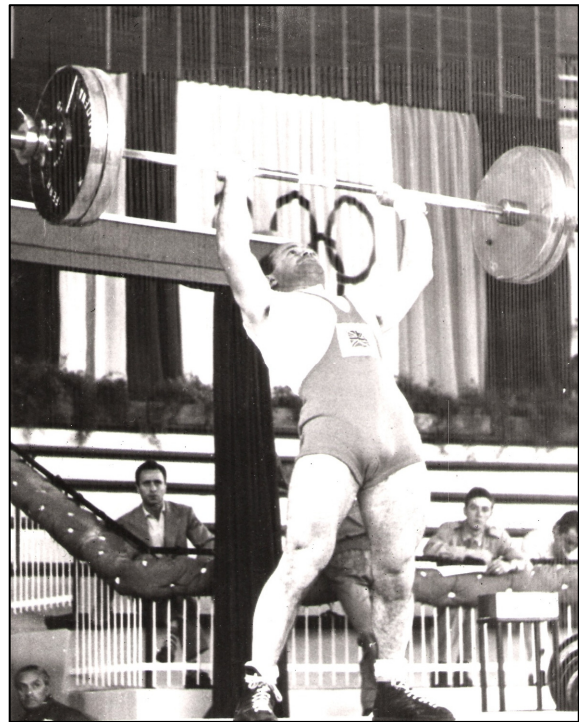


Ben Helfgott; the champion

Each time Ben Helfgott revisits Piotrkow, a town in Poland 26 miles away from Lodz, where he grew up, he notices how little the physical features of the town have changed even though the community he lived in was cruelly and systematically destroyed. As he walks through familiar streets he carries with him memories of special people - his parents, youngest sister, other members of his extended family and childhood playmates, all murdered by the Nazis. In Piotrkow, he feels especially close to those unjustly robbed of life. Today he works hard to ensure that the Holocaust is never forgotten and its lessons learned.



Ben Helfgott at the 1960 Olympics ©Ben Helfgott/AP

Ben was almost ten at the start of the Second World War. Growing up in a happy home, with his parents and two sisters and with other members of his family in the neighbourhood, he was aware war was looming. A perceptive and intelligent child, he could sense that adults were worried about the future and he felt apprehensive too as people listened to and spoke about news coming through on the radio. Jewish people, who had left Poland for a new life in Germany, returned to the town telling of how Jews were being driven out as the power of the Nazis took hold. As early as 1935 Ben's parents were worried about the future of their family and prepared to leave Poland. They obtained permits to travel to Palestine to begin a new life. However Ben's grandmother did not want them to go. She thought they should stay in Poland rather than face an uncertain future in a distant land.

Ben's memories of Hitler's invasion of Poland are vivid. On 1st September, 1939 he was enjoying a holiday with his parents and sisters, visiting his Grandfather, Aunt and Uncle in his mother's home town. His mother wanted to reach Piotrkow in time to prepare for the

Sabbath so the family began the return journey at seven in the morning. The usual trip home took about two hours but this day they did not reach home until six in the evening. As they travelled they heard bombs falling and sirens wailing.

The next day his family had to take shelter in the basement of their home as the invading force began to drop their bombs on Piotrkow. Ben's parents decided that it would be safer to leave home and find a place of safety so they travelled to a small neighbouring town, Sulejow, where they thought it would be more peaceful. It was a warm sunny day and the children played together, feeling safe. In the afternoon bombs began to fall on Sulejow. It was not long before the whole town was ablaze. Ben can vividly remember the sights and sounds he witnessed - everything was burning. Ben and his family ran to the woods for shelter. About 1000 people were killed during this bombing raid. Ben and his family miraculously survived and for the next few days they continued eastward but were eventually caught up by the invading German Army. Ben's parents decided that the only thing they could do was to take the children home to Piotrkow. There was no point in trying to travel any further.

The Nazis quickly identified individual Jewish people in Piotrkow, some they shot, some were publically humiliated and valuable goods were stolen from Jewish homes. The SS arrested some of the leaders of the Jewish community and demanded a large ransom for their release.

In October 1939 all Jews in Piotrkow and the surrounding areas were ordered to move into the ghetto by the 1st November. The ghetto was the first to be established by the Nazis in Europe. At first, fifteen thousand people from the local area were crammed into an area which previously had only housed three to four thousand. Subsequently, another 13,000 Jews were brought to the ghetto from western Poland which was annexed to the Third Reich. Ben and his family moved at the beginning of November. Living conditions were cramped, food was scarce, sanitation was poor and after a time, typhoid spread rapidly. Thousands of people died.

