

Icyk Mendel Reiser

Title: *The Watchmaker*

Author: Icyk Mendel Reiser

Publisher: Self-published (manuscript)

Place of Publication: Melbourne

Year of Publication: N/a

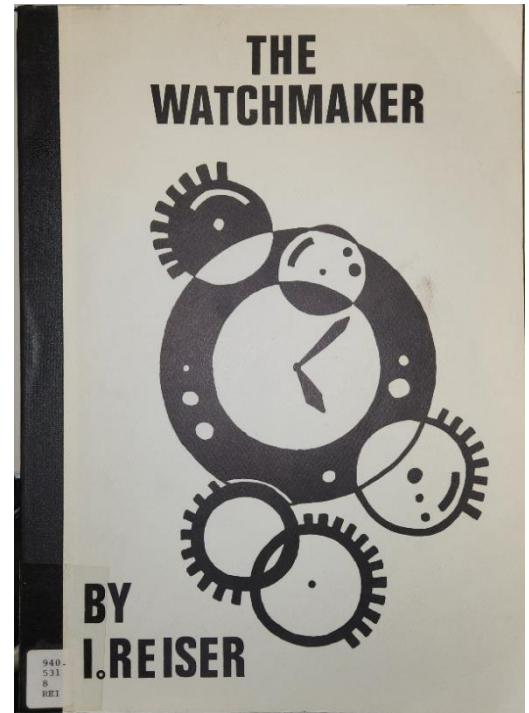
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library and Melbourne Holocaust Museum.

Cities/towns/camps: Ukraine: Kuty, Kolomyya, Lwów, Czernivtsi, Kharkiv, Bugodov (Bohodukhiv); Poland: Irena-Dęblin, Góra Kalwaria, Gdansk (Danzig), Stutthof, Szczecin, Gliwice; Russia: Saratov, Stalingrad, Kamyshin, Königsberg; Kazakhstan: Almaty, Aktobe; Belarus: Żlobin; Rogachev, Bobruysk; Germany: Bay of Lübeck, Ainring DP camp; Australia: Melbourne.

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

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Polish-Jewish POW; Red Army soldier; liberator.



The Watchmaker is the 40-page manuscript of Jewish Red Army soldier and tank technician Icyk Mendel Reiser, who fought to liberate Stalingrad and concentration camps near Stutthof, before being wounded in Poland.

Pages 1-8 cover the author's childhood in Kuty and work as a watchmaker. Pages 9-13 recount the onset of the war and the Russian occupation of Kuty. Pages 14-27 describe the German invasion of the Soviet Union and his experiences as a Red Army soldier. Pages 27-34 describe life in post-war Poland, and his escape to and life in a German DP camp. Pages 35-40 cover his emigration to Australia.

Icyk Mendel Reiser was born on 20 February 1915 in Kuty, a rural settlement in modern-day western Ukraine to Frida and Meier Reiser. He had three brothers, Abraham, Solomon, and Alter. The family was well-to-do, sustained by their father's business as a fruit and nut exporter. After matriculating, Icyk began a watchmaking apprenticeship that would lead to his post-war occupation.

In March 1937, Icyk was conscripted into the Polish Army. In August 1939, as war loomed, he was stationed at Irena-Dęblin. His unit soon came under heavy bombardment following the German invasion. On 13 September, his unit was deployed to defend Warsaw where he was captured in Góra Kalwaria and sent to a nearby POW camp. A week into his imprisonment, Icyk witnessed the segregation of Jewish

prisoners and escaped the camp, making his way to Lwów where his brothers were living.

Under Soviet occupation, Icyk found work as a government driver and supplemented his income through the black market. Transferred to Czernivtsi in Bukovina, he was later mobilised to deliver military supplies to the German-Russian border.

In June 1941, while transporting radio equipment, Icyk was caught up in the outbreak of the German-Soviet war. For two weeks, he drove across Ukraine enroute to Kharkiv, narrowly escaping the rapidly advancing German forces. In late July, he was ordered to transport government officials between Poltava and Kharkiv. When Kharkiv came under siege in September, he was conscripted into the Red Army and sent to a tank repair factory, where he worked twelve-hour shifts under constant air raids.

