

BLAKE SCHIFF

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.



Blake Schiff (born Boris Szyff), son of Nikodem and Salomea, was born on October 10, 1920, in Warsaw, Poland. Blake had an older sister, Halina. Nikodem was an

industrialist who worked in the paper business, and Salomea was an orthodontist who had a private practice and who also worked for the Polish Health Organization. The family was not very religious, but they attended synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and Salomea lit candles on Friday night (the Sabbath). When Blake was nine years old, his father died. After this, he and his mother would visit the cemetery every Sunday, and his mother would recount their week to his father.

With help from family members in the United States, Blake was accepted into Baylor University in Texas, where he was going to study medicine. The plan was for Blake and his mother to set sail for the United States from the Polish port city of Gdansk on September 3, 1939. However, on September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, and World War II began. The ship Blake and Salomea were supposed to sail on was destroyed, and they were trapped in Poland. Blake decided to leave Warsaw and head towards Grodno, a city in Eastern Poland where his sister Halina lived (Grodno is now part of Belarus). At this point in time, Grodno was under Soviet control, and Blake believed that as a Jewish man, he would be safer there. Blake stayed in Grodno until April 1940, when he went back to Warsaw to live with his mother.

By this time, Jews over the age of ten in Nazi-occupied Poland had to wear a white armband with a blue Star of David, and a ghetto was established in Warsaw. The ghetto was overcrowded and cramped, and the food rations were insufficient. Through family friends,

Blake was able to get a job in a pharmacy in the ghetto. He did not receive money for his job; instead, he was paid in bread. Blake recalls that the streets were full of beggars, people in rags, and dead bodies. Blake joined the Z.O.B. (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa; Jewish Fighting Organization) and was an archivist member of Oneg Shabbat, an organization run by Emanuel Ringelblum. Members of Oneg Shabbat wrote and recorded what they saw and heard in the ghetto; it was the hope that if the Jews in the ghetto did not survive, their observations of occupation would. In July 1942, Blake helped smuggle Emanuel Ringelblum's son, Yuri, out of the ghetto. (The entire Ringelblum family went into hiding in the non-Jewish area of Warsaw. Their hiding spot was found in 1944 and they were all killed). In August 1942, Blake saw Janusz Korczak (a Jewish educator and head of an orphanage in Warsaw, who refused to leave his children upon deportation to Treblinka) march with Jewish orphans to the Umschlagplatz (deportation site) in the ghetto. Blake remained in the ghetto until after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (April 19, 1943 – May 16, 1943). He was smuggled out through a sewer, and he then hid in a barn, together with his sister and his future wife, Anna, in the village of Nowosiolki from May 1943 until June 24, 1944.

Blake, his sister and Anna were liberated by the Soviet Army in June 1944. Blake and Anna were married in August 1944, and they had a daughter, Irene, in July 1946. The family immigrated to America in 1953, where Blake worked as an engineer. In 1968, Blake was a witness at the war crime trial of Heinz Errelis and Kurt Wiese, both of whom were SS officers in the Grodno ghetto. At the time of Blake's interview, he had two grandchildren. This interview was conducted on September 3, 1998, in Sherman Oaks, California.