

1 Lovers in Auschwitz, Reunited 72 Years Later. He Had One Question.

2 Was she the reason he was alive today?



4 Danna Singer for The New York Times

5 By Keren Blankfeld ¶¶¶

6 The first time he spoke to her, in 1943, by the Auschwitz crematory, David Wisnia realized that Helen Spitzer was no regular inmate.

7 Zippi, as she was known, was clean, always neat.

8 She wore a jacket and smelled good.

9 They were introduced by a fellow inmate, at her request. ¶¶¶

10 Her presence was unusual in itself: a woman outside the women's quarters, speaking with a male prisoner.

11 Before Mr. Wisnia knew it, they were alone, all the prisoners around them gone.

12 This wasn't a coincidence, he later realized.

13 They made a plan to meet again in a week. ¶¶¶

- 14 On their set date, Mr. Wisnia went as planned to meet at the barracks between crematories 4 and 5.
- 15 He climbed on top of a makeshift ladder made up of packages of prisoners' clothing.
- 16 Ms. Spitzer had arranged it, a space amid hundreds of piles, just large enough to fit the two of them.
- 17 Mr. Wisnia was 17 years old; she was 25. ¶¶¶
- 18 "I had no knowledge of what, when, where," Mr. Wisnia recently reminisced at age 93.
- 19 "She taught me everything." ¶¶¶
- 20 They were both Jewish inmates in Auschwitz, both privileged prisoners.
- 21 Mr. Wisnia, initially forced to collect the bodies of prisoners who committed suicide, had been chosen to entertain his Nazi captors when they discovered he was a talented singer. ¶¶¶
- 22 Ms. Spitzer held the more high-powered position: She was the camp's graphic designer.
- 23 They became lovers, meeting in their nook at a prescribed time about once a month.
- 24 After the initial fears of knowing they were putting their lives in danger, they began to look forward to their dates.
- 25 Mr. Wisnia felt special.
- 26 "She chose me," he recalled. ¶¶¶
- 27 They didn't talk much.
- 28 When they did, they told each other brief snippets of their past.
- 29 Mr. Wisnia had an opera-loving father who'd inspired his

singing, and who'd perished with the rest of his family at the Warsaw ghetto.

30 Ms. Spitzer, who also loved music – she played the piano and the mandolin – taught Mr. Wisnia a Hungarian song.

31 Below the boxes of clothing, fellow prisoners stood guard, prepared to warn them if an SS officer was approaching. ¶¶¶

32 For a few months, they managed to be each other's escape, but they knew these visits wouldn't last.

33 Around them, death was everywhere.

34 Still, the lovers planned a life together, a future outside of Auschwitz.

35 They knew they would be separated, but they had a plan, after the fighting was done, to reunite. ¶¶¶

36 It took them 72 years. ¶¶¶

37 On a recent afternoon this fall, Mr. Wisnia sat in his house of 67 years in his adopted hometown in Levittown, Pa., looking through old photographs.

38 Still a passionate singer, Mr. Wisnia spent decades as a cantor at the local congregation.

39 Now, about once a month, he gives speeches where he tells war stories, usually to students and sometimes at libraries or congregations. ¶¶¶

40 "There are few people left who know the details," he said. ¶¶¶

41 In January, Mr. Wisnia plans to fly with his family to Auschwitz, where he has been invited to sing at the 75th anniversary of the camp's liberation.

42 He expects to recognize only one fellow survivor there.

- 43 The last big anniversary, five years ago, which he attended, included about 300 Holocaust survivors.
- 44 The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany estimates that only 2,000 survivors of Auschwitz are alive today. ¶¶
- 45 As the [Holocaust fades](#) from public memory and anti-Semitism is once again on the rise, Mr. Wisnia finds himself speaking about his past with more urgency.
- 46 This is quite a turn for a man who spent most of his adult life trying not to look back.
- 47 Mr. Wisnia's oldest son learned only as a teenager that his father wasn't born in America.
- 48 (His father worked hard to lose his European accent.) ¶¶
- 49 Mr. Wisnia's children and grandchildren coaxed him to talk about his past.
- 50 Gradually, he opened up.
- 51 Once he started sharing his story, others convinced him to speak publicly.
- 52 In 2015, he published a memoir, "[One Voice, Two Lives: From Auschwitz Prisoner to 101st Airborne Trooper.](#)"
- 53 That was when his family first learned about his Auschwitz girlfriend.
- 54 He referred to Ms. Spitzer under a pseudonym, Rose.
- 55 Their reunion, as it turns out, hadn't gone quite as planned.
- 56 By the time he and Ms. Spitzer met again, they both had already married other people. ¶¶
- 57 "How do you share such a story with your family?"
- 58 Mr. Wisnia wondered. ¶¶

