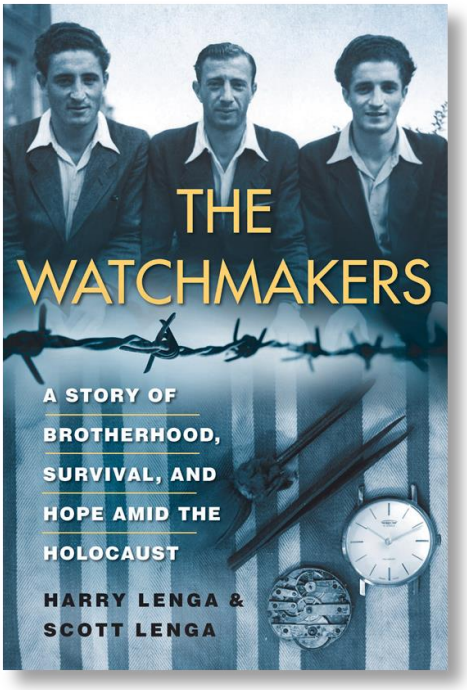

Co-Author's Note

I can't clearly place my first childhood memory. Perhaps it was watching President John F. Kennedy's funeral on our black-and-white TV in November 1963. I was two months shy of my third birthday. President Kennedy's son John-John was about my age, and my family made a big deal out of that when John-John walked in the funeral procession and saluted his father's coffin.

But I'm sure that even before the Kennedy assassination, I knew that my dad, Harry Lenga, was from a small town called Kozhnitz and that his mother died in childbirth when he was around four years old. That event marked the end of his childhood and continued to reverberate through mine.

At five, I didn't know what a concentration camp was, but I knew that my dad had a blue number tattooed on his arm from a place called Auschwitz. Sometimes I used to stare at it when he sat at his workbench fixing watches or when he reached for his glass of soda on a hot summer day. It was not something that eventually seemed normal or that I ever stopped noticing, like a mole or a scar.

Many *Shoah*—that is, Holocaust—survivors were not able to speak about what happened to them during World War II. My dad was on the opposite end of the spectrum. Around 1960, eleven years after he had moved to the United States, he started to have terrible

nightmares about the concentration camps. He used to cry and yell for help, and my mom would shake him out of the dream. “Harry, you are here in America!” she would tell him. “You are in bed! You’re a free person!” One day, he ran into another Shoah survivor, and they shared some wartime memories. That night he didn’t have any nightmares. From then on, he never stopped telling us his stories at the dinner table or during evening walks around our suburban neighbourhood in St. Louis, Missouri.

From listening to these stories, I understood that I shouldn’t complain to my dad about uncomfortable dress shoes, a choking tie, or other difficulties at school that didn’t measure up to the sufferings of his childhood. Even as he belittled my problems—”These are problems!?”—he also viewed them as a source of pride. We were not living in poverty or in fear of persecution. I was growing up in America. In his eyes, that meant I could do anything.

In my teens, I continued to listen to my dad’s stories with respect and found them interesting, but the Shoah and Jewish identity wasn’t “my thing.” I was busy trying to carve out a self-image as a regular American kid. That changed in my late twenties and early thirties as I learned to embrace my legacy as the son of a Shoah survivor.

I also grew to appreciate how rare and important my dad’s stories are in the context of both the existing Holocaust literature and the larger historical record. Of the 3.4 million Jews living in pre-war Poland, some 320,000 survived—the only remnant of the vibrant Jewish culture that developed there for over a thousand years. Of the 320,000 survivors, only 40,000 to 50,000 had been stuck in the German-occupation zone in Poland. My dad and his brothers were part of this small group. Their ability to fix watches enabled them to create windows of opportunity in the black-market economy of the German camps and became a powerful key to their survival. Unlike the vast majority of prisoners, they could influence their fate. Moreover, they were willing to take harrowing risks to stay together.

From 1989 to 1993, when my dad was in his early seventies, I interviewed him for some thirty-seven hours to record the stories I had heard over the years and to fill in the context that would make them fit together as a coherent, detailed account. He told everyone we were writing a book. I wasn’t so sure. Then he fell ill and passed away in the year 2000.

