

# **The Happiest Man on Earth**

# **What's in it for me? Become inspired by a story of resilience and love in the face of unimaginable cruelty.**

The atrocities of the Holocaust can seem very far away. Most of the people who lived through that time have since died and what happened is almost impossible to imagine. That's why firsthand accounts are so important. In these blinks, you'll get a personal insight into what it was like and how one man survived the Nazi death camps of Buchenwald and Auschwitz. Eddie Jaku shares the horrors and cruelty he saw, and how the kindness of friends, family, and strangers led him to survive against all odds. The Holocaust may be over, but fascism and anti-Semitism are alive and well. Eddie tells his story so that by remembering the horrors of the past we may never repeat them. In these blinks, you'll learn

why Eddie had to change his identity to get an education; how friendship saved Eddie's life in Auschwitz; and why life in newly liberated Europe was so hard for Jewish people.

## **Eddie Jaku's life changed as soon as Hitler became chancellor of Germany.**

Eddie Jaku was desperate to go to high school. He was clever and capable and wanted to follow in his father's footsteps and become an engineer. In 1933, Eddie had just graduated from elementary school in the beautiful city of Leipzig in Germany. He hoped to go to a good high school near his house. But then Hitler came to power, and suddenly everything changed for Eddie and other Jewish children like him. Eddie hadn't given much thought to being Jewish up until then. If he identified as anything, it was as a proud German. His father had helped to manufacture weapons in World War I and was fiercely patriotic. He always told Eddie that they were "German first and second, Jewish third." But when Adolf Hitler came to power, being Jewish became the defining aspect of their lives. The key message here is: Eddie Jaku's life changed as soon as Hitler became chancellor of Germany. When Hitler was elected, he made his anti-Semitic views known from the very start. Germany had lost the First World War in 1918 and was paying enormous sums of money in reparations to the winning Allied powers. But the country couldn't afford it, and the reparations had led to widespread poverty and hunger. The German people felt humiliated and angry. They were receptive to the messages of a man telling them he could return Germany to its former glory. They were also eager to find an object for their rage: the Jewish people. The Jewish community had been at the heart of Leipzig's culture and economy for hundreds of years. Even in medieval times, the weekly market was held on Friday instead of Saturday – the Jewish Sabbath day – so that Jewish merchants could attend. But when Hitler came to power, he brought with him a tide of anti-Semitism. Eddie felt the consequences almost immediately. He wasn't allowed to have his coming of age ceremony, or bar mitzvah, in Leipzig's main synagogue. And, of course, he wasn't allowed to go to high school. For Eddie's family, who saw themselves as proud citizens of a city that prized education and knowledge, this was a shocking betrayal. Eddie's father knew he had to find a way for his son to continue in school. So he found a solution, but it was drastic: Eddie would have to leave his family, and assume a completely new identity.

# **Returning to Leipzig shattered Eddie's life.**

The only way that Eddie could get a good education was to pretend to be someone else. His father forged some identity papers for him that said he was a German orphan named Walter Schleif. Under this assumed identity, Eddie was able to get one of the best educations in precision mechanics in the world. But it meant leaving home and living in an orphanage in a city nine hours away from Leipzig. For the next five years, Eddie didn't see his family. He felt isolated and lonely, having to live a lie throughout his teenage years. When he graduated, he decided to make a spontaneous trip home to see his parents on their 20th wedding anniversary. It had been so long, and he missed them fiercely. It felt worth the risk. Unfortunately, it was one of the worst decisions Eddie could have made. The key message here is: Returning to Leipzig shattered Eddie's life. Eddie arrived back at the family home in Leipzig in the middle of the night only to find that it was all closed up. None of his family were home. What Eddie didn't know was that they'd gone into hiding, believing Eddie to be safe and far away. He let himself in and was greeted by his ecstatic dachshund, Lulu. He curled up in his childhood bed and went to sleep. But sleep didn't last long. When Eddie woke, it was to a crowd of Nazi thugs kicking down his door. They found him and beat him savagely. So badly that his pajamas were soaked in blood. When Lulu tried to protect him, they stabbed her with a bayonet. Then they forced Eddie to watch as they destroyed his home. Without knowing it, Eddie had walked straight into the thick of Kristallnacht – the Night of Broken Glass – when Nazi Brownshirts attacked Jewish homes and businesses. The worst part of it, for Eddie, was that people who'd been his friends and neighbors joined in with the mob, jeering as Jewish families were thrown into the icy river and looting their things. The country that Eddie had grown up in and the community he'd thought his family belonged to, were gone. He would never consider himself to be a German again.