- 59 Ms. Spitzer was among the first Jewish women to arrive in Auschwitz in March of 1942.
- 60 She came from Slovakia, where she attended a technical college and said she was the first woman in the region to finish an apprenticeship as a graphic artist.
- 61 In Auschwitz, she arrived with 2,000 unmarried women. ¹¹¹¹
- 62 At first, she was assigned grueling demolition work at the sub-camp, Birkenau.
- 63 She was malnourished and perpetually ill with typhus, malaria and diarrhea.
- 64 She persisted as a laborer until a chimney collapsed on her, injuring her back.
- 65 Through her connections, her ability to speak German, her graphic design skills and sheer luck, Ms. Spitzer secured an office job. ¹¹¹¹
- 66 Her initial assignments included mixing red powder paint with varnish to draw a vertical stripe on female prisoners' uniforms.
- 67 Eventually, she started registering all female arrivals in camp, she said in [1946 testimony](#) documented by the psychologist David Boder, who recorded the first interviews with survivors after the war. ¹¹¹¹
- 68 By the time Ms. Spitzer met Mr. Wisnia, she was working from a shared office.
- 69 Together with another Jewish woman, she was responsible for organizing Nazi paperwork.
- 70 She made monthly charts of the camp's labor force. ¹¹¹¹
- 71 As Ms. Spitzer's responsibilities grew, she was free to move around within parts of the camp and sometimes was allowed excursions outside.

- 72 She showered regularly and didn't have to wear an armband.
- 73 She used her extensive knowledge of the grounds to build a 3-D model of the camp.
- 74 Ms. Spitzer's privileges were such that she managed to correspond with her only surviving brother in Slovakia through coded postcards. ¹¹¹
- 75 Yet Ms. Spitzer was never a Nazi collaborator or a kapo, a Jew assigned to oversee other prisoners.
- 76 Instead, she used her position to help inmates and allies.
- 77 She used her design skills to manipulate paperwork and reassign prisoners to different job assignments and barracks.
- 78 She had access to official camp reports, which she shared with various resistance groups, according to Konrad Kwiet, a professor at the University of Sydney. ¹¹¹
- 79 Dr. Kwiet interviewed Ms. Spitzer for an essay published in the book "[Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor](#)."
- 80 In the book, edited by Jürgen Matthäus, director of applied research at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Ms. Spitzer was interviewed by five different historians, each chronicling her life from a different perspective. ¹¹¹
- 81 "It's certainly not surprising to me that people in Zippi's position would have lovers and they would try to use their influence to save people," said Atina Grossmann, a professor at the Cooper Union in New York, who interviewed Ms. Spitzer for the book. ¹¹¹
- 82 "For everybody you saved, you were condemning someone else," Dr. Grossmann said.
- 83 "You had to be very precise, and that's how you kept the Germans at bay." ¹¹¹

- 84 Mr. Wisnia was assigned to the "corpse unit" when he arrived.
- 85 His job was to collect bodies of prisoners who'd flung themselves against the electric fence surrounding the camp.
- 86 He dragged those corpses to a barrack, where they were hauled off by trucks. ¶¶¶
- 87 Within months word got around that Mr. Wisnia was a gifted singer.
- 88 He started singing regularly to Nazi guards and was assigned a new job at a building the SS called the Sauna.
- 89 He disinfected the clothing of new arrivals with the same Zyklon B pellets used to murder prisoners in the gas chamber. ¶¶¶
- 90 Ms. Spitzer, who'd noticed Mr. Wisnia at the Sauna, began making special visits.
- 91 Once they'd established contact, she paid off inmates with food to keep watch for 30 minutes to an hour each time they met. ¶¶¶
- 92 Their relationship lasted several months.
- 93 One afternoon in 1944 they realized it would probably be their final climb up to their nook.
- 94 The Nazis were transporting the last of the camp prisoners on death marches and destroying evidence of their crimes. ¶¶¶
- 95 As crematories were demolished, there were whispers within the camp that the Soviets were advancing.
- 96 The war might end soon.
- 97 Mr. Wisnia and Ms. Spitzer had survived Auschwitz for more than two years while most prisoners never made it

past a few months.

