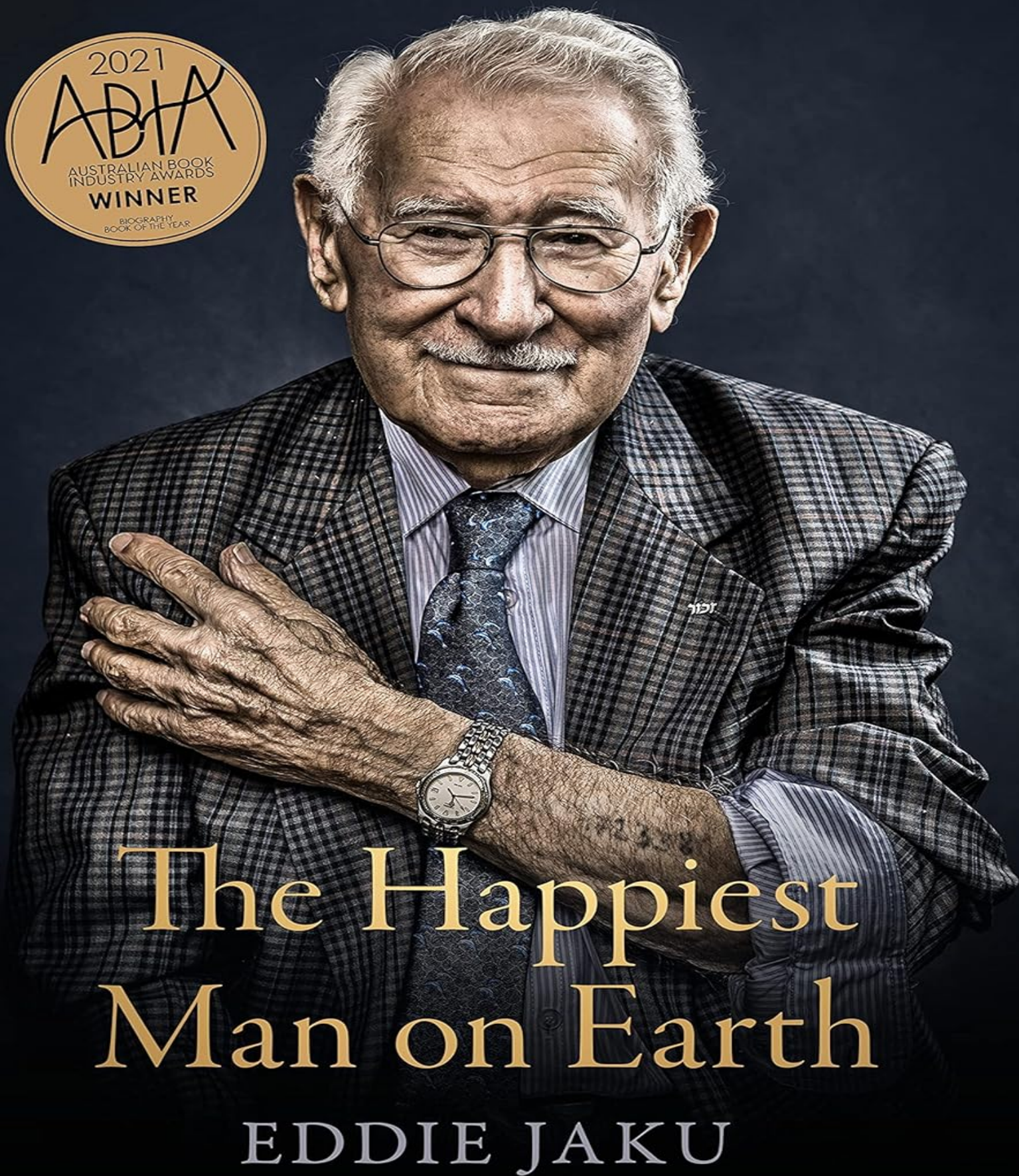


A Holocaust survivor shares how he found gratitude,
kindness and hope in the darkest of places



The Happiest Man on Earth

EDDIE JAKU

About *The Happiest Man on Earth*

Life can be beautiful if you make it beautiful. It is up to you.