For the next fifteen years, I was content to tell my kids stories about the *Zadie* (grandfather) whom they never really knew. From the time my daughter, Orli, was about ten years old she had been threatening to write this book herself if I didn’t take up the challenge. In my early fifties, I finally harnessed the maturity as well as the inspiration from Orli to take on this project.

This book is written in my dad’s first-person voice and style of communication. It is the

voice of a father telling his extraordinary life story to his son. Filtering his interviews through my narrative voice would have diluted the graphic passion of his will to survive. The deeper messages couched in his simple, unadorned language would have been lost.

The process of "translating" his Yiddish-English from the interview transcripts and editing this book in my dad's first-person voice injects an aspect of editorial license that a ghost writer would normally employ. Sadly, my dad was not available to confirm the final text, but the stories are his alone. Considerable effort was made to remain true to my dad's account of his upbringing in a Chassidic family of watchmakers in the 1920s and 1930s and how he and his brothers managed to survive the years of fury in German-occupied Poland and Austria (1939–1945).

Every Shoah survivor faces the question: "Why was I the one to survive?" My dad could not answer the *why*, but he spoke very clearly about the decisions that somehow enabled him to survive another day**.** In my dad's estimation, the emotional and spiritual tools that he activated in the Shoah were no less important than his watchmaking tools. He spoke of hope and optimism as indispensable:

> We worked hard to keep hope in our minds and not to become meshuga. And the more you talked yourself into it, the more you believed in that hope. If a hungry person believes that he'll find something to eat later, he can last longer. *If he thinks, It's pointless, and I won't survive*, he dies faster. I saw it happen many times. Pessimism is a terrible sickness. You destroy yourself. You have to have optimism all the time.

My dad's ability to marshal these qualities in the most extreme circumstances remains a complete mystery to me. All the more so because when I was growing up in America, he seemed quite ordinary, and I never knew him to be particularly hopeful or optimistic. It's the stuff of miracles at a time when the desperate cries of millions were met with silence and cruel abandon from God and their fellow men.

This book shines a light on daily life in dark times that only got darker and how a regular kid discovered his survival instinct and the hidden resources within himself to face the test.

Scott Lenga

Excerpt from Chapter 7:
Wolanow Slave Labor Camp (October 1942–June 1943)

It's a funny thing how sometimes a premonition will enter your mind. One Sunday, we were lined up for a selection, and I said to my brothers, "If God forbid, they should pick one of us to be shot, I'll step out and tell them that I am a watchmaker and the two of you are watchmakers, too, and maybe it will save us."

Just before they started to make the selection, Lagerführer Bartman, the murderer, took out a piece of paper, looked at it, and called out through his loudspeaker, "The watchmaker who works for Heiger Heine should step out."

When I heard that I almost died. Somehow, he had found out that I was fixing watches instead of doing real work. I thought they were going to shoot me. Moishe and Mailekh were ready to go out with me and die together. I said, "Wait a minute. Don't get killed because of me. Don't move. Let's see what's going to happen." I stepped out, and when I walked up to Bartman, his face did not have the murderous look that we usually saw. The dialogue went like this:

> BARTMAN: "Are you fixing watches for Herr Corbinus from Heiger Heine?"
>
> KHIL: "Yes, sir."
>
> BARTMAN: "From now on, you won't fix watches for him anymore."
>
> KHIL: "Yes, sir!"
>
> BARTMAN: "From now on, you'll fix watches for me. You'll sit here in the camp, and you'll fix all the watches that I bring to you. I have plenty watches to be fixed."
>
> KHIL: "Are you going to give me a lot of work?"
>
> BARTMAN: "Yes."
>
> KHIL: "I have two brothers, and they are watchmakers, too. Can they help me?"
>
> BARTMAN: "Yeah. Call them out."

And I called out Mailekh and Moishe. It happened in a second. Bartman gave me watches right on the spot.

