“Every day was an entity in itself. You’ve got to live through the day to get to the next day. You never knew when you went to bed if you were going to get up in the morning. You could get killed while you sleep. So, you became seasoned in survival.”
Leon Cooper

Leon Cooper was just shy of his tenth birthday when the German Army marched into his hometown of Chorzów, Poland in September 1939. Until then, life for Leon, his parents, and his two younger sisters had been peaceful. Leon went to a Jewish school in the mornings, continued his Hebrew education in the afternoons, and spent his free time enjoying a carefree boyhood: “I played soccer, got in trouble, got my shoes scuffed, got my pants dirty.”

The German invasion marked an abrupt end to Leon’s childhood. Amidst the chaos, the Kupczyk family fled Chorzów and eventually resettled in Dzialoszyce. On September 3, 1942, the Jews of Dzialoszyce were ordered to report to the market square. Leon’s mother and sisters were put on trains bound for Belzec. “That’s the last time I saw them,” says Leon. Together with his father, Mosze, Leon was sent first to a labor camp near Krakow and then to Plaszow. There, under the command of the sadistic Amnon Göth, inmates endured random, capricious violence and wanton brutality. One day, the SS discovered that one of the inmates in Mosze’s work detail was smuggling rations. The entire group was shot.

Then Leon’s luck turned: “Something happened to me, which saved my life. I was picked to work for Oskar Schindler.” The German industrialist owned a kitchen utensil factory where he employed Jewish slave laborers. Although he was outwardly friendly to the local Gestapo, he did everything in his power to protect the Jews in his care.

Toward the end of the war, Leon was forced to march to Theresienstadt, a ghetto and transit camp in Czechoslovakia, where Russian troops liberated him on May 9, 1945. Only 16 years old when the war ended, Leon came to America with a group of teenagers under the auspices of a United Nations relief organization. After a brief stay in Cleveland, he was sent to Houston in January 1947. The Houston Jewish Federation made it possible for Leon to resume his interrupted education at Sam Houston High School. After graduation, he was inducted during the Korean War and was stationed in Germany. When he returned to Houston, “the only home I had,” he married Shirley Pomerantz and established a successful career as a businessman. Although Leon often speaks to groups about his experiences, he did not talk about the Holocaust to his two daughters while they were growing up. “We know it as a generation of silence. We didn’t want any pity.”

Levon with his younger sister, Sarah, in Poland before World War II.

Born: Leib Kupczyk
Wodzislaw, Poland
September 13, 1929

Parents:
Mosze Kupczyk, d. Plaszow, 1943
Tauba Rosencweig Kupczyk, d. Belzec, 1943

Siblings:
Cypora (Cesia), d. Auschwitz, 1943
Oksana (Sarah), d. Auschwitz, 1943