

Auschwitz #34207: The Joe Rubinstein Story

Nancy Sprowell Geise

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This eye-opening account of a Polish Jew's life before, during, and after Auschwitz deposits readers right into concentration camp horrors.

In her first nonfiction book, *Auschwitz #34207*, Nancy Sprowell Geise takes the oral memories and documentary traces of one Polish Jew and weaves them into a riveting first-person narrative. Joe Rubinstein survived the Holocaust and is still alive at age ninety-four.

Born Icek Jakub Rubinsztein in 1920, Rubinstein was one of five children. After his father died of lung cancer when Joe was five, the impoverished family scraped by, selling their mother's produce at markets. Rubinstein also had after-school jobs at a lumberyard and a second job making shoes. With anti-Jewish sentiment and Nazi propaganda on the rise, 30,000 Polish Jews were moved into two ghettos in Joe's town of Radom. Rubinstein was taken to Auschwitz, where he was assigned work in a coal mine, as well as the unimaginable job of moving bodies to mass graves. His entire family perished in Treblinka.

The most interesting choice defining this book is its first-person narration. Instead of presenting this as a third-person biography, Geise writes as Rubinstein, using extensive interviews and documentary research to recreate his perspective (including a passage imagining his family's final journey and last days)—thus, readers are thrust right in the middle of the horrors of concentration-camp life. Small insights into his experience stand out: his obsession with keeping his feet clean and free of infection, receiving twenty-five lashes after a false accusation, and being sexually assaulted by the mine's record-keeper.

While the story is necessarily a bit less dramatic after the chapters on the Holocaust, the fact that Rubinstein survived and later became a successful shoe designer in New York is extraordinarily inspiring. Supplementary materials—photographs from the US Holocaust Museum trove, a glossary, a time line, discussion questions, and additional information on various camps and companies Joe lived in or worked for—reflect a tremendous amount of research.

Auschwitz #34207 will join work by Primo Levi on a shelf of classic Holocaust narratives.

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