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David Mitzner, a visionary surrounded by miracles

Henry Foy in Warsaw   Author alerts ⌄

David Mitzner: 'I managed to survive first the Germans, then the Russians'

Twenty-five floors up, the windows of David Mitzner's Warsaw office have a panoramic view over the streets that formed the largest Jewish ghetto in Europe during the Nazi occupation.

More than seventy years ago, Mr Mitzner's family was taken from those streets and killed. Today, the neighbourhood is dotted with gleaming new skyscrapers, the fruits of a property boom that many trace back to the time of his return to the country.

Mr Mitzner, who turned 100 last week, is for many the father of the central and eastern European property industry. His $1bn purchase in 2004 of the entire Polish real estate portfolio of Metro, the retailer, remains the region's largest deal.

"When you see what one man has built, it inspires you," says Steven Mitzner, his grandson and a director of the family business. "He is a legend."

If his business career beats the odds, his personal life defies belief.

Incarcerated by the invading Soviet army in 1939 and sent to a gulag in Siberia, Mr Mitzner was one of only two members of his family to survive the Holocaust.

After being deported to Kazakhstan, he smuggled himself into communist Poland and then out again to safety in the US.

His biography is titled *Nesim all around me*. *Nesim* is Hebrew for "miracles". It is no understatement.

"I managed to survive first the Germans, then the Russians," he says in the book. "And you know what? I knew I just had to keep on surviving."

Son of a small-time businessman, Mr Mitzner, who was born in 1915 as the first world war raged, was brought up in an orthodox Jewish family in Warsaw during the 1920s and 1930s as anti-Semitism was rising to a peak across central Europe.

When Poland was carved up between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Mr Mitzner was in Soviet territory in what is now Lviv in modern-day western Ukraine. His mother and two sisters were three of 400,000 Jews in Nazi-controlled Warsaw forced into the city's ghetto.

Mr Mitzner began taking daring and dangerous trips across the German-Soviet lines to visit and provide money for his family. It was on a return trip that he was arrested by a Russian border guard who, in mistakenly registering him as a German citizen illegally entering enemy territory, and not a Polish Jew, probably saved his life.

As the occupying units began to deport Warsaw's Jewish residents to their deaths in concentration camps, including his mother and one of his sisters, Mr Mitzner was sent to a gulag in Serov, in the vast emptiness of western Siberia, where he would chop down trees for lumber for almost eight years.

During this incarceration, his brother and father were killed at the hands of the Soviets.

In 1947, Mr Mitzner was summoned by the camp commanders and told he was to be freed, and deported to work on a farm collective in what today is Almaty in Kazakhstan. From there, he managed to stow away on a five-day train to Moscow, and finally arrived back in Warsaw to an unrecognisable city where 85 per cent of its prewar buildings had been destroyed.

Fearing the impending crushing of Polish democracy by Stalin, Mr Mitzner decided he had no choice but once more to leave his homeland.

He stowed away for three days in the hold of a ship across the Baltic to Sweden where he was granted asylum and attended his first Shabbat service for almost a decade.

Months later, on April 11 1949, his 34th birthday, Mr Mitzner stepped on to the docks in New York with nothing but the clothes on his back and $17 in his pocket.

It would be four decades before he returned to Poland. By that stage a successful businessman, he made an emotional visit to the Majdanek death camp where his mother had been executed 43 years earlier.

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Mr Mitzner made a series of fruitless business trips to Poland.

It was on what he said would be his final attempt to invest in the nascent democracy that he gambled on a disused factory, buying it for $6m and spending another $12m on building office buildings on the plot.

"He is a visionary. He had the foresight to see the potential of CEE," says Steven, his grandson.

It was to prove a shrewd investment. Within three years, he had made his money back in rental income. And he has not stopped since.