

Felix Flicker

Title: *My Story: From Bialystok to Brighton*

Author: Felix Flicker

Publisher: Makor Jewish Community Library

Place of Publication: Caulfield South, VIC.

Year of Publication: 2009

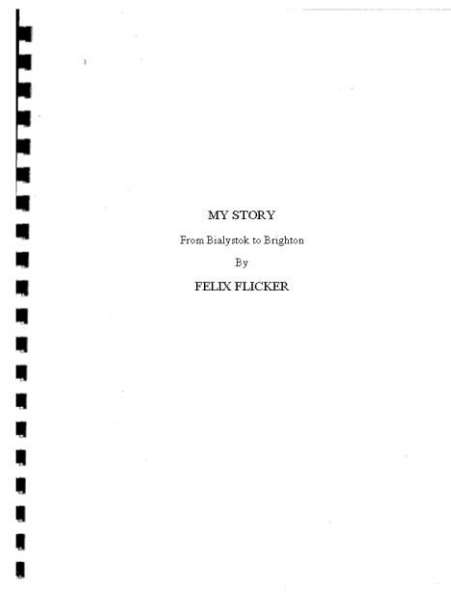
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library.

Cities/towns/camps: Poland: Białystok, Chełm, Majdanek, Wrocław (Breslau), Szczecin; Kazakhstan: Pavlodar, Kiziak; Caucasus; Germany: Hess-Lichtenau DP camp; Australia: Melbourne.

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

Genre: Memoirs

Key events/experiences: Soviet-occupation; Soviet collective farm; Soviet soldier; liberator.



My Story: From Bialystok to Brighton is the 37-page manuscript of Polish survivor, Felix Flicker, who was exiled to Siberia in 1940 after his father was declared a “capitalist” following the Soviet occupation of Białystok. At the age of seventeen, Felix enlisted in the Soviet army and participated in the liberation of Majdanek.

Pages 1-7 recount his childhood and family history. Pages 8-27 describe the Soviet occupation of Białystok following the outbreak of war and the family’s deportation to Siberia. Pages 28-37 describe his family, business ventures and charity work.

Felix Flicker was born 6 June 1925 in Białystok, the eldest child of David Flicker and Rifka Kartoflewicz. He had a younger brother Harry and sister Kelia. His father, a manufacturer, owned a cooking oil factory. Although the family observed Shabbat and adhered to kosher dietary laws, Felix did not attend Cheder. Educated during the period when Białystok was part of the Russian Empire, his parents spoke Russian and Yiddish. They were ardent Zionists, and Felix became a member of the Betar youth movement during his childhood.

In September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland and occupied Białystok but transferred the city to Soviet control two weeks later. Under Soviet occupation, the family’s oil business was confiscated and Felix’s father, labelled a ‘capitalist’ faced intense scrutiny. In November, his father was arrested by the NKVD and imprisoned after being declared an “enemy of the state”. Relocated to a prison in Minsk, he was later deported to Siberia.

In April 1940, six months after the father's arrest, Soviet authorities detained the Flicker family and exiled them to Siberia. They were transported in open trucks to the railway station and confined in overcrowded cattle wagons under deplorable conditions, resulting in the death of an infant during the journey. The wagon doors were only opened infrequently to provide meagre supplies of bread and water. A makeshift toilet was fashioned by creating a hole in the wagon floor. After a 26-day journey, the train arrived in Pavlodar, northern Kazakhstan. The prisoners were then conveyed by ox-drawn sledges to a collective farm in Kiziak, 40 kilometres away, where they laboured cultivating potatoes and pumpkins. Life in Kiziak was characterized by extreme deprivation, with inadequate food, freezing temperatures reaching -55°C in winter, and unsanitary living conditions.

In June 1941, the Polish government-in-exile secured the release of Polish political prisoners in Siberia, prompting the Flicker family's relocation to Pavlodar. Felix attended school for a year before entering the workforce, while his siblings, Harry and Keila, continued their education, benefiting from instruction by teachers from Moscow and Leningrad. The family subsisted on meagre rations, with their mother augmenting their income by sewing clothing and trading scrap fabrics for food. Their circumstances improved marginally as she engaged in black-market activities, producing and selling sewing threads, effectively establishing a small-scale cotton business in which the children also participated.

By chance the family received information from a recent Polish arrival that Felix's father was alive and in Komi. After corresponding with him he was able to join them in Pavlodar in 1943. Severely emaciated and ill, the family nursed him back to health and he later secured employment as an accountant. Motivated by his father's return, Felix resolved to enlist in the military.

In 1942, at the age of seventeen, Felix enlisted in the Soviet Army and was assigned to an artillery school in Ryazan, central Russia. After three months, he was transferred to the Polish Army and, in early 1944, sent to a military academy in Chełm. By nineteen, Felix graduated as a lieutenant in the Second Polish Army. In July 1944, he participated in the liberation of Majdanek, where he witnessed the execution of approximately thirty guards. His unit proceeded to liberate towns near the German-Polish border, including a visit to Auschwitz following its liberation.

In March 1945, Felix sustained injuries near Breslau when his jeep struck a landmine. Thrown from the vehicle, he evaded capture by hiding in bushes until he was rescued by scouts. After undergoing surgery for a broken leg he was transferred to a military hospital in the Caucasus, where he spent eight months recuperating. Despite scarce resources, Felix survived with the aid of a nurse with whom he developed a close relationship. He remained in hospital until the war's end and was discharged in November 1945, returning to Pavlodar after three years of military service.

In March 1946, the family was repatriated to Poland, settling in Szczecin. Subsequently, Felix joined the Bricha movement. With assistance from the JOINT, Felix facilitated the illegal emigration of approximately 150 Jewish refugees into Czechoslovakia and ultimately the Hess-Lichtenau DP camp in Germany by bribing Russian border guards and Allied soldiers. There, Felix and his brother Harry trained as dental technicians over a two-year period, receiving financial assistance from JOINT.

In 1948, Felix emigrated to Australia after securing landing permits from a former employee of his father's oil factory. After traveling via Paris, Marseille, and Bombay, he arrived in Sydney by HIAS-chartered plane in December. His family followed shortly after by ship. They were received by the Białystok Centre in Melbourne, which provided them with initial accommodation and secured employment for Felix with Victor Smorgon. Shortly thereafter, Felix met his future wife, Ursula. They married in May 1949 and had one daughter, Helen. After establishing a successful family grocery business, Felix's deep empathy for wounded servicemen led him to co-found Beit Halochem, a charity dedicated to supporting wounded Israeli soldiers. Felix also played a pivotal role in organizing Melbourne's annual commemoration of the Białystok Ghetto Uprising, an event he continued to lead until his later years.

My Story: From Białystok to Brighton offers a brief account of the author's wartime experiences. While it covers his time in Siberia in detail, it provides limited insight into his military service and the liberation of Majdanek. The memoir was written and published as part of the Makor Jewish Community's "Write Your Story" program and is available in the library as a spiral-bound manuscript.