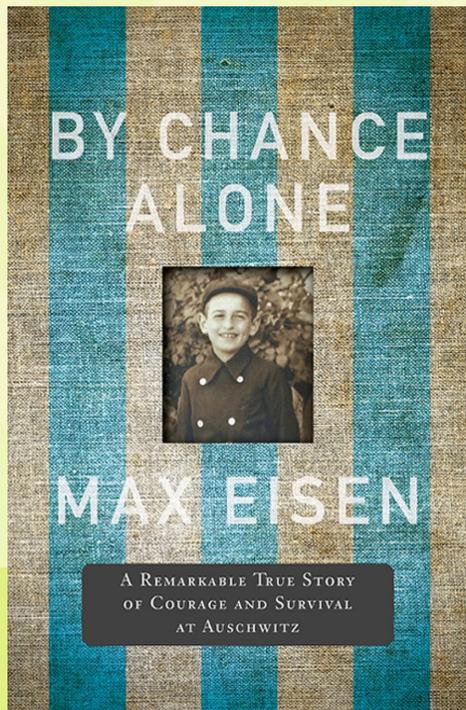


Book Background: **BY CHANCE ALONE** by MAX EISEN



More than 70 years after the Nazi camps were liberated by the Allies in World War II, this Canadian Holocaust memoir details the rural Hungarian deportations to Auschwitz-Birkenau, back-breaking slave labour, the infamous “death march” in January 1945, the painful aftermath of liberation, and a journey of healing.

Note to teachers:

This document contains spoilers!

*If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on **curio.ca** with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.*

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from **By Chance Alone** and watch Max Eisen discuss his book.

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LITERACY STRATEGY

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



Book Description

By Chance Alone is the story of how the author, Tibor “Max” Eisen survived the Holocaust. The book is divided into 28 chapters, which proceed chronologically through Max’s life. The first few chapters are about Max’s childhood growing up as the eldest of four children in an Orthodox Jewish family living in Moldava, Czechoslovakia.

Readers quickly get a sense of what daily life was like for Max as a child. He grows up living in a large dwelling with separate quarters for his immediate family, his grandparents, and his aunt and uncle’s family. As a young child, he recalls choosing where he would eat dinner each day based on the smells emanating from the extended family’s three kitchens. Bread baking, preserving fruit and brewing sauerkraut were all communal affairs he remembers fondly.

In the late 1930s, however, the region where Max lives is annexed by Hungary and the new government begins actively promoting anti-Jewish policies and propaganda. By the time Max begins grade five in 1939, Hungarian teachers oversee all the schools. And by 1940, his father’s business is seized without

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compensation. Jewish men are sent to work in labour battalions.

In 1942, armed police officers attempt to deport Max's mother and aunt, with their children, to a Jewish ghetto created in a city in western Ukraine. The plan is aborted, however, and they are sent home after three weeks, only to learn that some forty thousand earlier deportees were slaughtered. The relief of surviving this ordeal is short-lived however, and in 1944 Max's entire family are deported from their home once again, this time to the notorious concentration camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau.

There, a 15-year-old Max survives the initial selection process and is inducted into the camp as a slave

labourer with his father and uncle. His mother, grandparents, aunt and younger siblings are all immediately selected out and killed in the camp's gas chambers. For some time, Max, his father and his uncle spend their days enduring gruelling labour and their nights struggling to survive extreme hunger and cold.

Then, one terrible day, Max's father and uncle are also selected out for medical experimentation and ultimately death. As they are parting, Max's father bestows a final blessing on his son, and urges him to share the family's story. His father and uncle's deaths leave Max utterly alone.

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One day, Max is severely injured by an SS guard, and ends up in the camp's clinic, where a Polish physician treats his wound and decides to make him a cleaner in the operating room, saving him from certain death.

From here, the book goes on to describe the horrors Max endures when prisoners at Auschwitz are evacuated ahead of the Soviet army's arrival and subjected to the infamous Death March. Eventually, he is liberated by members of the so-called "Black Panther Battalion," but life after liberation remains a struggle—not only in terms of dealing with the trauma he's endured, but in terms of continued persecution.

Only in 1949 is Max able to emigrate to Canada, where he has devoted his life to educating people about the Holocaust.



Primary Characters

Max Eisen – The book's author and main character, Max Eisen was 15 at the time of his family's deportation from their home in annexed Czechoslovakia to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Today, Max is a 90-year-old Holocaust survivor living in Toronto, Ontario with his wife. Together, they have two sons, Ed and Larry, two granddaughters and three great-grandchildren.

