

The art of survival

by Harry Jarvis

IN 1994 I was welcomed with a letter from the late Ronnie Brickman, then Editor of *Shemot*, as member no. 76 of the JGSGB and lauded for my speed off the blocks in offering an article for publication.

It was a record of my recent visit, after an absence of 50 years, to my home town¹ and was prefaced by a prologue² from which I quote the final paragraph: "The few who escaped this hell and those who left the town before this catastrophe were real human beings, deeply attached to the loving memories of their own youth. All men hold dear the town where, under the loving care of devoted parents, they ultimately matured. These attachments have been severed forever and only profound grief now remains. This book is

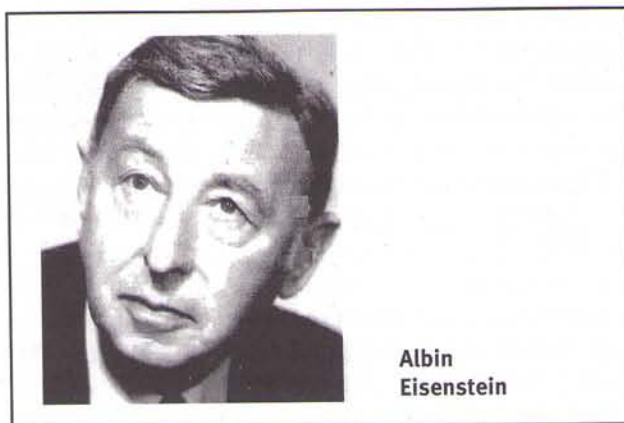
dedicated to the Jews of Czernowitz scattered all over the world who cannot forget their town".

In 1994 I was in Düsseldorf to visit cousins of the Einhorn family³ where I met a most remarkable compatriot whose incomparable heroism and exemplary stoicism in the face of great suffering is worthy of mention. Dr Ing. Albin Eisenstein had recently published a book called *The Art of Survival*⁴ and he kindly gave me an inscribed copy.



It is a gripping story of his experiences and observations during 35 years of banishment without trial to Siberia. He was arrested in Czernowitz in June 1941 in the middle of the night by heavily armed NKVD officers (Peoples' Committee for Internal Affairs) and carted off with wife and in-laws to the railway goods yard and herded into packed cattle trucks. They were accused by a secret commission called *Troika* of being politically unreliable citizens and condemned to resettlement in Siberia whereas in reality they were just one of many educated middle-class Jewish families in a Stalinist-controlled regime. Two buckets, one containing drinking water, were provided for the 20-hour, non-stop journey into the unknown.

His first contacts in the Siberian *taiga* (forest) were with disenfranchised Russian peasants, also fellow convicts who, unaware of racial prejudices become his friends. A gruelling trip by boat further into the wasteland took place, without food and only foul river water to drink, making it apparent that they had not been banished to this



inhospitable wasteland to live, but rather to die there as soon as possible of "natural causes".

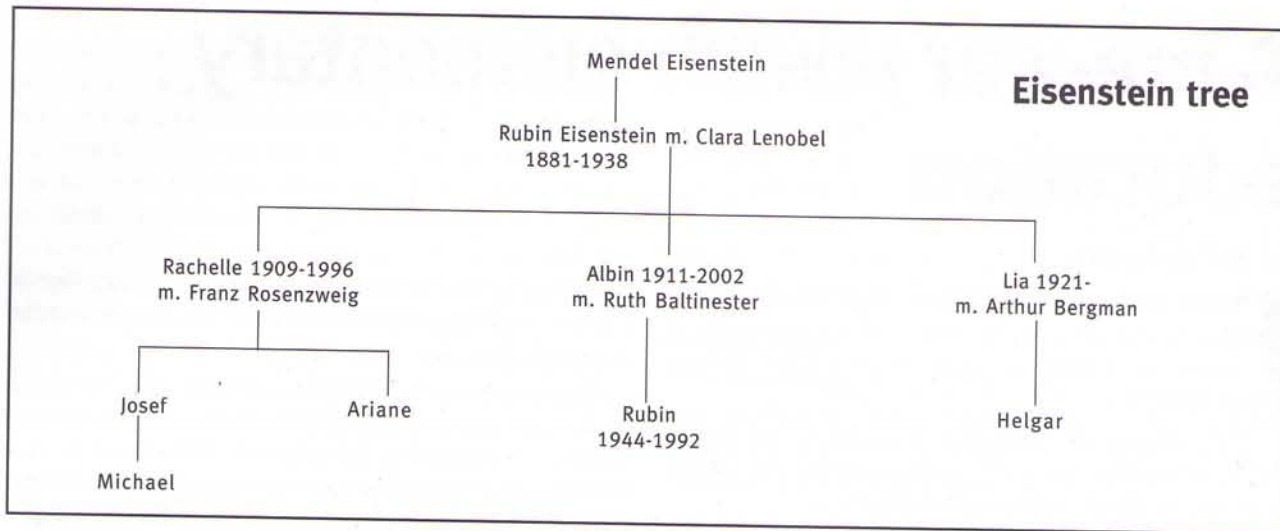
Some work was available and paid at the daily rate of a pound of bread and he became an assistant to the blacksmith while his wife and father-in law were allocated to byre cleaning. Eisenstein noticed the total absence of paper and carried out some successful experiments in secret using straw. He demonstrated this to the authorities and was ordered to build a papermaking factory under the most primitive conditions with utmost ingenuity and the help of one man. He built a second factory in a nearby town and finally a third. In his work he was constantly confronted by the arbitrariness and corruption of government officials who subjected him to hunger and misery.