- 98 In Auschwitz alone, 1.1 million people were murdered. ¶¶¶
- 99 During their last rendezvous they made a plan.
- 100 They would meet in Warsaw when the war was over, at a community center.
- 101 It was a promise. ¶¶¶
- 102 Mr. Wisnia left before Ms. Spitzer on one of the last transports out of Auschwitz.
- 103 He was transferred to the Dachau concentration camp in December 1944.
- 104 Soon after, during a death march from Dachau, he happened upon a hand shovel.
- 105 He struck an SS guard and ran.
- 106 The next day, while hiding in a barn, he heard what he thought were Soviet troops approaching.
- 107 He ran to the tanks and hoped for the best.
- 108 It turned out to be Americans. ¶¶¶
- 109 He couldn't believe his good fortune.
- 110 Since he was 10 years old, Mr. Wisnia had dreamed of singing opera in New York.
- 111 Before the war, he'd written a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt requesting a visa so he could study music in America.
- 112 His mother's two sisters had emigrated to the Bronx in the 1930s, and he'd memorized their address.
- 113 Throughout his ordeal in Auschwitz, that address had become a sort of prayer for him, a guidepost. ¶¶¶

114 Now, faced with soldiers from the 101st Airborne, he was beyond relieved.

115 The troops adopted him after hearing his tale, told in fragments of the little English he spoke, some German, Yiddish and Polish.

116 They fed him Spam, he said, gave him a uniform, handed him a machine gun and taught him to use it.

117 Europe would be his past, he decided.

118 "I didn't want anything to do with anything European," he said.

119 "I became 110 percent American." ¹¹¹¹

120 In his capacity with the American Army, Mr. Wisnia became "Little Davey," an interpreter and civilian aide.

121 Now he got to interrogate the Germans and confiscate their weapons.

122 Now he took prisoners of war. ¹¹¹¹

123 "Our boys were not so nice to the SS," Mr. Wisnia said. ¹¹¹¹

124 His unit trekked south to Austria, liberating towns along the way.

125 The troops protected Mr. Wisnia, and he in turn transformed himself into an American.

126 By the end of the war, they made it to Hitler's mountain retreat in Berchtesgaden.

127 Here, they helped themselves to Hitler's wine and myriad treasures.

128 Mr. Wisnia took a Walther gun, a Baldur camera and a semiautomatic pistol. ¹¹¹¹

129 Even though, as a Pole, he never could become a full-

fledged G.I., Mr. Wisnia performed numerous jobs after the war with the American Army.

- 130 He worked at the Army Post Exchange, which provided basic supplies to soldiers.
- 131 He also sometimes drove to the displaced persons camp in the city of Feldafing to deliver supplies.
- 132 Once he'd joined the Americans, his plan to meet Zippi in Warsaw was no longer even a consideration.
- 133 America was his future. ¶¶¶
- 134 Ms. Spitzer was among the last to leave the camp alive.
- 135 She was sent to the women's camp at Ravensbrück and a sub-camp in Malchow before being evacuated in a death march.
- 136 She and a friend escaped the march by removing the red stripe she had painted on their uniforms, allowing them to blend with the local population that was fleeing. ¶¶¶
- 137 As the Red Army advanced and the Nazis surrendered, Ms. Spitzer made her way to her childhood home in Bratislava, Slovakia.
- 138 Her parents and siblings were gone, save for one brother, who'd just gotten married.
- 139 She decided to leave him unburdened to start his new life. ¶¶¶
- 140 According to Dr. Grossmann, the historian, Ms. Spitzer's account of her journey immediately after the war was deliberately vague.
- 141 She alluded to smuggling Jews across borders through the Bricha, an underground movement that helped refugees move illegally across Eastern Europe and into Palestine. ¶¶¶
- 142 Millions of survivors were displaced, and Europe was

teeming with displaced persons camps.