Eddie Jaku always considered himself a German first, a Jew second. He was proud of his country. But all of that changed in November 1938, when he was beaten, arrested and taken to a concentration camp.

Over the next seven years, Eddie faced unimaginable horrors every day, first in Buchenwald, then in Auschwitz, then on a Nazi death march. He lost family, friends, his country.

Because he survived, Eddie made the vow to smile every day. He pays tribute to those who were lost by telling his story, sharing his wisdom and living his best possible life. He now believes he is the ‘happiest man on earth’.

Published as Eddie turns 100, this is a powerful, heartbreaking and ultimately hopeful memoir of how happiness can be found even in the darkest of times.

The Happiest Man on Earth

EDDIE JAKU



For future generations

Don't walk behind me, I may not lead.
Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow.
Just walk beside me and be my friend.
– Anonymous

Contents

[Cover](#)

[About The Happiest Man on Earth](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One: There are many things more precious than money.](#)

[Chapter Two: Weakness can be turned into hatred.](#)

[Chapter Three: Tomorrow will come if you survive today. One step at a time.](#)

[Chapter Four: You can find kindness everywhere, even from strangers.](#)

[Chapter Five: Hug your mother.](#)

[Chapter Six: One good friend is my whole world.](#)

[Chapter Seven: Education is a lifesaver.](#)

[Chapter Eight: If you lose your morals, you lose yourself.](#)

[Chapter Nine: The human body is the best machine ever made.](#)

[Chapter Ten: Where there is life, there is hope.](#)

[Chapter Eleven: There are always miracles in the world, even when it seems dark.](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Love is the best medicine.](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: We are all part of a larger society, and our work is our contribution to a free and safe life for all.](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: Shared sorrow is half sorrow; shared pleasure is double pleasure.](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: What I have to share is not my pain. What I share is my hope.](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Picture Section](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the author](#)

[Copyright page](#)

PROLOGUE

My dear new friend.

I have lived for a century, and I know what it is to stare evil in the face. I have seen the very worst in mankind, the horrors of the death camps, the Nazi efforts to exterminate my life, and the lives of all my people.

But I now consider myself the happiest man on Earth.

Through all of my years I have learned this: life can be beautiful if you make it beautiful.

I will tell you my story. It is a sad one in parts, with great darkness and great sorrow. But it is a happy story in the end because happiness is something we can choose. It is up to you.

I will show you how.

CHAPTER ONE

There are many things more precious than money.

I was born in 1920 in a city called Leipzig, in eastern Germany. My name was Abraham Salomon Jakubowicz, but friends called me Adi for short. In English, the name is pronounced Eddie. So please, call me Eddie, my friend.

We were a loving family, a big family. My father, Isidore, had four brothers and three sisters, and my mum, Lina, was one of thirteen children. Imagine the strength of my grandmother, who raised so many children! She lost a son in the First World War, a Jew who sacrificed his life for Germany, as well as her husband, my grandfather, an army chaplain who never returned from the war.

My father was as proud a German citizen as could be, an immigrant from Poland who settled in Germany. He first left Poland as an apprentice in fine mechanical engineering for typewriter manufacturer Remington. Because he spoke good German, he made his way to America working on a German merchant ship.

He excelled in his trade in America, but missed his family and decided to travel back to Europe to visit on another German merchant ship – arriving just in time to be caught in the First World War. Because he was travelling on a Polish passport, he was interned by the Germans as an illegal alien. However, the German government recognised that he was a skilled mechanic, and allowed him to leave internment to work in a factory in Leipzig, making heavy weapons for the war effort. In this time he fell in love with my mother, Lina, and with Germany, and stayed after the war. He opened a factory in Leipzig, married my mother, and soon I was born. Two years later, we welcomed my little sister Johanna into the world. We called her Henni for short.

