

The sun sets behind the hospital block courtyard at Auschwitz, located in southern Poland.

# 'never again'

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence, which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

Night by Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor

## Holocaust survivor to speak as part of JSU Remembrance Day

Above, the spotlight in the main tower over the entrance to the uploading ramp at Birkenau, the sister camp to Auschwitz. Prisoners' wooden clogs, right, are now part of the Auschwitz Museum archives in Poland.

BY BRETT BUCKNER

Star Staff Writer

Not all scars are visible to the naked eye. Some remain hidden, consumed by the darkness of memory, where the delicate suffering of hope serves only as a constant reminder of a pain once endured but never forgotten. These are the scars that never completely heal.

Max Steinmetz has many scars.

As a Holocaust survivor, Steinmetz has witnessed evil and dropped his eyes from its hateful stare. His body has withstood the depths of human cruelty that destroyed his will to live. And his mind has spent the past 50 years struggling to find reason amid the insanity of the Nazi's "Final Solution" that included the torture and mass murder of 6 million Jews — two-thirds of the European Jewish population — his entire



STEINMETZ

family among them, during World War II.

Steinmetz, 79, who now lives in Birmingham where he is retired from the retail business, knows the only way to ensure the atrocities of the Holocaust never happen again is to reveal his scars and the scars of all the survivors to the world. So he'll be sharing his story as part of Jacksonville State University's annual Commemoration of the Holocaust of World War II on Thursday. The event takes place at 7:30 p.m. in the Stone Center Theater.

Simply because he is willing to do so doesn't mean that speaking about his survival in two of the most infamous extermination camps — Auschwitz and Dachau — has gotten any easier. In fact, Steinmetz says that he has only recently begun to talk with his three children about what happened to him.

"I just can't," he says in a voice thick with regret, his eyes darting and distant. "It's very emotional to talk about because talking about it means reliving it. But the reason that I finally did start to speak to people was because I wanted to

### WANNA GO

**WHAT:** JSU annual Commemoration of the Holocaust of World War II with guest speaker Max Steinmetz, survivor of the Auschwitz and Dachau.

**WHEN:** Thursday.

**TIME:** 7:30 p.m.

**WHERE:** Ernest Stone Performing Arts Theatre at JSU.

**INFO:** Visit the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org).

# Steinmetz: 'The Holocaust' was taken from the Greek word meaning 'sacrifice by fire'

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make sure they knew, that everybody knew, what happened to us so that nothing like that is ever allowed to happen again.

"We have to make sure that these kids learn the truth because they are the future. They are the ones that must stand guard."

Dan Napolitano, deputy director of education for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., says many people do not really know what took place between 1933 and 1945.

"Most people are not aware of the facts," he says. "People have a media pop-culture sense that something did happen, but the level of accurate discourse is severely lacking. There's a multiplicity of levels of understanding and most people only have a very, very general knowledge."

The Holocaust, taken from the Greek word meaning "sacrifice by fire," was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of more than 11 million people. In addition to the Jews, 5 million were homosexuals, mentally or physically handicapped, Soviet POWs, gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, Slavic people, socialists and communists. The genocide essentially began when the Nazi Party came to power in Germany in January 1933, according to the Holocaust Museum.

The Nazis believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were "life unworthy of life," according to the museum's Web site. During the "Final Solution" of the Holocaust, which took place between July 31, 1941, and April 29, 1945, millions of Jews were imprisoned in concentration camps where they were ritually starved, beaten, murdered with poisonous gases, shot and burned.

"It changed me in so many ways. I don't have much trust for humanity," Steinmetz says. "If it happened once, it can happen again. That's why we must remember."

## 'They're all dead'

In the fall of 1943, Max Steinmetz, along with his entire family and hundreds of Jews, stood on the wooden ramp of a Polish railway station waiting in line for "the selection." In the background hung a steel sign that mockingly welcomed the starving, confused prisoners to Auschwitz, the largest and most infamous of the extermination camps. *Arbeit Macht Frei*, the sign read — "Work Makes You Free."

"We were completely misled," Steinmetz remembers. "We didn't know where we were going or what would happen to us when we got there. We were told only that we were going to labor camps as a whole family and would be given a chance to start a new life."

Born in what would become Hungary, Steinmetz and his family were sequestered with other Jews in ghettos before German soldiers forced them onto train cars. They spent three days riding in freight cars packed with people, and with only a third of a loaf of bread to eat apiece during the entire trip. When the doors opened in Poland, they were thankful to breathe fresh air again.

