

## Follow-Up Note from the Author

It has been one of the greatest honors and blessings of my life to write the story of this incredible man who somehow found the strength, time after time, to go on, not as merely a survivor, but as someone who thrived. Joe had a choice when he walked out of that concentration camp nearly seventy years ago—a choice to succumb to his sorrow or to move forward with joy. He chose joy and, thankfully, joy found him. He found the love of his life, and his desire to provide for his new family led him to become one of the leading shoe designers in the world.

When Joe first shared his story with me, he said he wanted to get it all out, from “A to Z.” He began with such clarity that I was reminded of the early scene in James Cameron’s 1997 version of the *Titanic* when the elderly “Rose” could still describe the smell of the fresh paint. When Joe began to tell his story, in essence, this is how he began: “It was before dawn. I was sound asleep. There was a knock at the door. I went to open it wearing only a T-shirt and pajama bottoms. Two German soldiers were there, ordering me to come with them. Why? I hadn’t done anything wrong. I wanted to change my clothes, but they told me I had everything I needed. Everything I need? I walked out in my bare feet. I didn’t even get to say goodbye to my mother. They put me on a truck with several others. It was frigid. They drove us around, collecting more people. Some of the men died.”

And then a shadow came over Joe and his next words were a quick summary: “And then I was taken to Auschwitz and I worked in a coal mine. Then after the war, I moved to New York.” All the details were gone, and I knew I was witnessing how Joe had survived and why he was, and still is, known as “Smiling Joe.” He had skipped the details in his mind. During the course of our many interviews, Joe would often say, “That’s all there is,” and every time he said it, I knew more was coming. I believe there is still much more that will forever remain unspoken.

Some memories may still be too painful for him to want to remember. Some of what Joe has told me, I do not have the ability to put into words, for much of what he experienced is simply beyond words.

When I began writing about Joe's life, I had A and Z, but very little in between. To get the rest caused Joe tremendous heartbreak and pain in reliving what he has spent a lifetime trying to forget.

This story, during the time he was held captive, is as I say often in the story ... the essence of what was taken—every last bit of Joe. And yet, somehow, when Joe was liberated, he made a choice to put it behind him enough to rebuild from the ashes of his life. What he did throughout his imprisonment, and the way he moved forward afterwards, was, and is, a testament to the human spirit, to Joe, and to his faith. Joe is, without question, one of the kindest and most joy-filled people I have ever known, which is even more remarkable given what he endured.

Throughout his ordeal during WWII, Joe never stopped believing that God was present with him. He believes it still.

Long before I ever met Joe, I visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and, like so many others, was profoundly affected by what I experienced there. I was especially shaken by the sight of thousands of shoes of the Holocaust victims, many of them the small shoes of infants and children, all piled high—like the bodies of those Joe helped throw into the pits at Auschwitz. While writing this book, I thought often of those shoes. Perhaps it was because I was repeatedly struck by the importance of shoes throughout Joe's life, including the wooden clogs of Holland and the fear Joe had that the blisters caused by them might cost him his life. As I wrote, I envisioned the people who once wore those museum shoes, of them slipping those shoes off, trusting that they would find them again after they had showered away the stench of the horrific train ride. It's hard to fathom that something as tangible as shoes could survive when the precious lives they held did not.

Under the direction of Mr. Nagel, Joe made many shoes and boots in the days before the war. I wonder now, could any of the shoes he

so lovingly stitched together be in that pile? Could the bodies of the people he pushed in his cart have worn any of those same shoes? Could any of them be those of Joe's siblings or his mother? A mother who sacrificed so much to provide them for her children. I wonder. It is heartbreaking, such wonderings.

The first date I am certain of is April 30, 1942. On that date, it is recorded that 606 prisoners arrived from Radom, Poland, to Auschwitz and were given the numbers in the range corresponding to Joe's: 34207.

Other dates are less certain. There is even some confusion on the year in which Joe was born. He grew up believing it was 1922. His birth certificate, which Joe was able to secure after the war, shows 1920, a date that he now believes is accurate.

We believe that Joe was working under the direction of the Nazis, digging trenches in approximately August 1940. We have documents from the Buchenwald Concentration Camp showing that he arrived from Auschwitz and was assigned number 117.66. Another document shows that Joe was transported from Buchenwald on January 22, 1945, and arrived at the Ohrdruf Concentration Camp on January 24, 1945. Another undated document shows that later he was a survivor of the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp. All these documents validate Joe's recollections of the places he was held.

In between, there are missing pieces of the many smaller camps and sub-camps where Joe said he was imprisoned. I have done my best to reconstruct the puzzle of his time since the invasion of Poland in 1939, using the pieces that I have ... a puzzle that will never be complete, not since the day that a knock at his door changed everything. I have fought the urge to fill in every gap, every detail.

While we don't know the exact date he was taken from his family, what we do know is that he was taken.

Nancy Sprowell Geise—August 5, 2014