

# **Mayer Bitterman's Holocaust Story Revealed**

**by Henry Bitterman**

This story is about my father, Mayer Bitterman, who survived the Holocaust. He was born in Krakow, Poland on August 9, 1920 and he died on April 8, 1989 in Cleveland, Ohio. He had one brother, Usher Salke Bitterman. His mother was Czewa Bitterman (maiden name Feuerstein) and his father was Heinrich (Henry) Bitterman.

My father grew up in Krakow, a big city in Poland. It had beautiful buildings and parks. His mother's family had a long history of living in Krakow, going back to the 1700's. His father was from Kroscienko, which is in southern Poland, an area with many mountains. Growing up, my father played sports like soccer, he went to movies, and he went to school. My dad helped his father in his tailor shop. He was studying business so he could help my grandfather run his business.

Growing up in Krakow meant experiencing some racism and antisemitism toward the Jews before World War II. Poland was influenced by Germany on its western border. Adolf Hitler also annexed other countries, like Austria and Czechoslovakia, before the start of World War II. Even before the war, Adolf Hitler was exhibiting racism and hatred toward the Jews in Germany and other European countries which also had some influence on Poland. However, it was mild compared to what was coming during World War II to the Jewish people.

In September of 1939, Germany invaded Poland and then life changed greatly for my father and his family. All Jews had to register with the

new government run by the Germans. Many new laws took away rights of the Jews, such as not being able to use public transportation or own property. The Nazis took all valuables, including jewelry, silver, and gold from the Jews. They were forced to move from their homes into the Krakow Ghetto. Only people who were born in Krakow or had family history of living in the area could go to the ghetto. Others were transported to concentration camps. Many families were forced to share a small apartment with other families.

The ghetto was surrounded by high brick walls and you needed a pass to leave and enter. People were forced to work for the Nazis, like slaves with no wages and poor conditions. There was also the threat of being killed or beaten by the Germans. Jews had no rights and had no choice but to do what the Germans wanted of them. There was starvation and suffering for all Jews in the ghetto and many died while in confinement.

My father had many jobs in Krakow and other areas of Europe during World War II. My father was labeled a skilled worker which helped save his life. All of the people in the ghetto were assigned jobs or picked up in the streets to perform work tasks, like shoveling snow. My dad was a good craftsman and good working with his hands. He worked with his brother who was an electrician on jobs for the Germans. One of his jobs was working at the Krakow airport installing electrical lines. Since the Jews could not use public transportation, he had to walk to and from the companies where he worked, sometimes miles away from where he lived.

My dad was assigned to work in a factory called Reidel and he lived near the factory in barracks. After the Reidel factory closed he was sent to the Oskar Schindler factory to work. Oskar Schindler was a

Nazi and owner of an enamelware factory for cookware. He also ran an ammunition factory where my father worked. The factory was located in the Krakow area. Oskar Schindler was a Nazi but he had empathy for the Jews and gave his workers better food and safer working conditions. He helped save 1200 Jews who were transported to Czechoslovakia when he moved his factory from Krakow. The factory was moved because the Russians, who were fighting the Germans, were getting close to Poland. Steven Spielberg (an American film director, producer, and screenwriter) made a movie about Oskar Schindler called "Schindler's List" in 1993.

Unfortunately, my father did not get on the famous Schindler's list when the factory was closed and instead he was sent to Mauthausen Concentration Camp in a box car. It was in August of 1944 and very hot. The conditions in the box car were very bad with poor air circulation and little food. There was only a bucket to use as a toilet. When he arrived at Mauthausen his clothing was taken from him and all his body hair was shaved. The hair was removed because of lice and other bugs. This was a very bad concentration camp where people were dying of starvation and harsh treatment from the Germans. They had a crematorium to dispose of the dead bodies.

My father worked on the "stairs of death" which was a job where the inmates had to carry rocks up 200 steps for building roads. Many of the inmates died doing this work. While doing this task my father was injured when a rock landed on his left leg. Fortunately my father was labeled a skilled worker and was transferred to a sub-camp of Mauthausen right after his accident. The factory was called Hermann Göring Werks or Works where Tiger tanks were built. My father worked at this factory until the end of the war when he was liberated by the Americans.

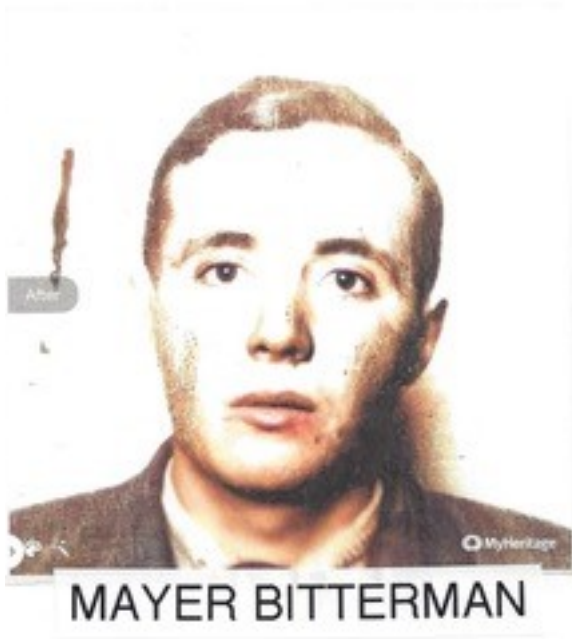
When my father was liberated by the Americans he was 70 or 80 pounds and a living skeleton. He was taken to a hospital where he slowly recovered, which took about one month. While being separated from his family, he learned what happened to his family. My father discovered his brother Usher Salke Bitterman was killed by the Germans because he worked in a resistance group in Krakow fighting the Germans. Salke was captured because of an informant who told the Germans about his location. My dad also found out that his parents were taken to concentration camps and murdered.

My father was placed in a displaced persons camp in Austria after the war where Holocaust survivors tried to regain their lives. My father discovered a few cousins survived the war and he made contact with them. However, most of his family were murdered by the Nazis. He lost his parents, his brother, his aunts, his uncles and many cousins. While in Austria, he met Simon Wiesenthal who was also an inmate in Mauthausen Concentration Camp and living in a displaced persons camp. My father became a witness in a trial in Dachau for the guards in Mauthausen because of his contact and friendship with Wiesenthal. In his Shoah video, my father stated that he did not have to testify because they had too much evidence on the defendants. Many of the defendants were sentenced to death for their crimes.

My father stayed in Europe until 1949 and then went to Cleveland, Ohio where he started a new life. He came to the United States having only a few cousins. He went back to school to learn English, found work, and got married. Mayer had two sons, one grandson and one great grandson. My father never talked about his experience during the Holocaust. He did not want to share his bad memories with his family. However, in 1984 he made a video about his Holocaust experience which can be viewed at the United States

Holocaust Memorial Museum online at the following site:

<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504999>



My father's picture from his Krakow Ghetto ID card found on the Yad Vashem website. (Early 1940's)

Henry Bitterman