But as they stood on the railway platform, German doctors stalked the crowd, pointing some prisoners to the left and others to the right. Right was life in the con-



'Arbeit Macht Frei' reads the sign on Gate 1 at Auschwitz — 'Work Makes You Free.'



Courtesy photo/The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Prisoners endured hours of grueling labor at Auschwitz.

centration camp, left was death in the gas chambers, but none of them knew that at the time, Steinmetz says.

On the platform, Steinmetz came face-to-face with Dr. Josef Mengele, "The Angel of Death" who was known for wearing white leather gloves and whistling Wagner operas while he worked. After looking the 16-year-old Steinmetz over, with a wave of his hand Mengele sent the teenager, along with his younger brother, to the right, Steinmetz's mother, father and baby sister were sent to the left. He would

never see them again.

Later that night, sick with worry, he grabbed the attention of a passing prisoner, a man who knew a great deal about the prison, including the horrible stench that hung heavy in the air, which Steinmetz describes as "smelling like burning meat."

"I asked him what it was," Steinmetz says. "You don't know?" "No," I said. "When do you come here?" "This morning." "What about your parents, did

they come with you?"

"Yes." "Where did they go when you got off the train?"

"To the left." "That's what you smell. That's the crematorium. Your parents are dead and that's them being burned."

Prisoners sent to the left were urged quietly forward into "shower rooms," where they were stripped of their clothes and told that they were about to be bathed and given fresh clothes. There were water pipes and sprays along the ceiling, but no drains on the floor.

Instead of water, Zyklon B gas spewed from the showerheads, killing all inside within a matter of minutes. The dead bodies were then piled into ox carts and taken to the crematorium in back where their remains were burned. According to calculations by German authorities, 1,440 corpses could be cremated every 24 hours.

"I couldn't believe it," Steinmetz says. "I simply refused to believe it. My entire family was gone — dead."

During his time at Auschwitz, Steinmetz and his brother worked from 5 a.m. until dusk. They were beaten if they moved too slow or didn't work hard enough for the guards' satisfaction. They were fed barely enough to keep them alive — 1,300 calories a day, 1,700 for those working hard labor. Though rarely received, even these rations were not enough, and many starved.

The only thing perhaps more constant than the beatings and starvation diet was death. It loomed over everything, reducing vibrant men to ghosts simply waiting for their turn die.

"There was no such thing as camaraderie," he says, his hand gestures pleading. "There was only one thing — to survive. That

was our goal and after a while that didn't even matter anymore. You lose your will to reason. You lose all hope because there's no future. "We thought we were all doomed, that we were all going to die."

After only a few weeks at Auschwitz, Steinmetz and his brother again were packed into freight cars and taken to Dachau in Germany, the oldest concentration camp and known as "murder school" because it trained troops that went to other camps. At Dachau, Steinmetz would grow even more comfortable with death on Feb. 4, 1945, the day his brother finally let go after holding on for so long.

"He starved to death," he says. "He actually starved to death. He became so weak that he couldn't walk."

"He told me just before I went out to work that he wouldn't be alive when I got back. And he wasn't. I never saw him again after that morning."

"When he died, I didn't really mourn, not at the time," Steinmetz says. "You see so much death that it becomes routine. A guy working in front of you gets a bullet in the head for no good reason — you don't think twice. You just step over him and move on."

## Liberation

On May 2, 1945, Steinmetz was liberated by American troops. At the time, he weighed less than 80 pounds; even though he's more than 6 feet tall.

Eventually, he was taken to a hospital to recover. He applied for U.S. citizenship and, in 1948, the application was granted.

After living in New York and Colorado, Steinmetz has spent the past 20-or-so years in Birmingham. He is the father of three and grandfather of six. And though it has taken him five decades to come to terms with the horror of the Holocaust, he says he has yet to find closure. It didn't come even after he visited Auschwitz — now a museum — in 2002. He has never returned to his home in Hungary.

And almost every day, he wrestles with that most basic question — why.

"I can't answer to why I survived when so many others died," he says. "It wasn't fate or destiny, maybe a miracle. I don't know. I just survived. That's all I know and for that I'm grateful."

"There's no real reason for it. It just is."

Contact Brett Buckner at 235-3561 or [bbuckner@amistostar.com](mailto:bbuckner@amistostar.com)

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