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**Samuel Willenberg, laid to rest on Monday, was not the Nazi death camp's last man standing**

# There are still Treblinka survivors living. One tells his tale

Now in Sweden, 89-year-old Leon 'Poldek' Rytz remains active in spreading his tale of survival in the face of genocide

BY AMANDA BORSCHEL-DAN | February 22, 2016, 8:33 pm |

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healthy 89-year-old living in the southern Swedish city of Borås, Leon "Poldek" Rytz is no stranger to escaping death. Through a combination of miracles and help from fellow prisoners, as a teen he twice escaped the Nazis, including once from the death camp Treblinka.

This weekend, when international news agencies announced the death of Samuel Willenberg, many reports referred to him as [the last survivor of Treblinka](#). On Monday, as Willenberg was [buried in Israel](#), world news reports [again referred to him](#) as Treblinka's last survivor. But Willenberg was, in fact, the final survivor of the August 1943 *Treblinka prisoners' revolt*.

Seeing this misunderstanding in print, Rytz's daughter Louise contacted The Times of Israel by email, notifying the paper, "My father Poldek Rytz is also a survivor from Treblinka, and is also still alive... He is still very active in telling his survival story in schools and public meetings and in 2015 he was named 'Ambassador' of the city of Borås."

Because survivors are becoming older and less able to tell their own stories, Rytz's daughter Louise felt compelled to reach out.

"It is very important to keep the history alive with witnesses and survivors from the Holocaust, specially in Sweden, a country that has turned so anti-Semitic due to our aid to Palestine and as we have taken more than 1.5 million Muslims to Sweden just in the last 10 years. Hate is growing very fast, we feel safe, but what will be for our children?" she asks in an email.

But Rytz, like many Holocaust survivors, was imprisoned in several different Nazi camps, including Treblinka, Majdanek, and Bergen-Belsen. So is calling him a Treblinka survivor

factually correct?

According to Yad Vashem's head of public inquiries Ehud Amir, there is no binding definition of how a Holocaust survivor is labeled. However, "a person who was in several camps can be considered a survivor from each camp he attended," says Amir.

And so, in addition to a phone conversation during a vacation she was taking in Thailand, Louise, seeking to spread her father's tale of miraculous survival, provided an ad hoc English translation of his testimony, which he wrote in Swedish. With this testimony as a jumping-off point, plus a brief conversation with Rytz and his wife, The Times of Israel recounts a selection of Rytz's harrowing experiences during the Holocaust.

## From small town Poland to the gates of hell

Leon "Poldek" Rytz was born in 1927 in the small Polish town of Warka. When he was still a baby, the seven-member Rychwold family — Rytz changed his name later — relocated to Warsaw, where father Szlomo co-owned and managed a tea import company. However, by 1939, his father, pressed into service to the Polish Cavalry, was killed, leaving mother Lea alone to raise their five children just as the Nazis occupied Warsaw.

The family struggled to survive on a stock of tea his father and sister had hidden — "a small and limited life insurance," as Rytz remembers it. Tea was exchanged with a Polish family for food through his brother and sisters.

It was perilous to be seen on Warsaw's streets and as part of the Nazis' Operation Reinhard — code name for the systematic plan to exterminate Poland's Jews — Rytz was eventually among the many Jews captured and taken to the Warsaw Umschlagsplatz, a square located near the Jewish Ghetto. There, he says, "I found myself together with a lot of other horror-filled children."

Asked by The Times of Israel this week when these events occurred, Rytz, who although hale has severe hearing loss, said through his Holocaust survivor wife Ester Dyna Rytz that he is unsure of dates.

He said that during this period in his life, dates did not exist for him. He and his family "just struggled from day to day to survive." According to daughter Louise, however, it is safe to assume that Rytz was captured before the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April 1943.

The mass transport of Warsaw's Jews, the Grossaktion Warsaw, began on July 22, 1942, when Jews were deported on packed freight cars largely to the brand-new Treblinka death camp, located northeast of Warsaw. The deportations from Warsaw continued until the uprising when most of the ghetto — and its Jews — were decimated.

Treblinka continued operating through October 19, 1943, and according to historians, as many as 10,000 Jews were deported from Warsaw to the camp per day. In sum, up to 900,000 Jews were murdered in the gas chambers there, along with some 2,000 Romani.

After his capture in Warsaw, Rytz waited with hundreds of others for several days at the railway square for deportation. He was transported south, to the Majdanek death camp, where he stayed for a few days. He was then again forced onto a train and taken to Treblinka.

“When I arrived to the camp by train, a man by the name of Jozef Kaufman, who was a friend of my father before the war, recognized me and pulled me out of the line of people leaving the train. He told me, ‘If you go with them, you will be dead within 24 hours,’” recounts Rytz.

## A pair of daring escapes

Kaufman, 45, told the teen he would take care of him and he should stay with him. Kaufman, whom Rytz describes as “a big strong man,” was tasked with loading murdered inmates’ clothes onto the emptied trains’ wagons. Kaufman was given relatively free rein of the camp along with extra food rations, “as he had an agreement with the camp commandant Franz Stangl to collect and deliver all valuables he found in the prisoners’ luggage and clothes to Franz Stangl every evening,” says Rytz.

