

John Birner

Title: *Changing Landscapes: The story of my formative years*

Author: John Birner

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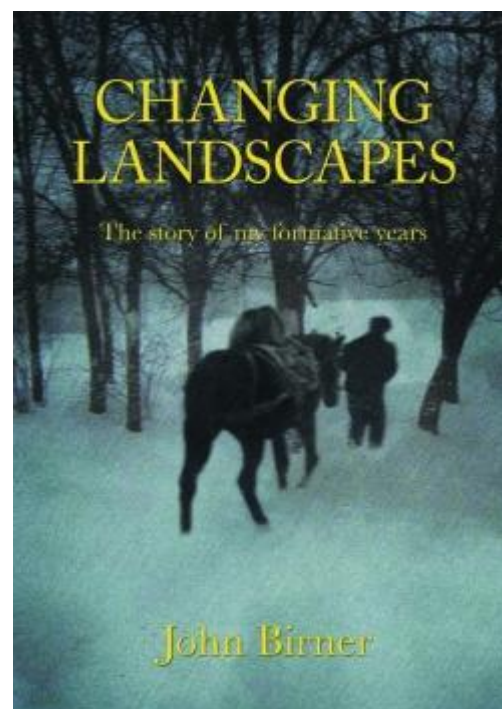
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library, Melbourne Holocaust Museum, State Library of Victoria and National Library of Australia.

Cities/towns/camps: Poland: Krakow, Lublin, Gliwice, Zabrze; Ukraine: Lviv (Lvov); Soviet Union: (Ural Mountains) Berezniki, Cherdyn, Nyariz Soviet labour camp; Uzbekistan: Bukhara; Austria: Rothschild Hospital and Haid DP camps; Germany: Munich, Weilheim and Greifenberg DP camps; France: Marseille; Israel: Akko, Neve Eitan, Jaffa; 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.



Changing Landscapes is the 113-page memoir of Polish survivor John Birner who was exiled to a Siberian labour camp after escaping the Nazi-occupied Krakow with his family.

Pages 1-16 briefly recount the author's childhood in Krakow and flight to Lvov following the Nazi invasion. Pages 17-44 describe his family's exile to Siberia and life in Uzbekistan. Pages 45-68 describe their repatriation to Krakow in 1946, preparations for *Aliyah* and time in Zionist-run DP camps. Pages 69-113 recount his life in Israel from 1948-54 and subsequent emigration to Melbourne. The memoir contains 35 historical photographs of the author and his extended family.

John (Janek) Birner was born circa 1929 in Krakow, Poland, the eldest child of Leon and Lola. His birthdate is not provided, and his younger sister is not named. His father was a successful businessman who owned a popular delicatessen. The family lived in a well-to-do part of Krakow among largely assimilated Jews and only spoke Polish. As a child, John attended a state school and never experienced antisemitism.

In September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, and the family fled east towards Lublin. During the journey, they often hid in roadside ditches to avoid German bombers which strafed the roads, killing and wounding many people and their horses. In the chaos, they were forced to leave their grandfather in the care of nuns at a village convent.

Arriving in Lublin to find the city under heavy German bombardment, they continued to Soviet-occupied Lvov. Life temporarily stabilized until the spring of 1940, when Soviet authorities arrested the family after John's father registered for repatriation to Poland.

Following a gruelling fourteen-day journey in crowded cattle cars, the Birner family arrived in the remote forest settlement in Nyariz where they lived for the next fifteen months in primitive log cabins. All able-bodied men, including John's father, were conscripted into a labour battalion felling trees, leaving eleven-year-old John as the head of the household.

Life in Nyariz was marked by harsh conditions, minimal resources, and daily struggle. With a meagre daily food ration of 300 grams, John stole potatoes from nearby farms, collected water from the river, and bartered sugar brought from Lvov to help his family survive.

In autumn 1941, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Birners were released and began a month-long journey to Bukhara. There, they continued to live in destitution. To sustain the family, John's father began trading rice and tea on the black market in Kyzyl-Orda – a town 800 kilometres away. When that became too dangerous, he found work at a local uniform factory and John began smuggling the surplus materials to trade in the black market. Though punishable by imprisonment, these methods enabled their extended family's survival.

By 1943, starvation was so severe that garbage trucks began collecting the dead from the streets. Obtaining bread rations became increasingly dangerous, as desperate crowds queuing for food became violent. In the summer, John could not even secure a pair of shoes and was forced to walk barefoot.

Despite these hardships and scarce resources, John resumed his education in 1942 at a school established by Polish-Jewish educators, where he formed lasting friendships and participated in Zionist activities.

In mid-1946, the Birners were repatriated to Krakow, where they found a Polish family occupying their apartment. John's father eventually recovered their home and belongings with the help of police. During this time, John reconnected with surviving Jewish friends and joined *Aliyat Hanoar*. A few weeks after his return to Poland, he moved to a Zionist youth camp in Gliwice and began preparing for emigration to Palestine. There he met his future wife, Rena Krieger.

A few weeks later, the group was transferred to Zabrze. In August 1946, with assistance from *Bricha*, John's group of approximately 120 adults and children crossed the Polish-Czech border, lodging in forest cabins near the border and posing as a summer scout camp. After bribing border guards, they marched across the Czech countryside before boarding a train to Vienna under the guise of Greek scouts to avoid Soviet detection.

In Vienna, they were briefly accommodated at the Rothschild Hospital DP camp before relocating to Haid, where they lived in log cabins and survived on meagre rations supplied by the JOINT. They later moved to Zionist-run DP camps in Weilheim and Greifenberg, with continued support by the JOINT and UNRRA. They were also educated and trained by Haganah officers. After excelling in an intensive military course, John became a trainer himself.

In April 1948, as the Zionist emigration movement intensified, John and Rena departed for a Haganah-run camp in Marseille. Four weeks later, they sailed to Israel aboard the *Endeavour*, a Greek vessel secured by the Haganah. Meanwhile, John's family emigrated to Melbourne.

The couple married soon after and spent a year at Kibbutz Neveh Eitan. They later moved to Jaffa, where their son Zvi (Henry) was born in 1950. After years of hardship and austerity, and following an eye injury sustained during his army service, the family emigrated to Melbourne in 1954 after landing permits were obtained by relatives.

Years later, John began writing his wartime memories by hand. After connecting with the Makor Jewish Community Library "Write Your Story" Program co-ordinator, John expanded the original manuscript which was published through the program.

Changing Landscapes offers a compelling account of the author's life and wartime experiences. Beyond detailing the hardships of war, the memoir provides valuable insights into the post-war Zionist movement in Europe – particularly the Aliyah Bet operations and activities of the Haganah – as well as life in the formative years of the Israeli state.