

# Israel Kipen

**Title:** *A Life to Live...*

**Author:** Israel Kipen

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**Year of Publication:** 1989

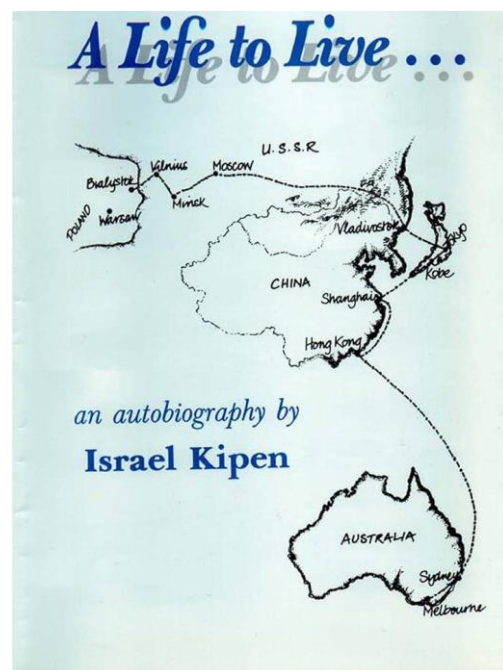
**Location of Book:** Monash University, Lamm Jewish Library, Melbourne Holocaust Museum, Sydney Jewish Museum, and other public libraries.

**Cities/towns/camps:** Poland: Bialystok; Lithuania: Vilnius (Vilna), Kaunas (Kovno); Soviet Union: Minsk, Moscow, Vladivostok; Japan: Tsuruga, Kobe; China: Shanghai; Australia: Sydney, Melbourne.

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

**Genre:** Memoir

**Key events/experiences:** Jewish refugee; Russian-occupation; Curaçao pass; Japanese-occupation.



*A Life to Live* chronicles the experiences of Israel Kipen, a Jewish refugee who fled Nazi-occupied Poland and found refuge across three continents – ultimately settling in Melbourne. The memoir provides a vivid account of Jewish diaspora communities and Israel's personal journey, beginning with his escape from Poland to Lithuania, his years in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, and his eventual emigration to Melbourne in 1946. There, he made lasting contributions to the post-war Jewish community and the development of the Jewish day-school system.

The memoir is 314 pages long. Pages 1-60 detail the history of Jewish Bialystok and the author's childhood. Pages 61-97 cover Bialystok in the 1930s, the Nazi invasion of Poland, and his flight to Vilna; Pages 98-145 recount his journey to Japan, life in Shanghai, and emigration to Melbourne. Pages 146-292 describe his life in Australia, involvement in Zionist organizations, and contributions to Jewish education. Pages 293-314 reflect on his later years from 1961-86.

Israel Kipen was born 21 March 1919 in Bialystok, Poland, the eldest of five children (four boys and one girl) born to Orthodox-Jewish parents, Judel and Sheina Kipen. His parents owned a knitwear manufacturing business. While attending Hebrew school, Israel developed a love for Hebrew language and literature, becoming an avid Zionist. After matriculation in 1937, he began working at his father's factory.

In September 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland, Bialystok was handed to Soviet rule. In October, Israel escaped to Vilna where he lived for a year under the Lithuanian administration. During this time, his father was arrested in Bialystok and placed in a Russian prison whilst his mother and siblings were deported to Siberia.

Seeking to escape Soviet rule and the threat of Nazi invasion, Israel began making plans to emigrate.

In the summer of 1940, the Dutch consulate in Kovno began issuing travel passes to Curaçao and transit visas to Japan – a thinly veiled bureaucratic move enabling Jewish refugees to escape to Japan. Frequently commuting between Vilna and Kovno, Israel secured the Curaçao pass and, after obtaining a Soviet exit visa, travelled via the Trans-Siberian railway to Vladivostok in February 1941 where he boarded a Japanese vessel to Tsuruga.

Upon arrival the refugees were taken to Kobe where they lived in overcrowded shelters provided by the Jewish community. With limited resources, Israel worked illegally as a messenger to supplement his income. Despite being an Axis power, the Japanese were kind towards the refugees. However, following the Nazi invasion of Russia, Japanese authorities grew anxious about the presence of Jewish refugees in Kobe, a city that was near key military and commercial ports, and relocated the refugees to Shanghai in October 1941.

In Shanghai, Israel settled in the French section of the International Concession, a foreign enclave governed by European colonial powers. With the onset of the Pacific War in December 1941, the Japanese military seized control of Shanghai's foreign areas and began imposing stricter security measures. Unexpectedly, Israel became a central figure in the Jewish community when he was appointed head of the community kitchen following the emigration of the former manager. Though under scrutiny by Japanese police, who suspected the kitchen of being a cover for Zionist and British enemy activities, Israel's work continued with minimal interference. In February 1943, following a military decree, all Jewish refugees were relocated to the Hongkew ghetto. The community kitchen was disbanded and daily life became more oppressive. However, Kipen was soon offered a managerial job at a Jewish hospital in the French Concession, which exempted him from the move to the ghetto.

In August 1945, following Japan's surrender, the American Navy took over Shanghai. With strong Zionist convictions, Israel hoped to emigrate to Palestine, but bureaucratic delays compelled him to explore other options. He eventually decided to settle in Australia after receiving a landing permit from a maternal cousin who emigrated before the war. With passage funded by the JOINT, Israel arrived in Sydney in May 1946, eventually settling in Melbourne where he established a successful knitwear manufacturing business.

Israel secured landing permits for his family who survived the war in Siberia and Central Asia. In March 1948, his parents and sister emigrated to Melbourne and by January 1949, his three brothers joined them. Through their shared involvement with the Victorian Zionist Organisation, Israel met his future wife, Laura Braitz. The couple married in 1950 and had two children, Doron and Aviva.

After retiring from his business in 1977, Israel resumed his education at the age of 58, eventually earning a BA and MA from the University of Melbourne, with a focus on

Hebrew language and Zionism. Throughout his life, Israel remained deeply involved in Jewish communal activities. As one of the founders of Mount Scopus College, he served on its School Executive from 1949 to 1958. He was also a founding member of the Bialystoker Centre, an immigration reception centre in St. Kilda. As president of the State Zionist Council, Israel played a pivotal role in transforming the Bialik School from an afternoon and Sunday school into a full-time Jewish day school. He was a generous philanthropist and in 1995, Monash University honoured Israel's contributions by naming its Judaica collection the Laura and Israel Kipen Judaica Collection. In 1997, he gave his testimony to the Shoah Foundation and published *Ahad Ha-am: The Zionism of the Future*, a scholarly work on the philosophical foundations of Zionism.

*A Life to Live* is a rare and invaluable autobiographical work. The memoir not only documents the author's own experiences but also provides incisive and thoughtful commentary on Jewish cultural, social, and political life across three continents during the turbulent wartime and post-war years. An astute observer, the author narrates his life story through a wide-ranging perspective, leveraging his academic expertise in history and political science to contextualize his experiences within broader social and political forces and provide a rich commentary on the major events and issues of his time.