Nothing could shake my father's patriotism and pride in Germany. We considered ourselves Germans first, Germans second, and then Jewish. Our religion did not seem as important to us as being good citizens of our

Leipzig. We practiced our traditions and observed our holidays, but our loyalty and our love were for Germany. I was proud to come from Leipzig, which had for 800 years been a centre for art and culture – it had one of the oldest symphony orchestras in the world, and it was a city that inspired Johann Sebastian Bach, Clara Schumann, Felix Mendelssohn, writers, poets and philosophers – Goethe, Leibniz and Nietzsche, and many others.

For centuries, Jews had been part of the very fabric of Leipzig society. Since medieval times, the big market day was on Friday, rather than Saturday, to allow Jewish merchants to participate, as work is forbidden for us on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. Prominent Jewish citizens and philanthropists contributed to the public good, as well as the Jewish community, overseeing the construction of some of Europe's most beautiful synagogues. Harmony was part of life. And it was a very good life for a child. We had the zoological gardens just five minutes' walk from my house, famed around the world for its collection and for breeding more lions in captivity than anywhere else in the world. Can you imagine how exciting it was for a small boy? We had huge trade fairs twice a year that my father would take me to – the same ones that had made Leipzig one of the most cultured and wealthy cities in Europe. Leipzig's location and importance as a trading city made it a nexus for the spread of new technologies and ideas. Its university, Germany's second oldest, was founded in 1409. The world's first daily newspaper began publication in Leipzig in 1650. A city of books, of music, of opera. As a boy, I truly believed that I was part of the most enlightened, most cultured, most sophisticated – certainly the most educated – society in the whole world. How wrong I was.

While I was not personally very religious, we visited synagogue regularly. We kept a kosher kitchen and diet for my mother, who wanted to do things as traditionally as possible to please her mother, my grandmother who lived with us and who was very religious. Each Friday night we would meet for *Shabbos* (Sabbath) dinner, say our prayers, and eat traditional meals lovingly prepared by my grandmother. She would cook on the huge wood stove that also heated the house. An ingenious system of pipes ran through the home so that spare heat was not wasted, and the smoke was taken safely outside. When we came in frozen from the outside, we would sit on cushions next to that stove to warm up. I had a dog, a little dachshund

puppy called Lulu, who would curl up on my lap on cold nights. How I treasured those nights.

My father worked hard to provide for us and we were comfortable, but he was careful to make sure we understood that there was much more to life than material things. Each Friday night, before the *Shabbos* dinner, Mother would bake three or four loaves of *challah*, the special, richly delicious ceremonial bread made with eggs and flour that we ate on special occasions. When I was six, I asked him why we baked so many when we were only a family of four, and he explained that he would take the extra loaves to the synagogue to give to Jews in need. He loved his family, and his friends. He was always bringing friends home to share dinner with us, although my mother put her foot down and said he could have no more than five people at a time, as no more could squeeze around our table.

‘If you are lucky enough to have money and a nice house, you can afford to help those who don’t,’ he would tell me. ‘This is what life is all about. To share your good fortune.’ My father used to say to me there is more pleasure in giving than in taking, that the important things in life – friends, family, kindness – are far more precious than money. A man is worth more than his bank account. I thought he was crazy then, but now after all I have seen in this life, I know he was right.

But there was a cloud over our happy family scene. Germany was in trouble. We had lost the last war and the economy was ruined. The victorious Allied powers demanded more money in reparations than Germany could ever pay back, and 68 million people were suffering. There were food and fuel shortages and rampant poverty, which was keenly felt by the very proud German people. Although we were a comfortable middle-class family, it was not possible to find many necessities, even with ready money. My mother would walk many kilometres to market to exchange handbags and clothes she’d collected in better times for eggs, milk, butter or bread. For my thirteenth birthday, my father asked me what I wanted, and I asked for six eggs, a loaf of white bread, which was hard to find as Germans prefer rye bread, and a pineapple. I couldn’t imagine anything more impressive than six eggs, and I had never seen a pineapple. And somehow, he found one – I have no idea how, but that was my father. He would do things that seemed impossible just to put a smile on my face. I was so excited that I ate all six eggs and the whole pineapple at once. I’d

never had so much rich food. Mum warned me to slow down but did I listen? No!

