reflections on the Holocaust. Consequently, some names, places and dates are missing or lack precision, while certain events appear to be conflated. Nevertheless, the memoir provides valuable insight into the pre-war Orthodox Jewish world destroyed by the Holocaust, as well as the wartime death marches and the author's later struggle with religious faith.