## **Camp Buchenwald was terrible but Eddie had a lucky escape.**

After Kristallnacht, Eddie was taken to a big hangar inside the zoo near his house, a place he'd loved visiting as a child. But, this time, there was nothing fun about it. Eddie was terrified as more and more Jewish men were brought to the hangar throughout the night. In the morning, they were taken to Camp Buchenwald – one of the many concentration camps that the Nazis were just in the process of setting up in 1938. Conditions in the camp were awful. Thousands of men slept stacked like sardines on narrow bunks. Instead of a toilet, there was a big pit latrine. And men were forced to use their hands to wipe themselves, as there was no toilet paper. Disease and starvation were constant dangers. The key message here is: Camp Buchenwald was terrible but Eddie had a lucky escape. Eddie was surrounded by doctors, lawyers, and students who had – up until then – been respected members of German society. Now they were treated as subhuman; everything about the camp was designed to strip them of their dignity. Eddie couldn't understand how the German soldiers could obey such cruel orders. Nazis beat the prisoners for the smallest offense and played sadistic games – like pretending to allow men to go free and then shooting them in the backs as they ran. But they weren't all equally cruel. Eddie had a lucky break when he met a soldier he knew from the boardinghouse where he'd studied as the orphan Walter Schleif. The

guard convinced the camp commander that Eddie's mechanical skills made him valuable to the Nazis. Eddie was allowed to leave, on the condition that he would spend his life working in Nazi factories. He agreed, and the camp commanders contacted his family - who'd returned to Leipzig and were waiting to make sure Eddie was safe before fleeing the country. Eddie's father was allowed to fetch him on the understanding he'd take him to the factory where he'd be working. But Eddie never arrived. Instead, he and his father drove straight to the Belgian border, where they paid a people smuggler to help them escape. The smuggler drove them through the dark forest to a place where they could cross, warning them to be quick or they'd be caught in the searchlights. Eddie sprinted over the border, but when he looked back for his father, he was gone.

## **Eddie was desperate to reunite with his family in Belgium, but every step seemed to take him further away.**

Eddie had made it across the border and into Belgium, but his father hadn't been so lucky. Having stopped to help another refugee, he fell behind and ended up caught in the searchlight. He was handed to the Gestapo and severely beaten. Father and son were separated. Back in Leipzig, Eddie's mother and sister were also arrested. It took months for his mother to negotiate their release. Eventually, father, mother, and sister all made it to Belgium. But, by the time they got there, Eddie was gone. The key message is: Eddie was desperate to reunite with his family in Belgium, but every step seemed to take him further away. Eddie had been arrested for crossing the border illegally as a German and had been placed in a Belgian camp. The authorities didn't care that his life was in danger as a Jewish person - they arrested him for breaking the rules and kept him locked up for a year. When Germany invaded Belgium in 1940, Eddie and his fellow prisoners were released. He tried to escape by walking to France to catch a boat to England. But there was a chaos of evacuations and no space on the boats for refugees. Eddie wandered through southern France relying on the generosity of local farmers for food until eventually he was arrested again. This time he was taken to a prison camp called Gurs in the southwest of France. If he could have lived out the war at Gurs, Eddie would have been safe and relatively comfortable. But it wasn't to be. The French authorities agreed to a prisoner swap with the Germans and Eddie was again loaded onto a train, this time bound for Auschwitz - the notorious concentration camp in Poland. But, amazingly, Eddie escaped. He stole the conductor's screwdriver and pried open some floorboards, jumping from the train before it reached its destination. Hopping on and off trains in the dead of night, he made his way back to Belgium where, with the help of a friend, he found his family hiding in the attic of a house outside Brussels. The months that followed were some of the happiest of Eddie's life. The attic was cramped and uncomfortable and there was little food, but the family was together again. But the happiness was short-lived when someone reported the family to the authorities. They were arrested and put on a train to Auschwitz. This time, nobody would escape.