Everyone had to adjust to changing circumstances very quickly and Ben looks back with admiration at his parents' efforts to help their family survive. His father was very courageous and enterprising. He still had links with the town and although he was supposed to stay within its confines, or risk being shot, he bravely spent much of the time

outside the ghetto. Unlike Warsaw and Lodz, the ghetto in Piotrkow was not walled or sealed, but borders were clearly marked and no Jew was allowed outside without permission and no Pole was allowed to enter.

Ben's father organised the smuggling of food into the ghetto, using imaginative ways to defy Nazi restrictions. Although only a child, Ben too found ways to defy the Nazis. He would not wear the armband with the Star of David and spent much of his time outside the ghetto, his fair hair assisting in his pretence to be a non-Jewish Pole. He smuggled newspapers back to the ghetto and became quite knowledgeable about politics and the progress of the war.

In 1941 Ben's father was able to acquire a pass from the Nazis to allow him to freely move outside the ghetto. He was supposed to be collecting rabbit skins from local peasant farmers. The Nazis needed them to make warm clothing and boot linings to send to soldiers on the Russian front. This gave him cover for his own enterprising activities but when he sometimes disappeared for days at a time Ben's mother worried constantly about his safety. A Jewish person outside the ghetto could be shot at any time.

Ben lived in the ghetto for three years. It felt longer and the pattern of life changed. Jewish children could not go to schools. A person could be shot for having a radio inside the ghetto, though some people listened to hidden ones. Ben continued to spend time outside, sometimes taking great risks. He even went to the cinema, in defiance of Nazi regulations. He knew that the Nazis would not be able to tell him apart from the non-Jewish citizens of the town as he did not fit into the stereotypical image that Nazis had of Jews but he was constantly afraid that he might be denounced by someone in the town, who would know he was part of the Jewish community. He knew that most people would stay silent but there was a considerable minority who were prepared to betray Jews found outside the ghetto.

Today, as he looks back, Ben makes clear that it was difficult for Poles to help Jewish people because they were afraid for their own lives but he is sad that a minority of his former neighbours actively helped the Nazis and made their campaign of hate easier.

Ben's father, using his connections outside the ghetto, arranged for his daughters - aged eleven and eight - to go into hiding with Polish families. He also managed to find a job for Ben in a local glass factory outside the ghetto. Ben was only 12 years old but had to work

very hard and cope with racist bullying that took place inside the factory but once his father paid money to one of the deputy shift leaders work life became bearable.

In Piotrkow the systematic deportation and murder of Jews began in October 1942. One evening in 1942 Ben went to work on the night shift. His mother was at home, with her sister and his father was somewhere outside the ghetto. After work he and his fellow Jewish workers were preparing to return to the ghetto but they could not get through. The ghetto had been sealed and people were being rounded up for "resettlement". In one week approximately 22,000 Jews from a total population of over 24,000 were rounded up. 3000 had already died from starvation and typhoid. Some people accepted that they were being deported to be resettled but rumours about gas chambers began to spread. It was difficult to know what to believe. In fact, forced to travel in terrible conditions, they were sent by rail straight to the death camp at Treblinka. Ben and his fellow factory workers had no news of their families' whereabouts, though Ben was told that neither of his parents had been seen as the round ups took place.

Now there were only 2,400 Jews left inside the ghetto. The Nazis reduced the size of the ghetto area. Ben and others who had been on work-shifts during the deportations round up were allowed back in to the smaller ghetto. He heard that both his parents were in hiding but his grandfather had been on the transport to Treblinka. He managed to contact his parents and he and his father returned to the ghetto, leaving his mother in hiding.

As a factory worker Ben was still a legitimate person within the ghetto but his father was not. With the help of relatives they managed to legitimise his father's position. But their problems were far from over. His mother and aunt had to return to the ghetto when a woman within the family sheltering them made demands for large sums of money. Then the Polish man hiding Ben's youngest sister brought her back to the ghetto. His neighbours were putting too much pressure on him. He could no longer keep her safe. Shortly after Ben's other sister also had to return.

The Nazis announced that they knew there were people who had returned to the ghetto illegally. They offered them an amnesty. Naturally people came out of hiding. The Nazis immediately rounded up 520 of them, including Ben's mother and youngest sister Lusia, who was eight years old. They held them in the synagogue. Ben's father managed to get hold of a permit for the release of his wife but could not organise one for Lusia. Frantic

messages passed between the parents as Ben's father begged his wife to come home. Ben's mother wrote a message to her husband. "You look after the two children and I have to look after the youngest one."