Inflation was terrible, which made it impossible to stock up on non-perishable foods or to plan for the future. My father would come home from work with a valise full of cash that would be worthless by morning. He would send me to the store and say, 'Buy whatever you can! If there are six loaves of bread, get them all! Tomorrow we will have nothing!' It was very hard even for fortunate people to live, and the Germans were humiliated and angry. People became desperate and receptive to any solution. The Nazi party and Hitler promised the German people a solution. And they provided an enemy.

In 1933, when Hitler came to power, he brought with him a wave of anti-Semitism. This was my thirteenth year, and our tradition called for my *Bar Mitzvah*, an ancient religious ceremony to celebrate coming-of-age. *Bar Mitzvah*, meaning 'son of commandment', is usually followed by a wonderful party with delicious food and dancing. In other times, it would have been held in the grand Leipzig Synagogue, but this wasn't permitted after Nazi rule began. Instead, I had my *Bar Mitzvah* in a small synagogue three hundred metres down the street. The Rabbi who ran our *shul* (another name for synagogue, literally 'house of books') was very smart. He rented the flat below the synagogue to a gentile who had a son in the SS. When anti-Semitic attacks came, this gentile son always made sure guards were protecting the flat, and therefore the *shul* above it. If they wanted to destroy the *shul*, they would have to destroy this man's home too.

We had the religious ceremony, with candle lighting and prayers for both my family, and those who had passed away. After the ceremony, I was considered a man in Jewish tradition, responsible for my own actions. I started to think about my future.

As a very small boy, I had wanted to be a doctor, but that was not where my talents lay. In Germany, we had centres to which students were sent to discover their aptitudes through a series of memory and manual dexterity tests. From that they decided that my talents were optical and mathematical, with excellent eyesight and hand-eye co-ordination. I would make a fine engineer, so this was what I decided to study.

I was attending a very good school in a beautiful building called 32 Volksschule. It was one kilometre away from our home, and it would take

me about fifteen minutes to walk there. Unless it was winter! Leipzig is a very cold city and for eight months of the year, the river was frozen solid. I could skate on the river all the way to school in five minutes.

In 1933, I graduated to high school, and would attend the Leibniz Gymnasium school. Had history run a different course, I would have studied there until I was 18, but it was not to be.

One day, I turned up and was informed I could no longer attend – I was being kicked out for being Jewish. This was unacceptable to my father, a stubborn man with powerful connections in Leipzig, who soon devised a new plan for my education.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said to me. ‘You will continue your studies. I will make sure.’

False papers were prepared for me, and with the help of a family friend I was enrolled at Jeter und Shearer, a mechanical engineering college in Tuttlingen, far to the south of Leipzig. This was the epicentre of engineering technology in the world at that time, supplying the world with precision mechanics. They made all kinds of incredible machines, intricate medical instruments and industrial machinery. I remember seeing a machine where a chicken would go into one end of a conveyer belt and emerge at the other end plucked, washed, and wrapped. It was incredible! And I would be learning how to make these machines, the best possible engineering education in the world. To get in, I had to sit a series of exams, and I was so nervous that I had to be careful to wipe the sweat from my forehead before it could fall and ruin my paper. I was very anxious that I would let my father down.

I was enrolled under the assumed name of Walter Schleif, a gentile German orphan who had less to fear from Hitler’s appointment as German chancellor. Walter Schleif was the identity of a real German boy who had vanished. Most likely, his family had quietly left Germany when the Nazis began to rise. My father obtained his identity cards and was able to modify them into forgeries that were convincing enough to fool the government. German identity cards at the time had tiny photos embedded in the paper which could only be seen with a special infrared light. The forgery had to be very well done, but my father’s vocation in typewriters meant he had access to the right tools and know-how.