## **Auschwitz took away Eddie's family - and his will to live.**

The train to Auschwitz was packed so tightly that there was no space to sit or lie down. There wasn't even enough room for the people to take off their winter coats. That was a problem because the carriage was stiflingly hot with 150 men, women, and children all breathing the same air. They traveled for nine days, but the passengers were given no food at all and only a barrel of water to last the journey. That they survived was thanks to Eddie's father who came up with a rationing system to share the water. He cut up 150 squares of paper - one for each person. Everyone was given one cup of water on presenting their paper in the morning, and another in the evening. All but two people survived the journey, while in other cars as many as 40 percent died from dehydration. Sadly, many of those passengers lived only to face immediate death. The key message here is: Auschwitz took away Eddie's family - and his will to live. At Auschwitz, the train passengers were sorted into two groups. The young and fit, like Eddie, were sent to the labor camp. The older people and the children were sent to the gas chambers. Eddie lost his mother and father without ever having the chance to say goodbye. Auschwitz was worse than any place Eddie had ever known. He never knew if he'd make it through the night - many men froze to death as they were forced to sleep naked with no blankets. There was never enough food, and the prisoners did hard labor every day in German factories and mines. If you couldn't work you were killed immediately. Many prisoners chose to take their own lives instead. They ran to the electric wire fence circling the camp and electrocuted themselves. What kept Eddie going was his sister, Henni, who Eddie discovered was alive and in a separate part of the camp, and his best friend, Kurt, who, miraculously, always seemed to end up in the same place as him. Eddie and Kurt had met when they were both arrested on Kristallnacht. Kurt had also sought refuge in Belgium and was on the same train as Eddie to Auschwitz. Kurt and Eddie looked after each other, sharing food and clothes and keeping an eye out when one or the other was sick. Most importantly, they offered each other something rare: emotional support. In a place designed to dehumanize, having a true friend was Eddie's lifeline.

## **Auschwitz was emptied toward the end of the war. But life for the prisoners got even harder.**

On January 18, 1945, the commanders at Auschwitz decided to evacuate the camp. The Russian Army was closing in, and the Nazis wanted to cover their tracks and hide just how brutal the regime had been. Auschwitz was emptied and the crematoriums destroyed. Eddie and the other prisoners were marched through the snowy countryside, their thin prison uniforms and flimsy shoes doing nothing to keep out the freezing cold. There was no food or water, and if they fell they were shot. It was impossible, but Eddie kept putting one foot in front of the other, hoping to make it alive. But Kurt was struggling. And as the journey continued he got noticeably weaker. The key message here is that: Auschwitz was emptied toward the end of the war. But life for the prisoners got even harder. Eventually, the group reached an abandoned building where they could stop for the night. Kurt was so exhausted he told Eddie he couldn't keep going. The thought of his oldest friend being shot was too much. Looking around, Eddie spotted a hiding place in the ceiling of the bathroom. Kurt climbed up, and Eddie sealed in behind him with a piece of wood. At least now his friend had a chance. From here, Eddie and the other prisoners marched on, finally ending up on another train. First to Buchenwald where his nightmare had begun, then to a smaller camp with better living conditions.



But, after only a few months, he was evacuated again. This time, the Nazis had no plan, and as the prisoners marched in circles, across hundreds of miles, Eddie could see his captors becoming increasingly desperate. He knew he had to escape. But how? At the roadside, Eddie noticed some drainage pipes – pipes that were big enough to clamber into. He'd found his way out. But what if he drowned in the process? He managed to get hold of two wooden barrel lids which he could use to keep afloat in the water. As soon as it got dark, he made his escape. Inside the pipe, icy water rushed over Eddie, carrying him along so fast he lost his shoes. Exhausted and starting to lose consciousness, he wedged the barrel lids on either side of himself and fell asleep. When he woke, he saw that the lids were full of bullets. The Nazis had been shooting down the drainage pipe, but, incredibly, hadn't hit him! Eddie clambered out and looked around. He was free.

## **By the end of the war, Eddie's mental and physical health had been completely destroyed.**

Eddie had survived multiple internments, death marches, slave labor, and beatings by Nazis. But in spite of his resilience, he nearly died right at the end of the war. When he crawled out of the drainpipe to freedom, he was completely emaciated. He found shelter in a cave and survived on a diet of snails and slugs. But the water he drank made him sick, and he got even weaker. Eventually, he decided that he didn't care if he was caught or shot. After all, if he stayed in the cave, he'd die anyway. So Eddie started to crawl to the road on his hands and knees. Just then, a tank appeared. As it got closer, he saw that it was driven by American soldiers. The key message is: By the end of the war, Eddie's mental and physical health had been completely destroyed. When Eddie came to a week later, he was in a clean hospital room with crisp white sheets. Nurses and doctors buzzed around him, doing everything they could to keep him alive. But the odds weren't good. Eddie weighed just 28 kilograms and was extremely sick from typhoid and cholera. A nurse told him his chance of survival was 35 percent. Right then, Eddie made a promise to God – if he lived, he would be a force for good in the world and never take his life for granted. Whether it was the prayers or medical care, Eddie lived. After six weeks, he left for Belgium to find his family. Of course, no one was there. Like many survivors, Eddie felt more pain than relief at the end of the war. He no longer knew where he belonged. And he'd lost his trust in people. Belgium was full of Nazi collaborators; people who'd given his family up and looted their possessions. He was isolated and adrift. Then, one day, amazingly, he had yet another lucky meeting – with his old friend Kurt, who'd been rescued from his bathroom hiding place by Russian soldiers. Meeting up with Kurt gave Eddie a new reason for living. Together they found work and rented an apartment. And then Eddie discovered that his sister, Henni, was also alive and in the city. She moved in with them, and they started rebuilding their lives.

