

Miklos and Lilian Wirth

Title: *We survived, for a purpose: From Nyírbogát and Fiume to Melbourne*

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

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: in-hiding; ghetto; concentration camp; death march; child survivor.



We survived, for a purpose is the 159-page memoir of Miklos and Lilian Wirth (née Friedrich). Lilian was orphaned at six when her parents were deported to Auschwitz. She survived in hiding with her brother in an Italian convent. Miklos survived Auschwitz, forced labour camps and a 600 km death march to Bergen-Belsen before being liberated in 1945. After the war, fate brought them to Melbourne where they fell in love and married.

Pages 1-14 detail Miklos' childhood, family, antisemitic measures in wartime Hungary, and Nazi occupation in March 1944. Pages 15-36 describe his internment in the Nyíregyháza ghetto, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Project Riese labour camps. Pages 37-49 recount the forced march to Bergen-Belsen, liberation in April 1945 and recovery at the Bergen-Belsen DP camp. Pages 50-70 cover his return to Hungary, flight to Vienna and emigration to Melbourne.

Pages 71-85 recount Lillian's wartime experiences and post-war emigration to America. Pages 86-108 describe her relocation to Melbourne in 1955 and marriage to Miklos. Pages 109-44 are written by Miklos, describing their married life, retirement and Lillian's death. Pages 145-59 conclude with a eulogy for Lillian written by her son, Andrew.

Miklos:

Moshe (Miklos) Yankel Wirth was born on 8 May 1924 in the village of Nyírbogát, in eastern Hungary, the youngest of three sons born to Etel Heller and Josef Wirth. His father, a master shoe-maker, operated a successful shoe factory and the family were strictly observant Orthodox Jews.

In 1938, at age fourteen, Miklos left school to work at his father's factory while his older brothers, Lajos and Béla, served in the Hungarian army. In the early 1940s, antisemitic laws intensified and both brothers were conscripted into the Hungarian forced labour brigade.

In March 1944, following the Nazi occupation of Hungary, local police rounded up the Jewish community of Nyírbogát and confined them in the Nyíregyháza ghetto. Due to overcrowding, the Wirths and other families were moved to a farm in Nyirjes. In mid-May, the Jews of Nyíregyháza were publicly marched to the railway station and packed into cattle cars bound for Auschwitz.

Upon arrival after a gruelling five-day journey, Miklos was separated from his family. Interned in Auschwitz-I, he soon learned from a Polish Kapo that his parents had been murdered in the gas chambers. Two weeks later, he was sent to Birkenau to work in a commando responsible for collecting the clothes of those murdered. He was later transferred back to Auschwitz-I and eventually sent to the Wolfsberg labour camp in the Silesian town of Włodarz.

At Wolfsberg – part of the Project Riese complex – Jewish prisoners laboured for 12 hours a day laying railway tracks and constructing an underground complex in the Owl Mountains, hauling iron rails and sleepers without proper tools, food, or rest. Many collapsed and died from exhaustion or were crushed.

After six to eight weeks, Miklos volunteered for shoemaking work in the nearby Wüstegiersdorf camp, where conditions were marginally better. Four months later, he was among 200 prisoners forced on a death march to Lower Saxony. Over several weeks, the exhausted and emaciated prisoners trekked 600km through the countryside, with many shot along the way.

At Hildesheim concentration camp, Miklos witnessed an Allied air raid. The next day, the prisoners were moved to an unnamed camp in Hanover, then to Celle, where Miklos saw a group of inmates take violent revenge on a brutal Kapo. Two weeks later, they were marched to Bergen-Belsen where conditions were appalling. Miklos survived there until the camp's liberation by the British Army on 15 April 1945. Upon seeing the Star of David sewn on a British soldier's uniform, Miklos kissed the man's boots.

He was transferred to the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons (DP) camp to recover from typhus and malnutrition, remaining there for seven months and working in the kitchen.

At the end of 1945, he returned to Hungary and reunited with his surviving brother Béla. Together they reopened their family's shoe business, but communist restrictions forced its closure in 1947. Two years later, Miklos fled communist Europe with the help of a Zionist organisation. He crossed into Czechoslovakia on foot and after several months in Bratislava travelled to Vienna. There, he sheltered in the Rothschild Hospital DP camp, supported by the JOINT. After six months, Miklos moved to the Hallein DP camp near Salzburg where he stayed for a year. With help from a fellow shoemaker from Nyírbogát, he secured an Australian landing permit. He departed Salzburg in late 1950, sailing from Genoa on the SS *Surriento*, and arrived in Melbourne on 21 December. Béla joined him in 1957.

Lilian:

Lillian Friedrich was born 16 December 1936 in Fiume (now Rijeka, Croatia), a Yugoslav province in Italy, to middle-class Orthodox parents of Hungarian ancestry, Mira Vamos and Andrew Friedrich. She and her younger brother Alan were raised by a devoted Christian nanny, Irma, and spoke Hungarian, Italian and Croatian.

In 1938, fascist Italy enacted race laws that stripped the Friedrichs of their citizenship, rendering them stateless. After the 1941 German and Italian occupation of Yugoslavia, the family fled to Milan with Irma. Entrusting their children to Irma's care, Mira and Andrew sought help to flee Italy, but were arrested and deported to Auschwitz. They were never seen again.

To protect them, Irma took the children to a convent in Treviglio, Lombardy, where they remained in hiding for 18 months. Though treated kindly by the nuns, the children led an isolated life, attending daily mass instead of school and hiding in a barn during air raids.

After the war, the children were placed in a Red Cross facility and later in a Jewish orphanage, where they were contacted by a Zionist group who prepared them for emigration to Palestine. After several weeks, the Friedrich children were selected for emigration, but just as they were boarding a bus Rose, their maternal aunt, arrived and reclaimed them.

The children then travelled by ship to New York, where they lived with their aunt and uncle. They quickly adapted to life in America, attending public school and learning English. In 1955, at the ages of seventeen and fifteen, the children were relocated to Australia to join their paternal uncles and cousins.

Lillian began working at a dress shop and became a skilled dressmaker. Shortly after arriving, she met Miklos at a dance. The couple married just three months later, and their son Andrew was born in December 1957. After years of hard struggle, they became successful retailers and enjoyed a happy marriage for 62 years, until Lillian's death in 2017.

We Survived, For a Purpose narrates the wartime and postwar experiences of Miklos and Lillian Wirth through candid, poignant vignettes. Miklos's account offers raw insight into the brutality of camp life, touching on difficult subjects such as cannibalism and inmate-led retribution, as well as moments of hope and resistance. Though not all early events are recounted in detail the memoir is rich in dates, names, and historical detail. There are some typographical errors in German spelling which have been corrected in this summary (e.g., *Riese*, *Wolfsberg*).

Lillian's account, by contrast, is more general and occasionally vague, shaped by her young age during the war and the monotony of life in hiding. Her testimony focuses primarily on the postwar period and her adjustment to life in the United States and Australia. The memoir was written and published as part of the Makor Jewish Community Library's "Write Your Story" program.