The Soviet Army's victory over Germany was celebrated and Eisenstein, working 16 hours a day, exhausted and undernourished, was suffering from tuberculosis. Two years later he was back at work and using his engineering skills to design and build ventilators for the coal industry where the Russian models constantly broke down. His design, which was of much improved reliability, was adopted but he was denied recognition under law as a banished, non-Soviet citizen. Incautiously he mentioned the superiority of western technology, an offence which the authorities duly noted.

Arrested again

Consequently in 1953, fully-armed KGB officers burst into his apartment in the middle of the night confiscating all documents⁵ and any valuables and he was arrested. Accused of counter-revolutionary activities he was kept in solitary confinement for three months and subjected to brutal and intimidating interrogations in order to force him to sign a confession. Optimism and his deep love for his wife and son stopped him from committing suicide. At the mock trial which followed his lawyer pleaded for leniency and succeeded in having the proposed death sentence commuted to 25 years' imprisonment with hard labour.

Life then meant working daily out of doors in the harshest of Siberian winters as well as having to endure the indignities to which he was subjected by gangs of Soviet young hoodlums imprisoned for "re-socialisation" and put in charge to enforce discipline! Surprisingly, he was released before completing the full sentence and enrolled at a Russian university to study the teaching of engineering where the ability to lecture weekly on the subject of political correctness in Soviet society was a compulsory subject.



He was appointed salaried Professor of Technology at a high school and allowed to travel within the USSR. I know that he travelled to Moscow where he had a clandestine meeting with my cousin Erich from our home town, whom he knew well.⁶

One day, when changing trains, he met, quite by chance, his elder sister Dr *Med.* Rachelle Rosenzweig, who was arrested a year before his deportation for attempting illegal emigration to the west and was sent to the Urals for 35 years. She had endured a similarly cruel fate which she describes in her book.⁷

Third time lucky

Eisenstein's application to leave the USSR was refused and re-applications were only permitted at three-yearly intervals. His third attempt was successful and he was granted an exit visa to emigrate, but not without some final chicaneries when boarding the train, because the authorities had incorrectly stamped one of the photographs on his documents.

He was required to hand over his last few dollars, in private, to the chief of the emigration control police before being allowed to leave.

His story began and ended in Düsseldorf where he lived and where he died after an accidental fall, aged 90. A film of his extraordinary life is anticipated by a private German film company.

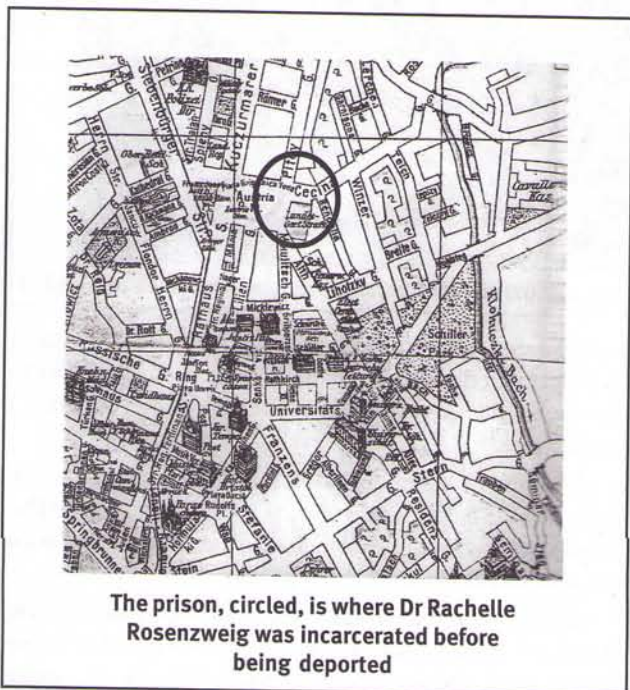
This, like my previous articles, is dedicated to the Jews of Czernowitz who cannot forget their town.

● **The author was a medical practitioner who has regularly contributed stories about his home town, Czernowitz.**

REFERENCES

1. *Shemot* Vol. 2,4.
2. *The history of the Jews of Czernowitz*, Verlag Olamenu, Tel Aviv, 1962.
3. *Shemot* Vol. 9,2.
4. Albin Eisenstein, *Die Kunst zu überleben: Erlebnisse und Beobachtungen in sibirischer Verbannung*, Herchen, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1992, 146pp. 3-89184-120-5. €8.
5. *Shemot* Vol. 10,1.
6. *Op. cit.* 3.
7. *Russische Eisblumen. 35 years in Soviet captivity* (out of print).

During my visit to Düsseldorf in June this year, I met Albin Eisenstein's younger sister, Lia, for the first time and it occurred to me that as the surname was common in Czernowitz and that the family was now scattered in Canada, Germany and England, a simplified family tree might add interest.



**Has your family been
in Britain for 200 years
or more?**

**If so, you will have something to
celebrate next year when the Jewish
community will commemorate its
350th anniversary of The
Resettlement.**

**See YOUR story published in Shemot
and send your family history around
the world. Contact the Editor.**