## **Eddie fell in love with Flore, but she couldn't fully understand his experiences during the war.**

Flore Molho was a Greek Jewish girl, who'd lived nearly her whole life in Belgium. During the war, she'd avoided deportation because for many years the Nazis didn't realize she was Jewish. When eventually she was found out, she escaped to Paris using a fake identity, where she survived the war relatively unscathed. When she met Eddie at the municipal office where she worked, Flore felt more sorry for him than anything else. But for Eddie, it was love at first sight. When he told Flore how he felt she stared at him in disbelief. He'd only been out of Auschwitz for a few months and looked terrible. He was emaciated and sickly but full of bold talk. He said he wanted to take her away to start a new life. Flore could only laugh. The key message here is: Eddie fell in love with Flore, but she couldn't fully understand his experiences during the war. As they got to know each other better, Flore began to fall in love with Eddie, too. Her mother welcomed him into the family as a son, and on April 20, 1946, they got married. They loved each other very much, but the first years of marriage were hard. Eddie was suffering from complex trauma from the war. He'd been in survival mode for so long that he didn't know how to stop living in fear. On top of that, he was in deep grief for the family he'd lost. The first few years of their marriage were miserable. Eddie didn't even know why he was still alive. That all changed when Flore became pregnant, and Eddie held his first child. As he stared at his baby, a change came over him. He realized how very lucky he was to be alive. If, during his time in the concentration camps, you'd told him he'd eventually get married and have a beautiful son, he'd never have believed it. And yet, here he was. Eddie decided he was going to make the most of his time on Earth by making a conscious decision to be happy and smile every day.

## **Australia provided a haven for Eddie and his family as he tried to forget the trauma of his past.**

Eddie never really felt like he belonged in Belgium. As a refugee, he could only get a permit to live there for six months at a time, and that was no basis for building a life. He and Flore decided to emigrate and in March 1950 they boarded a ship for the long journey to Sydney, Australia. For Eddie and Flore, life in Australia was heaven compared to what they'd been through in Europe. Eddie got a job building medical instruments, and the family bought a house and settled down. They'd found a place where they felt truly free. The key message here is: Australia provided a haven for Eddie and his family as he tried to forget the trauma of his past. For many decades, Eddie completely avoided talking about his life during the war. He didn't want to burden his children and grandchildren with such awful experiences. But, at some stage, he started to feel that he had a moral obligation to share his story with others. Eddie was horrified at Holocaust deniers and realized that, as one of the few surviving eyewitnesses to Auschwitz, he needed to speak up while he still could. In 1972, Eddie and 20 other survivors came together to share their experiences. It was a great relief to talk to some of the only other people in the world who understood what he'd endured. Later, this group was formalized as the Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. In 1992, they went on to set up the Sydney Jewish Museum. Eddie started giving regular speeches at the museum about the horrors he'd lived through and the dangers of fascism. He told his audiences about the depraved and shocking cruelty he'd endured from fellow citizens, but also the kindnesses. And he shared his unique survival strategies, and the decision he made after the war to become "the happiest man on earth," despite what had happened to him. In 2020, Eddie turned 100 and he and Flore

celebrated their 75th wedding anniversary. Their anniversary date – April 20 – is also Hitler’s birthday. But their love has endured while Hitler is long dead, with no marked grave. Eddie likes to think that surviving and thriving as they have is the sweetest act of revenge.

## Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Eddie Jaku’s life was shattered when Hitler came to power in 1933. He was made to endure unbelievable cruelties in Nazi concentration camps. His parents were murdered, and he narrowly escaped death many times. Only his friendships and the odd kindness from strangers kept him going. After the war, Eddie built a new life with his loving family. He is passionate about teaching future generations of the dangers of fascism. And remember: Happiness is a choice. Eddie survived the Holocaust, but it was hard to build a new life. He’d lost everything and suffered from complex trauma. Often, he questioned why he was still alive. But he realized that while he may never understand what happened or why he survived, he had to take advantage of the chance he’d been given – by living each day to the fullest. From that moment, he made a point to savor every day, and never take his life for granted. He would become “the happiest man alive” in spite of everything he’d lived through. Got feedback? We’d love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to [email protected] with The Happiest Man on Earth as the subject line and share your thoughts!