As Soviet losses mounted, the mechanics were pressed into combat. On 5 October 1941, the factory committed its last eleven T-34 tanks to battle near Bugodov and Icyk was sent to the front lines, where his tank was struck by heavy shellfire. The commander and gunner were killed. Icyk suffered a severe spinal injury and was sent to a military hospital in Saratov,

When the Germans advanced further east, he was evacuated to Almaty, Kazakhstan, where overcrowded wards and inadequate medical care compounded his suffering. Months later, he regained mobility and was sent for light duties, eventually retraining as an ambulance driver.

By mid-1942, Icyk was declared fit for active service and reassigned to the 5th Tank Battalion. After completing a refresher course in Aktyubinsk, he joined a convoy of technicians bound for the besieged city of Stalingrad. Stationed in Kamyshin, Icyk and his unit worked around the clock repairing tanks under relentless air raids and surviving on meagre rations of soup.

When Soviet forces turned the tide in November 1942, most technicians were sent to the front lines where many were killed. Promoted to Sergeant Major, Icyk crossed the frozen Volga in January 1943 and witnessed the desolation of Stalingrad after the German surrender. He later drove a captured German armoured vehicle for Red Army officers and assisted in salvaging equipment from the ruins.

During the summer offensive of 1943, Icyk was again promoted and became the tank driver for a battalion commander. His brigade advanced westward, capturing thousands of German soldiers but enduring heavy casualties. Poor nutrition and constant exposure weakened him, but after recovery he re-joined operations in Belarus, helping to capture Żlobin and Rogachev. In March 1944, his unit took part in the Bobruysk offensive, cutting off the German retreat and seizing large quantities of vehicles and prisoners.

By August 1944, Icyk was reassigned to drive senior officers between command posts, offering a brief respite from the front lines. In January 1945, the Red Army resumed its

assault on East Prussia. Icyk witnessed the destruction of Königsberg and the bombing of trains packed with civilians. By late March, his brigade captured Danzig and liberated a subcamp near Stutthof, where they found only three surviving Jewish women.

Days later, as German forces evacuated the remaining prisoners by sea, Icyk was ordered to assist in a rescue mission. He arrived just as the Germans blew up a ship at the Bay of Lübeck and witnessed countless bodies wash ashore. Soon after, he was wounded by a sniper in Szczecin and hospitalised. While he was recovering in hospital Germany surrendered and on 28 June 1945 he was discharged from the army due to his injuries.

Returning to Lwów, Icyk began searching for surviving relatives. In Czernivtsi, he located an uncle but learned that his parents and brothers had been murdered in the Kolomyia ghetto and various concentration camps.

Determined to rebuild his life, Icyk opened a small watch repair business in Gliwice and reconnected with friends Gershon and Chana Hasenfratz, who planned to emigrate to Australia. After the Kielce pogrom of 1946, Icyk resolved to leave Europe. Assisted by the Bricha underground, he escaped into Czechoslovakia and travelled via Vienna and Salzburg to the Ainring DP camp in Germany where he worked as a watchmaker and technician for the UNRRA.

In September 1947, the Hasenfratz family sent him landing permits for Australia. With support from HIAS and the JOINT, Icyk left Germany in July 1948, arriving in Melbourne on 22 August. Welcomed by the Hasenfratz family, he resumed work as a watch and jewellery repairer, eventually opening his own successful business. In June 1950 he married Lola, a survivor of Auschwitz.

The Watchmaker recounts the author's extraordinary journey from soldier and prisoner to immigrant and craftsman. Interspersed with photographs and official documents, the memoir documents his years in the Red Army with attention to dates, places, and military movements. In his brief memoir, the author is candid in his portrayal of the horrors witnessed, as well as the moral and emotional burdens endured, ranging from battlefield survival to the haunting aftermath of loss.