

The memoir of  
a Holocaust  
survivor keeping  
alive the stories  
of his generation

*the*  
**Keeper**  
*of*  
**Miracles**

PHILLIP MAISEL

**READING NOTES**



## ABOUT THE BOOK

This is the story behind the man who came to be known as ‘the Keeper of Miracles’.

An idealistic boy, Phillip Maisel didn’t see the threat of the rising Nazi regime until it was too late. First confined to the Jewish Ghetto in his hometown of Vilna, Phillip’s harrowing journey saw him transported first to an Estonian hard labour camp, then multiple concentration camps across Nazi-occupied Europe. He was separated from his father, his brother, and his beloved twin sister Bella – never knowing whether he would ever see any of them again.

But through it all, Phillip held out hope. Hope in humanity, in kindness, in the power of stories. It is this hope that steeled him through his own tragedy and trauma, and that led him to become a trusted confidant to fellow Holocaust survivors at Melbourne’s Jewish Holocaust Centre. For more than thirty years, he has been entrusted with the testimonies of survivors and their descendants, recording their stories for future generations. And he’s not done yet.

Published as Phillip turns 99, this deeply moving, healing and inspiring memoir shows us the cathartic power of storytelling, and reminds us never to underestimate the impact of human kindness.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phillip Maisel OAM was born in August 1922, in Vilna, Lithuania. When the Germans arrived in Vilna in 1941, Phillip’s life changed dramatically. He survived two years in a squalid, overcrowded Jewish Ghetto, before enduring multiple Nazi labour and concentration camps. Phillip was liberated in 1945 while on a death march. He moved to Australia in 1949.

For over thirty years, Phillip has worked at Melbourne’s Jewish Holocaust Centre, recording over a thousand testimonies of other survivors and their descendants – each story of survival a miracle in its own right – earning Phillip the nickname ‘the Keeper of Miracles’.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### HUMANITY

1. 'Everything the Nazis did to make me feel inferior only made me more convinced that my humanity was stronger.' (p 96) How important was Phillip's sense of his own humanity? Why do you think the Nazis' attempts to dehumanise him backfired?
2. On pages 52–54, the author tells a story that reveals the nuances of human nature. During an uprising in Vilna's Jewish Ghetto, Phillip saw a lone Estonian soldier pass by the woodpile where he was hiding. Gripping an axe, it occurred to Phillip how easily he could kill the soldier and take his gun. Ultimately, he decided against it. Moments later, a little girl with her own axe rushed out to ambush the soldier, who quickly disarmed her and sent her home safe. Soon after, more Estonian soldiers appeared, and Phillip 'felt such an overwhelming relief that [he] had not killed the fellow' (p 54). While he admits his relief stemmed primarily from self-preservation, realising that the soldiers would have killed him and probably the little girl in retribution, Phillip also acknowledges that he was affected by the humanity he'd seen in the soldier's refusal to hurt the girl: 'If a minute ago I'd felt guilty for not murdering him, I now realised I'd never have forgiven myself if I had. . . I just didn't have it in me. Perhaps that is weakness, perhaps it is strength. In any case, I am glad I didn't go down that route. I have never regretted it.' (p 54) What does this scene tell us about the complexity of human nature? Do you agree with Phillip's conclusions?
3. On page 109, Phillip shares a remarkable story about a death march where his fellow prisoners saved his life by risking their own. In a moment of unspoken synchronicity, when the SS guards demanded that the Jews in the group identify themselves, all of the men in Phillip's group – gentiles and Jews alike – stepped forward in unison. This simple act of solidarity could have resulted in the whole group being murdered, but because the SS were under strict orders to only kill Jews, they all survived. What did this anecdote reveal to you about the strength of the prisoners' humanity? Can you think of a time in your own life where somebody showed you a great depth of humanity through self-sacrifice? Or where you demonstrated your own humanity to help another?
4. On page 195, the author's friend and colleague at the Jewish Holocaust Centre, the fearless Kitia Altman, said: 'You can't blame God for the Holocaust. It was people that did it all to us. Human beings just like you and me.' (p 195) What do you make of this? Does this view reinforce or contradict the author's belief that miracles are not divine but human?



## STORYTELLING

1. The power of testimony is central to the book. What can a firsthand account achieve that other types of narrative – from journalism to novels – cannot?
2. ‘A face-to-face encounter with a Holocaust survivor is both disturbing and reassuring for young people, because the horrific truth of history is insulated by the storyteller’s humanity.’ (p 194) How important is humanity in storytelling, and vice versa?
3. On page 184, Phillip describes how the fickleness of memory and the desire to portray oneself in a positive light can affect the accuracy of personal stories. How important do you think it is for the testimonies of survivors to adhere to an objective truth? Or do you believe truth is more subjective?

## MIRACLES

1. What constitutes a miracle to you? Does a miracle need to be grand, marvellous? Or can it be small, innocuous? Is it supernatural or divine, or can it be human?
2. ‘By some miracle we had been found by a Lithuanian soldier whose sense of right and wrong, his basic humanity, had made him decide not to turn us in.’ (p 32) How do you believe this event shaped Phillip’s view of miracles and of humanity?
3. ‘Once you begin to look for the miracles in your life, you cannot stop finding them.’ (p 201) Do you agree with this assertion? Can a miracle be an everyday occurrence, or must it be rare?

## SURVIVAL

1. ‘It is this thought that kept me alive for many years – that as bad as things were, I was still a good man.’ (p 202) How might a sense of self-worth aid in survival? And what, to your mind, makes a person truly ‘good’? Is goodness an inherent trait, or a practise? A result of nature or nurture?
2. ‘One child asked her: “Did the Nazis ever rape you?”  
“They didn’t have to rape me,” she laughed. “I would have gladly slept with any of them if they had a piece of bread.”’ (p 195)

What does Kitia’s flippant reply tell us about human resilience?



## HISTORY

1. 'It is important to remember that when we talk about the Holocaust, it is not only the history of what happened to the Jews. There were millions of victims from other religions, ethnic groups and minorities. It is their history too.' (p 209) It is often said that history books are written by the victors. In terms of the Holocaust, how is our collective understanding shaped by both the victors (the Allied forces) and those who lost the most (victims)?
2. It is also often said that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. What do you think we have learned from the Holocaust? Do you believe we've learned enough, or indeed learned the right lessons, to prevent this era of history from repeating?
3. Despite remarkable efforts to document events, record testimony and educate the global population about the Holocaust, as time wears on, Holocaust deniers and conspiracy theorists appear to be growing in number and visibility. Why do you think this is? What do you think can be done to combat these ideas?

## SUGGESTED READING

*The Happiest Man on Earth* by Eddie Jaku

*The Choice* and *The Gift* by Edith Eger

*The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne