

ALEC WARD



Recalling a talk he gave to a school class about his life, Alec Ward remembers a student who said the survivor's story had changed his whole outlook. After spending time with a man who, despite his shattering wartime experience, is so loathe to hate and so eager to educate, it is easy to see why.

Alec Ward was born Abram Warszaw in Parysow, Poland in 1927. When the Nazis invaded, his family saw their freedoms rapidly evaporate. After restrictions on education and travel, the Warszaw's found themselves segregated into the Magnuszew ghetto in 1941. Alec became the breadwinner, selling smuggled cigarettes. "I used to sing Yiddish songs to attract customers," he recalls. (The same songs he now sings at the HSC Yiddish group he helped to found). Surviving the ghetto's sub-human

conditions became an everyday struggle. "Starvation and disease were everywhere. My father told me to take my brother and escape," explains Alec.

Living off the land and sleeping in haystacks for three months, the brothers were finally caught and sent to the first of three slave labour camps. "We were put in selection lines, my brother to the left and I to the right." Alec was never to see his brother again. By 1945, Alec had survived the dehumanising regimes of both Buchenwald and Mauthausen Concentration Camps, where he was finally liberated. "If I had not gone through it, I wouldn't believe it could have happened."

Alec arrived in the UK with the aid of the Central British Fund, as one of 'The Boys' — a group of 732, whose friendship bonded them together for life. (Alec's comradeship with 'The Boys' is told in Sir Martin Gilbert's book of the same name.) The retired couture tailor believes that without the shared experiences of the group, "life would have been unbearable". Continues the survivor: "We share the pleasures of life and the sadness." Alec's 'best friend' and wife, Hettie, has also helped him cope with another tragedy, when their son died of cancer in his early twenties.

Like so many other survivors, Alec refused to discuss the Holocaust for many years. "At first I couldn't talk, it was just too painful." But as the Holocaust became more widely discussed, he felt it was time to tell his story. And to those who have heard his emotive words and refusal to hate, it is clear he has much to teach. Alec has spoken to many audiences — although he admits that without the public speaking training gained at the Holocaust Survivors' Centre, he would have been too shy to have done so. Of all the synagogues, schools and audiences he has addressed, without question, he says, a group of life inmates at Lincoln Prison were his most rewarding. Organised by Ben Helfgott, chair of the 45-Aid Society, (a UK-based survivors' fundraising and support group), Alec and Hettie travelled to the prison to tell his story. As Alec explained to his enraptured audience, "I too was a prisoner - although my crime was to be born Jewish." A letter from one of the prisoners holds pride of place in Alec's album, next to pictures of his late son, married daughter and grandchildren. The inmate wrote:

"I admire your sense of forgiveness towards your tormentors' descendants and how you have moved on from your terrible traumatic experiences."
For Alec, teaching about the Holocaust is not just about remembering, but learning. He believes 'Education is the key, young people should be taught not to hate.'

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ALEC WARD'S STORY



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