With the new documents, I could begin a new life and take my place in the

school, where I began an apprenticeship in mechanical engineering. The school was a nine-hour train journey from Leipzig. I would have to look after myself, my clothes, my education, and keep my secret at all costs. I would attend school every day and sleep at night in a nearby orphanage, in a dormitory with much older boys. In return for the work of my apprenticeship, I received a small stipend which I could use for clothing and other essentials.

It was a lonely existence, being Walter Schleif. I could tell nobody who I really was, could confide in nobody – to do so would have meant the outing of my Jewish identity and put me in danger. I had to take special care in the restrooms and shower, as if another boy were to notice I was circumcised, it would have been the end for me.

There was little contact with home. Writing letters was not safe, and to telephone I had to visit the phone in a department store basement, taking a long and complicated route to make sure I wasn't followed. On the rare occasions I could speak to my family, it broke my heart. I can't begin to explain the pain of being a young man so far from home, and that being the only possibility to secure an education and the future my father wanted for me. But as hard as it was to be far from my family, it would have been worse to let them down.

I told my father how lonely I was without them, and he urged me to be strong.

'Eddie, I know it is very difficult, but one day you will thank me,' he would say. I learned later that although he was stern with me, the moment after he hung up the phone, he would start crying like a baby. He was putting on a brave face to help make me brave.

And he was right. Without what I learned at that school, I would never have survived what was to come.

Five years passed. Five years of unrelenting work and loneliness.

I'm not sure I can explain what it is like to pretend to be someone you are not from thirteen-and-a-half to eighteen. It is a terrible burden to carry that secret for so long. Not a moment passed when I did not miss my family, but I understood that my studies were important and persisted. It was a terrible

sacrifice, to miss my family for so long, but I gained so much from my education.

In the final years of my apprenticeship, I worked at a company making very fine X-ray equipment. In addition to the technical and theoretical side of my education, I was expected to demonstrate that I could work hard and capably at my new profession. I would work all day and attend school at night. Wednesday was the only day I didn't work and could devote entirely to my studies.

Despite my loneliness, I loved the education I was getting. The masters I was studying under were some of the greatest minds in the world, and they could pick up their tools and make seemingly anything, from the tiniest gears to giant machines on the forefront of technology. It all seemed miraculous to me. Germany was at the forefront of a technological and industrial revolution that promised to make quality of life better for millions of people, and I was on the very cutting edge.

In 1938, just after my eighteenth birthday, I sat my final exams, and was selected as the top apprentice of the year from my school and invited to join the union. The unions in Germany at that time were not the same as you find in modern society. They had less to do with negotiating work conditions and how much money you made, and were more about what you were able to do as a practitioner. At that time, you were only invited to join if you were really good at your profession, the top of your trade. It was a place for the finest minds in a field to gather and co-operate to push science and industry forward. Within the union, concerns like class and creed had no importance next to the prestige of the work itself. It was truly a great honour for me to be admitted so young.

At the ceremony, I was called up in front of everyone to accept the commendation from the Master of the Precision Engineering Union, who was dressed in the traditional fine blue robe with an elaborate lace collar.

'Today, we accept the apprentice Walter Schleif into one of the finest unions in Germany,' announced the Master. I burst into tears.

The Master shook me. 'What's wrong with you? This is one of your finest days! You should be proud!'

But I was inconsolable. I felt terribly sad that my parents couldn't be there to see me. I wanted so badly for them to see what I had achieved – wanted, too, for my master to understand that I wasn't the poor orphan, Walter

Schleif. That I was Eddie Jaku, that I had a family who loved me, and it hurt so much to be far from them.

I treasure every piece of knowledge those years gave me, but I will always regret that time spent far from my family. Truly, my father was wise when he told me a life is worth more than a bank account. There are many things in this world that no amount of money will buy you, and some things priceless beyond measure. Family first, family second, and family at the last.