- 143 Some 500 such camps materialized in Germany.
- 144 Amid the chaos, Ms. Spitzer made it to the first all-Jewish displaced persons camp in the American zone of occupied Germany, which in the spring of 1945 housed at least 4,000 survivors.
- 145 It was called Feldafing, the same camp that Mr. Wisnia would deliver supplies to. ¶¶¶
- 146 The odds they would be in the same place were remarkable.
- 147 "I would drive over there to Feldafing, but I had no idea she was there," Mr. Wisnia said. ¶¶¶
- 148 Soon after she arrived in Feldafing in September of 1945, Ms. Spitzer married Erwin Tichauer, the camp's acting police chief and a United Nations security officer, roles that allowed him to work closely with the American military.
- 149 Once again, Ms. Spitzer, now known as Ms. Tichauer, was in a privileged position.
- 150 Although they, too, were displaced persons, the Tichauers lived outside the camp. ¶¶¶
- 151 Ms. Tichauer, then 27, was among the oldest of the survivors in Feldafing.
- 152 Because of her husband's position, she told Dr. Grossmann, she was considered "top management" at the camp.
- 153 As such, she distributed food among the refugees, particularly the booming population of pregnant women.
- 154 In the fall of 1945, she accompanied her husband when Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Gen. George S. Patton came for a tour of the camp. ¶¶¶

- 155 Ms. Tichauer and her husband devoted years of their lives to humanitarian causes.
- 156 They went on missions through the United Nations to Peru and Bolivia and Indonesia.
- 157 In between, Dr. Tichauer taught bioengineering at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. ¶¶¶
- 158 Throughout their travels, Ms. Tichauer continued to learn new languages and use her design skills to help populations in need, particularly pregnant women and new mothers.
- 159 Her existence was not defined by her experience as a Holocaust survivor, said Dr. Matthäus.
- 160 “She had a much richer life,” he said.
- 161 “There was a lot that she achieved with her husband.” ¶¶¶
- 162 Eventually, the Tichauers moved to America, first to Austin, Tex., and then in 1967 they settled in New York, where Dr. Tichauer became a bioengineering professor at New York University.
- 163 In their apartment, surrounded by books about the Holocaust, Ms. Tichauer spoke regularly with historians.
- 164 She never gave speeches and said she despised the concept of the Holocaust as a business.
- 165 The historians she entrusted with her story became part of her family.
- 166 Dr. Kwiet, who called her from Australia every Friday, saw Ms. Tichauer as a mother figure. ¶¶¶
- 167 “Her duty was not to be a professional survivor,” said Dr. Grossmann.
- 168 “Her job was to be the historian’s historian.
- 169 She was committed to this very sober, almost technical rendition of what happened.” ¶¶¶

- 170 Yet throughout the many hours she devoted to detailing the horrors of Auschwitz to a number of historians, Ms. Tichauer never once mentioned Mr. Wisnia. ¶¶¶
- 171 Sometime after the war ended, Mr. Wisnia heard from a former Auschwitz inmate that Ms. Tichauer was alive.
- 172 By then he was deeply enmeshed with the American Army, based in Versailles, France, where he waited until he could finally emigrate to the United States. ¶¶¶
- 173 When his aunt and uncle picked him up at the port in Hoboken in February 1946, they couldn't believe the 19-year-old in a G.I. uniform was the little David they last saw in Warsaw. ¶¶¶
- 174 In a rush to make up for lost time, Mr. Wisnia plunged into New York City life, going to dances and parties.
- 175 He rode the subway from his aunt's house in the Bronx to anywhere around Manhattan.
- 176 He answered an ad in a local paper and got a job selling encyclopedias. ¶¶¶
- 177 In 1947, at a wedding, he met his future wife, Hope.
- 178 Five years later, the couple moved to Philadelphia.
- 179 He became a vice president of sales for Wonderland of Knowledge Corporation, the encyclopedia company, until his career as a cantor took off. ¶¶¶
- 180 Years after he'd settled down with his wife in Levittown, a friend of the lovers told Mr. Wisnia that Zippi was in New York City.
- 181 Mr. Wisnia, who had told his wife about his former girlfriend, thought this would be an opportunity to reconnect, and he could finally ask how he had managed to survive Auschwitz. ¶¶¶