Eugene, Alfred and Judit – Max's two younger brothers and his baby sister, who is born just before their deportation. All of Max's siblings are murdered immediately upon the family's arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

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His mother (Ethel) and father (Zoltan) – Growing up, Max deeply respects both his parents and admires their efforts to care for the family. Tragically, his mother is killed, along with his younger siblings and grandparents, immediately upon arriving at Auschwitz. His father survives initial selection, and manages to protect Max for a time before he, too, is “selected out” for medical experimentation. While they are saying their final goodbyes, Max’s father gives him a blessing and makes him promise that, should he live, he will make sure the world knows this story. At this point, Max becomes the only surviving member of his immediate family, and the only member of his extended family that he knows of.

Uncle Eugene and Aunt Irene – Max’s aunt Irene is killed with his mother and siblings upon arrival at Auschwitz. His Uncle Eugene survives for a time. When their arms are tattooed with their prisoner numbers, Max’s father is given the number A-9891, Max is marked as prisoner A-9892 and Eugene is A-9893. As Max puts it, “Wherever we went, I was always between them; they were my guardian angels.”

Dr. Tadeusz Orzeszko – The chief surgeon in the medical clinic within Auschwitz-Birkenau, who decides that Max will work as a cleaner in the clinic after he’s injured — a decision which Max continues to believe ensured his survival.

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Aunt Bella – Another of Max’s aunts, Bella had survived polio before the war and had very limited mobility. Max remembers her presence during his childhood fondly, and early in the book, he recalls her death of natural causes as a mercy, since it came shortly before the family’s deportation.

Farkas – The family’s beloved dog, whom Max describes as “more humane than the townspeople, because he was the only one who seemed to care that we were being taken away.”

Key Themes



RESILIENCE – The mental and physical horrors which Max and other Holocaust survivors endured are horrendous. Max’s memory for these events is astonishing and he describes the conditions he endured with a level of detail that underscores his resilience — and the resilience of all survivors — time and time again. His ability to remain sane and committed to family, morality and to his own survival in the face of such tremendous suffering is remarkable and a testament to the resilience of humankind.



LUCK – As the title, *By Chance Alone*, implies, Max remains preoccupied with the utterly arbitrary nature of his own survival. In one anecdote, he describes a

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night of random selections by the SS doctors at Auschwitz and how the man immediately in front of him was stopped and selected out for experimentation, allowing Max to keep moving towards the exit of the building they were in, undetected. The moment is one of many instances where Max's seemingly random "good fortune" relative to that of other prisoners is highlighted.

 **FASCISM** – Of course, a major theme in *By Chance Alone* is the rise of fascism in Europe. The transformation of the society where Max grows up from one of tolerance into one of profound anti-semitism and disregard for the injustice of Jewish people's persecution is abrupt and insidious. Max describes this shift as he remembers it from childhood,

when his family was stripped — not just of their home, belongings and livelihood — but of their dignity all in a matter of months.

 **THE ROLE OF BYSTANDERS** – Repeatedly throughout the book, Max describes his deep distress at seeing people who aren't themselves overtly hateful towards Jews turn their backs on the suffering of Jewish families. During the Death March of 1945, for instance, Max and other concentration camp prisoners are paraded through towns where the reactions of local people are striking. "They totally rejected the sight of us, as if to say that they did not acknowledge the reality of what was happening right in front of them," Max writes. On the other hand, Max is careful to point out that the kindness of strangers sometimes saved lives —

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as in the case of bystanders who threw bread to Death March prisoners, despite the threat of gunfire, or when a Christian friend suggested that Max's mother leave his baby sister, Judit, in her care.

★ FAMILY – Of all the suffering Max endures, it's clear that his greatest loss is the loss of his family. In the acknowledgements for *By Chance Alone* he writes, "Of approximately sixty members of my extended family, only three of us survived: me; my maternal first cousin, Lily Friedman Kalish; and my paternal first cousin, Chaim (Tibor) Lazarovits." With his book, Max memorializes the dozens of family members who died, and celebrates the fact that he lived to create a new family comprised of his wife, their two sons, two granddaughters and three great grandchildren.



About the Author

Max Eisen is a Hungarian Jew who was deported to Auschwitz in the spring of 1944. He is a passionate speaker and educator who volunteers at the Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre and

the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center in Toronto. He currently resides in Toronto with his wife, Ivy.

