

## Related Reading

### *The Book Thief*

#### *“The Urgency of Bearing Witness”*

By PAUL VITELLO

Published: April 9, 2010

He has been telling the story for more than 60 years: expelled from school at 13 for being Jewish; arrested at 16; sentenced to labor in the service of Nazi Germany until an SS guard’s blow landed him, at 20, on the doorstep of death — an infirmary at Auschwitz.

Good handwriting saved his life.

In 1943, convinced he was headed to the gas chambers, Ernest W. Michel was rescued by a fluke of fate and a German punctiliousness for record-keeping. Despite the peril of raising one’s hand in a concentration camp, Mr. Michel answered the call when someone asked for a volunteer with proper penmanship. He had studied calligraphy after being kicked out of school, as it happened. His father had insisted that he learn a skill.

The job he acquired was inscribing death certificates for his fellow inmates.

“No matter how they had died, I was to write ‘heart attack’ or ‘bodily weakness’ for the cause of death,” he said. “You could not say ‘gas chamber.’ I had to say only one of those two things.” The choice was left to him.

Mr. Michel, a Manhattan resident who has told his story of survival all over the world as an official of [UJA-Federation of New York](#), will recount it again on Sunday as the featured speaker at a Holocaust [Memorial Day](#) event in Clifton, N.J., one of thousands of observances scheduled across the country.

But when he stands on the podium as a spokesman for the act of remembering, Mr. Michel, 86, will have to call once more on his penmanship — this time for help remembering. In his careful hand, he has fashioned a set of flash cards.

“My memory isn’t so good anymore, so I need my ‘Stichworte’ cards to remind myself of episodes I don’t want to forget,” said the German-born Mr. Michel, summoning a phrase that translates roughly as “cue words.”

“I can remember exact details from the camps — what people said, where I was standing when I saw certain things,” he said. “But I can’t remember what happened yesterday.”

As their cohort ages and dies off, some long-silent Holocaust survivors have overcome their reticence, heeding the injunction of [Elie Wiesel](#), a Nobel laureate and Auschwitz survivor, to pass down the authority of their testimony to the next generation.

“I believe fervently that to listen to a witness is to become a witness,” Mr. Wiesel said in a recent interview.

Mr. Michel (pronounced Mish-ELL), a longtime friend of Mr. Wiesel's, has never been reticent; but his sense of urgency to bear witness has only increased as his short-term memory has diminished. "There are so few of us left," Mr. Michel said. "I feel it is my duty."

So he brings his cue cards. One says, "Sept. 1, 1939," to remind him of the day the war began; he was arrested the next day at his home in Mannheim, Germany, never to see his parents again. (A younger sister, Lotte, survived.)

Another card says, "Berga," for the last camp in which he was confined after being evacuated from Auschwitz ahead of the Allied invasion. One says, "Calligraphy." It is all in his 1993 autobiography, "Promises to Keep," which he refers to whenever he is at a loss for an answer to a question. "It's in the book," he says.

At Auschwitz, Mr. Michel's handwriting earned him a promotion of sorts. He became an orderly in the infirmary, where one of his tasks was filling out transport forms for those patients culled from the wards each day by Nazi doctors "to be sent up the chimneys," he said.

By his own description, Mr. Michel is a cheerful man. The things he saw, and the jobs he performed, are part of an irreducible record that he believes is his duty to recount. But he has no regrets about having done what he could to survive.

"If I didn't do it, somebody else would have done it," he said. "I never had a bad dream about Auschwitz."

Between 1939 and 1945, when he escaped during a last-ditch forced march between camps, Mr. Michel said, he endured famine, beatings and the constant horror of seeing fellow inmates executed before his eyes or dispatched to the gas chambers.

Yet an innate optimism seemed to propel him forward, he said. After his escape, he found his way to the American side, became a translator, then a reporter for the American occupation government at the Nuremberg war crimes trials. He went to work in New York as a fund-raiser for the United Jewish Appeal, and eventually became its executive vice president. He married, had three children and learned to love tennis.

The only possession that Mr. Michel kept from his years in the camps was the leather belt he wore through those lean years — "a belt," he said, "with a lot more holes in it than I have today, let me tell you." It serves as a kind of symbol for the adaptability that made survival possible.

"I have always loved life," he said. "That is what saved me."

Kathrin Flor, a spokeswoman for the International Tracing Service, an International Red Cross agency that has collected much of the documentary record of the Nazi concentration camps, said the papers written in Mr. Michel's hand would most likely be among the millions stored today at the [Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum](#), on the site of the death camp in Poland.

“The death certificates and documents he describes would have been made for inmates who were working for a period of time before their death,” she said. “Families who were gassed immediately upon arrival — there are no death certificates for them.”

In retirement, Mr. Michel maintains a rigorous speaking schedule. For several years, he led a campaign to stop the Mormon Church’s practice of posthumously baptizing Jews who had died in the Holocaust, in the belief that they might embrace the faith in the afterlife. He gave that up when it became clear to him that they would not desist. “Always look to the future,” he said.

In that spirit, Mr. Michel recently made plans for a reunion: The man in the camp who had asked for a volunteer with good handwriting, a German Communist prisoner-worker named Stefan Heyman, died of natural causes some years ago. But he had a son who now lives in Houston.

“I have been in touch with the son,” Mr. Michel said. “We are going to have a get-together. It will be wonderful.”

He cannot remember the last time he used his calligraphy. “Sometimes, for invitations,” he said, trying to recall. They might, he said, have been invitations to his children’s weddings.

***A version of this article appeared in print on April 10, 2010, on page A17 of the New York edition.***