Some time after Rytz’s arrival, Kaufman told him that they must escape Treblinka to survive. No easy task, with Nazi guards and “cruel” Ukrainian and Lithuanian soldiers, who “killed people in the line just if they stopped,” says Rytz.

While packing the train cars one day, Kaufman pulled the guard on duty into one of the wagons, where he strangled him and took his bayonet. Kaufman pushed Rytz, along with another inmate, with him into another wagon filled with murdered inmates’ belongings, just before the train left the camp.

The three hid among the clothes as the train left Treblinka. Later, in seeing the approaching forest, Kaufman used the bayonet he had taken from the Ukrainian guard and opened the wagon’s lock. The three prisoners jumped from the moving train. Kaufman and Rytz ran into the woods; the third prisoner did not survive the fall.

After a few nights in the forest, the pair joined the Polish partisans, with whom they participated in different missions with the goal of blowing up railway lines and bridges.

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The pair escaped the partisans, but were soon captured again and taken to a forced labor camp in the German-occupied town of Skarżysko-Kamienna, about 150 kilometers (90 miles) south of Warsaw.

“At once I was taken to work at Werk C, where my task was to fill up missiles with [trinitrotoluene](#). It was an extremely dangerous environment that caused the entire body to turn yellowish. Protective clothes were unthinkable, since the average survival time at this work was approximately three-four months,” writes Rytz.

The 1997 book “Death Comes in Yellow” by Felicja Karay chronicles the Skarżysko labor camp, where she had been imprisoned. [Karay writes](#) in the popular history based on her doctoral dissertation that some 25,000 Jews passed through the labor camp, “and the large majority of them never lived to see its liberation.”

Kaufman and Rytz quickly assessed their options and decided to attempt another escape, through a sewer, and also with a third prisoner.

“The spotlight fell on the first man who came out of the sewer pipe, and he was shot. As we came out, we raised our hands so we were captured and taken back to the camp,” writes Rytz.

The pair were stood on barrels in a spot where all inmates must pass, with a sign around their necks stating, “Due to an escape we are to be executed in the evening.”

Rytz relates that a woman several years older than him “approached an SS officer and offered him a diamond she had hidden in her shoe, if her ‘brothers’ were saved.” The SS officer was named Battenschlager, a [widely reported](#) notorious sadist.

“The woman took a high risk, since he could have killed her and taken the diamond in any case. Miraculously, we were released,” he writes. Battenschlager returned the pair to Werk C, to a section in the factory in which ammunition cases were painted.

## Into Germany, and beyond

In 1944, as the Russians encroached on Nazi-occupied territory, Rytz was transported to Czestochowa, the setting for Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel “Maus,” and then to Germany, to the Buchenwald subcamp Dora-Nordhausen. On the way to Buchenwald, Rytz was separated from his protector and companion, Kaufman.

In February 1945 Rytz was taken 300 kilometers away to Bergen-Belsen, where he was placed among the Russian prisoners of war.

Ahead of Bergen-Belsen's April 1945 liberation by British forces, Rytz had already left the camp, taking advantage of the increasingly "chaotic" situation.

"I met an American brigade. The captain was a Jew and he felt much pity for us and promised to adopt me if I had lost all my family in the Holocaust. The captain was redeployed to Japan and we lost contact. Unfortunately I have lost and forgotten his name," writes Rytz.

How Rytz ended up settled in Sweden — a neutral country during World War II — is thanks to another heroic chapter of humanity in the Holocaust.

"I was transferred to Sweden thanks to a Swedish 'nurse' who was in charge of the transports, of Swedish White Buses," writes Rytz.

In the spring of 1945, a cooperation of some 300 Swedish Red Cross and Danish government workers set about rescuing prisoners from concentration camps. Originally only targeting Scandinavian citizens, the White Buses eventually had the transport capability to lift out some 1,200 people.

Operating under extreme danger and walking a diplomatic tightrope, the White Buses operation rescued 15,345 prisoners, among them 423 Scandinavian Jews who were in the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

In Sweden, Rytz, along with other Jewish youth, was put under the protection of the Zionist organization Hechalutz (the Pioneer) and sent to a "Kibbutz school" to prepare for resettlement in British Mandate Palestine.

In 1947, his group sailed on the Ulua, a ship originally built in 1912 to prevent alcohol being smuggled into Prohibition-era United States. In 1947, it had been purchased by [Aliyah Bet officials](#) and registered in Honduras to smuggle Jews into the Holy Land.

The group was caught on Cyprus, where the stateless Holocaust survivors were interred until the State of Israel was established.

However, Rytz was not among his peers on that journey.

"I was left behind, since just upon departure I had fallen ill and was caught with fever. They could not take the risk of bringing me on such an adventurous journey. I was left with only my pajamas, since everything had been packed to be brought with the group," writes Rytz.

Rytz stayed in Sweden, where he worked in textile and eventually established his own company in 1955, providing employment for many people, says daughter Louise.

He worked as a consultant for years after selling his business in 1985, but is now retired. And so this year, like every year, Rytz and wife Ester have plans to come to Israel for Passover, to celebrate.

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