Then he called the captain of the Jewish police and told him, “Take those three pieces of *dreck* (shit) to the barrack, and I’ll give you instructions later. Don’t send them to work outside the camp anymore and don’t take them to work in the camp. They’ll be my watchmakers. See to it that they have a place to fix the watches that I bring them.” The captain saluted and took us out of the lineup right away. His name was Zygmunt Immerglick. He wore a special hat with a red stripe and carried a sidearm consisting of a rubber hose, which he often used.

From that same lineup, that murderer Bartman singled out about seven hundred men and women to be shot. He chose each one separately with a wave of his finger. We sat in the barrack staring out the window. We saw everything.

After they finished the shooting, Immerglick came in and ordered us to bury them. He took Moishe and Mailekh, and he wanted to take me, too, but I told him, “No, I cannot do it. I have to be here to take care of the watches.” Immerglick was a little bit afraid to argue with me. Suddenly, I had status.

On Sundays, they always shot people with dumdum bullets that exploded on impact and blew the victims to pieces. Some bodies were buried without heads. Moishe and Mailekh picked up arms and other body parts and threw them in the grave. It was terrible. Sickening. We were upset and disturbed about it for months after that.

The next day, I explained to Bartman that if we lived with the other prisoners in the barrack, we couldn’t be responsible for the safekeeping of the watches, so it would be wise to put us in a separate room. He agreed, and they made a little private room for us to sleep and work in. I told him we needed a long workbench and three chairs, and he instructed Immerglick to set up the bench and a large bed for three boys to lie in. Everything was built perfectly with wood.

They put a straw mattress on the bed and gave us sheets. We were being treated better than everyone else in the camp. We weren’t just lying on a straw sack. Now we had a straw sack with a sheet. We also had pillows and a little stove. It was terrific. And of course, we had our down comforters from home. That was worth a million dollars in the camp.

The Germans would bring us wood to put in the stove, and Bartman told the Germans in the kitchen to give me anything I needed. He didn’t mention food, but they understood he meant food, too.

We worked and slept in that room. We had to get up in the morning at 6:00 A.M. like everybody. We went out to get the cup of coffee with everyone else. In the evening, we lined up to get soup and bread, but we came back to the room to eat. We didn’t have to sit outside to eat like the other inmates. All the Germans and Poles who worked in the

kitchen recognized us as the watchmakers. Now they gave us a full bowl of soup with two ladles. When we wanted more soup, they gave it to us.

Those guys from the kitchen also brought me watches to fix without Bartman's knowledge, and we would fix them even though we were not supposed to. Sometimes they would give me money and sometimes food. The food was more valuable for us because we couldn't spend money in the camp. The guy who delivered the bread would give us a loaf of bread once in a while. The guy who delivered vegetables let us have a little bit. We had a small storage of food in our room. Sometimes we even had an onion.

The main thing was that we didn't have to work hard outside and deplete our strength. And we didn't go out for the Sunday selections anymore, either. All of the guards and all of the Jewish police knew that they were not supposed to take us out. That alone was a very big thing. Bartman inspected us in the mornings when he came to bring watches. We watched out for him every morning so we could make sure to be busy working at the bench when he arrived. He called us the lousiest dirty names. He would say, "You *zecken* (lazy parasites, lit., ticks), you have it good!" Or he would call us *ausnutzer* (someone who tries to exploit other people). He never said good morning to us. He never smiled at us. I was the only one who spoke to him because Moishe and Mailekh were scared to talk to him.

For Bartman, it was a very good deal to have us fixing watches for him. He was making good money from it, and not only money but stature. He did favors for colonels and other leaders in the German hierarchy around him. When you fixed a watch for somebody in wartime, they appreciated it. Bartman became an important guy. It was not so easy for a German soldier to find a watchmaker during the war. He had to make the trip to a big city, and it might be difficult to take leave from his duties. And even if he went, he probably wouldn't find any watchmakers. Most of the watchmakers in Poland were Jews who had already been evacuated from the towns. There were very few Polish watchmakers.

To the other inmates, we looked like the luckiest people on this Earth.