182 Their friend arranged a meeting.

183 Mr. Wisnia drove the two hours from Levittown to Manhattan and waited at a hotel lobby across from Central Park. ¶¶¶

184 “She never showed up,” said Mr. Wisnia.

185 “I found out after that she decided it wouldn’t be smart.

186 She was married; she had a husband.” ¶¶¶

187 Over the years, Mr. Wisnia kept tabs on Ms. Tichauer through their mutual friend.

188 Meanwhile, his family grew – he had four children and six grandchildren.

189 In 2016 Mr. Wisnia decided to try again to reach out to Zippi.

190 He’d shared the story with his family.

191 His son, who was now a rabbi at a Reform synagogue in Princeton, N.J., initiated contact for him.

192 Finally, she agreed to a visit. ¶¶¶

193 In August 2016, Mr. Wisnia took two of his grandchildren with him to the reunion with Ms. Tichauer.

194 He was silent during most of the car ride from Levittown to Manhattan.

195 He didn’t know what to expect.

196 It had been 72 years since he’d last seen his former girlfriend.

197 He’d heard she was in poor health but knew very little about her life.

198 He suspected she’d helped to keep him alive and wanted to know if this was true. ¶¶¶

199 When Mr. Wisnia and his grandchildren arrived at her apartment in the East 30s, they found Ms. Tichauer lying in a hospital bed, surrounded by shelves filled with books.

200 She had been alone since her husband died in 1996, and they'd never had any children.

201 Over the years, bed-bound, she'd gone increasingly blind and deaf.

202 She had an aide looking after her, and the telephone had become her lifeline to the world. ¶¶¶

203 At first, she didn't recognize him.

204 Then Mr. Wisnia leaned in close. ¶¶¶

205 "Her eyes went wide, almost like life came back to her," said Mr. Wisnia's grandson Avi Wisnia, 37.

206 "It took us all aback." ¶¶¶

207 Suddenly there was a flow of words between Mr. Wisnia and Ms. Tichauer, all in their adopted English tongue. ¶¶¶

208 "She said to me in front of my grandchildren, she said, 'Did you tell your wife what we did?'"

209 Mr. Wisnia remembered, chuckling, shaking his head.

210 "I said, 'Zippi!'" ¶¶¶

211 Mr. Wisnia talked about his children, his time in the American Army.

212 Ms. Tichauer spoke about her humanitarian work after the war and her husband.

213 She marveled at Mr. Wisnia's perfect English.

214 "My God," she said.

215 "I never thought that we would see each other again –
and in New York." ¶¶¶

216 The reunion lasted about two hours.

217 He finally had to ask: Did she have something to do with
the fact that he'd managed to survive in Auschwitz all that
time? ¶¶¶

218 She held up her hand to display five fingers.

219 Her voice was loud, her Slovakian accent deep.

220 "I saved you five times from bad shipment," she said. ¶¶¶

221 "I knew she would do that," said Mr. Wisnia to his
grandchildren.

222 "It's absolutely amazing.

223 Amazing." ¶¶¶

224 There was more.

225 "I was waiting for you," Ms. Tichauer said.

226 Mr. Wisnia was astonished.

227 After she escaped the death march, she had waited for
him in Warsaw.

228 She'd followed the plan.

229 But he never came. ¶¶¶

230 She had loved him, she told him quietly.

231 He had loved her, too, he said. ¶¶¶

- 232 Mr. Wisnia and Ms. Tichauer never saw each other again.
- 233 She died last year at age 100.
- 234 On their last afternoon together, before Mr. Wisnia left her apartment, she asked him to sing to her.
- 235 He took her hand and sang her the Hungarian song she taught him in Auschwitz.
- 236 He wanted to show her that he remembered the words.