It was a Sunday morning, 20th December, when the Nazis took 100 people at a time out of the synagogue, led them into the woods and killed them group by group. Ben remembers waking up that morning to find his father crying. He didn't need to ask him what had happened. Ben did not want to cry in front of other people but when he was alone he wept for his mother and youngest sister.

In July 1943 the Nazis decided to liquidate the small ghetto and the town became *Judenrein* (free of Jews). Those Jews working in the glass and woodworking factories were left - 1650 in all. The rest were deported to other labour camps in Poland.

The Nazis fled from Piotrkow in August 1944. The Russian army was advancing towards them. No one was guarding the remaining Jews and it seemed that the town would soon be liberated but this was not to be. The Warsaw uprising took place and was brutally crushed. Nazi soldiers returned to Piotrkow. There were more round ups. 300 Jewish men were sent to Buchenwald Concentration Camp, Ben and his father amongst them, whilst Mala and her cousin, Ann, were deported to the Concentration Camp at Ravensbruck. The rest were despatched to Czestochowa where they were set to work in munitions factories.

Ben and his father were in Buchenwald for nearly two weeks, and then Ben was separated from his father and sent to Concentration Camp in Schlieben where anti-tank weapons were produced. Ben's father was left behind in Buchenwald. In April 1945 Ben was transported to Theresienstadt. Three weeks later the camp was liberated.

After liberation Ben found out that his father had been shot a few days before the end of the war, as he made a bid to escape from a death march.

Now an orphan, fifteen year old Ben was reunited with a younger cousin, Gienek, in Theresienstadt. The two boys decided to travel back to Poland. They thought they would be welcome there but on arrival they faced racial abuse and were almost murdered by some

Polish army officers. It was hard to realise that they might be no longer welcome in their home country. However good news awaited Ben in Piotrkow. His sister, Mala and his cousin had survived and were in the displaced persons' camp at Bergen-Belsen. He retraced his steps via Prague to try to reach them.

At Theresienstadt he was offered the chance to come to England. He wanted to go but hurried to find his sister and cousin first. However upon hearing from the Americans that travel to Belsen would be impossible, he decided to join a group of young people on the trip to England and contact Mala once he arrived. Mala had in fact been taken to Sweden but was reunited with her brother in 1947.

Ben travelled to the UK with a group of around 300 boys, all around the age of 16, 30 girls and 20 small children. They arrived on VJ Day and spent time in Windermere in the Lake District. From there 30 of the boys were sent to Essex and finally Ben moved to Belsize Park where he lived in a hostel. He helped to establish a club for Jewish young people, called the Primrose Club and attended Plaistow Grammar School, in an attempt to make up 6 years of his lost schooling. Ben enjoyed taking part in sporting activities such as gymnastics, football, athletics and table tennis. He did well at school and relished the chance to return to study.

In 1948, he was about to go to university. It was the summer holidays and he was swimming on Hampstead Heath. There he watched people taking part in weight lifting exercises. He asked whether he could try to lift some of the weights. One man said that he thought the weights would be too heavy for Ben but the 18 year old lifted 180lbs into the air with ease. Ben remembers being hailed as "a natural." The Primrose Club started weight lifting training but Ben was about to go to university and was unable to join in. Southampton University did not have any weights so the club arranged for some to be sent from London. The club manager thought Ben should enter for the 1950 Maccabiah Games to be held in Israel. He won the trials for the games, became Home Counties champion and went on to win a gold medal in Israel. Encouraged by this he began to train more seriously and became the British title holder four times. In a few short years the victim of Nazi persecution became a champion. He was fifteen years old and describes himself as a walking skeleton, when he first arrived in the UK and yet ten years later he represented his adopted country at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, 1958 Commonwealth Games in Cardiff where he won a bronze medal and at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. He was captain of the British weightlifting team on all these occasions.

For 46 years Ben has been Chairman of the '45 Aid Society, an association formed by and for the boys and girls who arrived in England in 1945 from Nazi Europe – 732 souls in all. The members have rebuilt their lives and live in many different countries. They consider themselves part of one large family and are in close touch with one another.

Together with other survivors of the '45 Aid Society Ben has worked very hard over many years to teach the lesson of the Holocaust so that all can learn from it. Ben believes that the mental processes, suspicion, intolerance, ignorance, prejudice and racial hatred which made the events of the Holocaust possible, are unlikely to vanish. By making people aware of the consequences and by widening the circle of enlightened human beings we can at least reduce the intensity and help to create the conditions to live in harmony and exercise mutual respect and understanding of one another. This is Ben's Legacy of Hope.