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Other Author Info

- Max donates a portion of all the royalties from sales of *By Chance Alone* to institutions promoting Holocaust education
- In 2016, Max Eisen testified in Germany at the trial of two former SS guards at Auschwitz. Both were convicted at their trials

Awards & Accolades

By Chance Alone:

- RBC Taylor Prize finalist (2017)
- Vine Awards for Canadian Jewish Literature History finalist (2017)



Notable Quotes from Reviews

“Eisen’s memoir is a timely examination of the human capacity for cruelty, ignorance, and depravity. It is also a message of hope, a *cri de coeur*, and a reminder that small acts of kindness can have an immeasurable impact on another person’s life.” – Quill & Quire

“*By Chance Alone* is depressing, and induces the incredulity and anger one expects from a memoir of the Holocaust. Yet the book possesses unique power that comes from its candour, its lack of pretension, its spare prose, and the author’s sharp memory. One surprise is Eisen’s description of how hard it was for him to endure the years after the war under

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Communist rule before he finally found his home in Toronto. A compelling book, *By Chance Alone* recalls in direct and measured language how one young man confronted horrible atrocities and personal grief. It reminds us how fragile the world we know is, and how terrifying its breakup can be.” – RBC Taylor Prize jury citation

“This brings us to the dilemma most face when we ponder the Holocaust. If we label the perpetrators monsters, we are safe. We cannot then imagine ourselves participating in such horror. And yet, there were too many perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders. Participants were not so unlike us.”
– The Catholic Register

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CBC Links

- Book Page: www.cbc.ca/1.4024041
- Author Page: www.cbc.ca/1.4971725
- Max Eisen shares the hardest thing about being a writer: www.cbc.ca/1.4029350
- Holocaust Survivor Max Eisen shares personal stories: www.cbc.ca/1.3542278
- Auschwitz liberated 65 years ago: www.cbc.ca/player/play/1397047220
- VIDEO – Why Canada Reads author Max Eisen wrote a book about escaping death during the Holocaust: www.cbc.ca/1.5019503

Other Links

- VIDEO – Auschwitz survivor: 'Beware of hate' | BBC News: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCUV8bUuOPg
- VIDEO – A story of survival | Max Eisen | Walrus Talks: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzQcNcp-xdl
- Max Eisen in conversation with Brian Bethune | Macleans: www.macleans.ca/culture/max-eisen-taylor-prize-nominee/



Watch Max Eisen discuss his book:
www.curio.ca/canadareads

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Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from *By Chance Alone* found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. The title of the book suggests that luck played a huge role in the life and survival of the author, Max Eisen. How much of a role does luck play in your life?
2. The Hungarian government used propaganda to turn attitudes against Jewish people. Are there current examples of propaganda being used for similar purposes? Does it work?
3. Why is it important for readers to see the Eisen family happy and together before the Holocaust?
4. What are the connections between the Holocaust and acts of genocide that are happening currently or may happen in the future?
5. What factors prevent bystanders from becoming upstanders? What can be done to encourage more people to stand up for people being victimized by others?
6. Does the technology we have access to today make it easier to victimize others or easier to uncover and prevent victimization? Both? Neither?

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7. Max Eisen travels across Canada as a Holocaust educator and writes “I recognize how important it is for survivors to tell their stories, and to honour and remember the people and human potential that was lost.” What is the importance of intergenerational knowledge sharing and teaching?
8. Max Eisen starts the prologue of *By Chance Alone* by describing a field trip to Poland to participate in The March of the Living and tour historical sites with 150 students from Toronto. What is the importance of experiencing historical sites firsthand? How is your understanding of history enhanced through this direct experience?



Inquiry Activities

1. Students can research Jewish lives and experiences outside of the context of the Holocaust to develop a broader understanding of the Jewish diaspora.
2. Students can watch video clips about World War II, particularly those focusing on The Holocaust. Video clips can be found on websites such as www.cbc.ca and www.curio.ca. They can organize their ideas and learning about what they are seeing according to a Think-Pair-Share.

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3. Students can find and reflect on a piece of poetry or music written by victims of the Holocaust. Students can share these pieces and their reflections in small groups.
4. Students can look at the systemic ways that the Nazis dehumanized and victimized the Jewish people in The Holocaust and investigate whether these same techniques are being used in later acts of genocide.