

Yom Hashoa

May 2, 2000

Most of you have seen and heard of the stories of the holocaust. It was a living hell for 6 years. I have lived in this wonderful country for 50 years now. My life and my family members' lives have been strongly influenced by the war. It is not with me all the time anymore. But today is Yom Hashoa and it is fitting that I should speak about my past.

I was born in a town called Kalicz in Poland which was near the Polish- German border. The population was about 120,000 of which 30,000 were Jews. The population was very poor. The Jewish culture was abundant. We had Jewish theatre, Jewish soccer teams, and many religious and Zionist organizations. I was born into a family with 5 children. I had 2 brothers and 2 sisters. I was the youngest.

My father was a kosher butcher and my mother was a today's woman. It seemed that everybody was always asking for her advice.

Everyday my father woke me at 6. Then we went to daily services at the nearby sztibil, home for lunch, then to cheder or Hebrew school til 7. Then we would have supper and homework and to bed. I shared a bed with one brother.

My sisters shared a bed on the other side of the room. The first 2 years I had trouble in public school. The Polish boys were always calling

me Zyd, Zyd (Jew, Jew), " You killed Jesus." It was especially bad the day after Easter. The priests would get the population riled up against the Jews. We learned not to go to school that day because it was a sure beating for all of us. Later we got a Jewish public school and things were better. The high

schools were all private, and my parents couldn't afford to send me.

I went to work in a printing shop making 3 zlotys a week and went to

school at night. When I was a teenager the Balfour

Declaration was ^{signed} ^{Stamps}. It's goal was for England to help

build a Jewish state. I worked for a Zionist organization for

8 years. I lived at a kibbutz near my home for a year and a

half. During that time I sat at a table with Ben Gurion and

discussed politics during his visit to our kibbutz.. We

donated our funds to Ke'eren Ka'emet, which bought land

in Palestine with the hopes that Jews would be able to settle

there. My 89 year old brother Leon lives today in a house

that is leased from that organization in Ramat Gan.

IN 1936, we began to have lots of problems with hoodlums in our town. Gangs would beat us up. The police looked the other way. In 1938 I was drafted into the Polish army. I was put into the artillery, though I had never ridden a horse. I was miserable. I could not get the hang of mounting a horse without stirrups. I had to practice every night in the stables until I finally got the hang of it. When Passover came I sneaked away and went to the Seder at my parents' house. On my return I got caught by my Jewish sergeant.

In September 1, 1939, the war broke out. During one of the first bombardments I found myself buried up to my neck. A bomb had exploded very near to me. Luckily someone saw me and pulled me out.

We were overrun and captured fairly quickly and we were taken to Germany as P. O. W.'s to Stalag 2a. We worked on a farm for a year, still wearing Polish army uniforms. At the end of 1940 an order came to separate out all the Jewish soldiers and send them back to Poland. after 3 days on a cattle train we ended up in Lublin.

There the Germans opened up a camp. They took our army uniforms and gave us rags to wear. We were now 12,000 Jewish civilians. We were guarded by teenaged Volksdeutschen. These were Polish boys who were prisoners and were put above us. They believed that they

would get special treatment by the Germans. They beat us and they enjoyed it.

I was working in a stone quarry for a month. The order came to send us to the direction of Warsaw. I figured that it was to the Warsaw ghetto and I knew that would be bad. I jumped the train before we got there and got caught by the S.S. They beat the hell out of me and put me on another train to Warzaw. I jumped the train again. I made my way to a little Polish town, Lowicz. I got there at 9 pm, but there were no Jews on the street because of a curfew.

I did find a Jewish family that took me in for 2 days. I took off my Jewish star. I found my parents and grandparents in Tulishkov. We shared the house with the local police. We worked in the public works for a loaf of bread a day. Then they separated the men who could work

and sent us away to another site to build rivers by hand

That would be the last time I ever saw my parents or grandparents. They then separated the men and women.

My grandfather was shot and killed as he chased after my grandmother. My mother was taken away as well, and confined in a church for weeks with no food and no toilet facilities. My brother Bernard found out where she was and got the job of carrying out the bodies as the people died. He saw Mother there and planned to smuggle her out between the dead bodies. A problem was that even as she was starving, she still was a beautiful woman and had pink cheeks. They rubbed the slime of human waste from the floor onto her face to darken it in order to camouflage her face. Bernard also saw my grandmother, but was not able to rescue her. It did not matter. The living, including my mother and brother, were too weak to walk.

They were carried off in the early crematoria on the way to the death camp Chelmo. You see, the Germans had developed portable gas chambers to put on the back of trucks and there they both died. My beautiful sisters met the same fate. My father faithfully followed his beloved rabbi and ended up at the crematorium in Chelmo.

The food at the work camp was awful. A little soup every day and a small piece of bread. The beatings were terrible. Some people broke out to the nearby village to beg for food. Every Sunday the people that were caught were hung in the woods. The living were forced to witness the hangings.

Half of our group died from hunger or typhus. I caught a severe case of the fever from typhus. Unbelievably an uncle of mine who had some leather hidden was able to

shnear the German officials and got me into a German run hospital. I got well. A few weeks later I got the disease again and survived again.

In July 1943, we finally were put on the dreaded cattle train to Oswiecim which became Germanized to the name Auschwitz. We arrived at midnight. A band was playing. We saw the now well known sign saying Arbeit Macht Frei (work makes you free). There were lots of SS men with dogs. They announced that those who could not walk should get on trucks.

Those trucks went directly to the crematorium. We lucky ones stayed up all night. We were stripped of our clothing, and tattooed on the wrist. We were given striped uniforms and wooden shoes. The conditions were unspeakable.

Beatings by the capos. Starvation. Up at 5 and standing in formation to be counted. A little black coffee and work all

day moving steel plates from one spot to another and back again. Sleep, if you could call it that, was in racks with inmates sandwiched like sardines. The stench was horrible. 200meters away was the crematorium. Smoke was always in your eyes. We could see but not believe that this was a place where they burned people. Nothing grew there. No trees No grass. No birds singing.

When you got up in the morning you would see people lying near the electrified fence, having committed suicide.

Three times I found myself in long lines facing four doctors. We would pass by the doctors, and as we passed one would point left or right. To the left meant you would go straight to the crematorium. To the right meant you would get to go through this again.

One of the doctors I found was the dybbuck, Dr.

Mengele. My job there was to work at the coal mine. Part of my job was to carry out dead workers, who had been killed from falling rock. We carried the bodies out on our shoulders. I was lucky that my job was elevator operator. Because of that, I was able to make the four-hour marches each day to and from the barracks in the cold.

During the marches we were chained. This went on until January, 1945. There was an air raid. Half of the inmates were killed. I was again very, very lucky to have survived. It was not much of a camp anymore. That same morning the SS men got us together to begin the well known death march toward Germany. The Russians were closing in from the east.

We marched for several weeks in the snow without food or sleep. Many walked barefooted or without

much clothing. I had traded for, amazingly, a pair of boots and some schmattes that I wrapped around my waste. Each day I used part of the rags for dry socks. I let the other part dry for the next day. I had bribed the guards with some goods I had stolen from the canteen. If I had ever come across an honest guard I would have been shot on the spot. During the march hundreds of inmates walked away from the column and were shot. At one point we passed by a farm, and the farmer had mercy on us. He cooked a bunch of potatoes for us. The SS man said that if he caught anyone going through the line twice he would be shot on the spot. I went through the line 6 times. I thought that if I was going to die, at least it would be with a full stomach. You had to take ~~o~~ your chances.

By then it didn't seem to matter too much. We came to a place called Gross Rosen. It was another concentration

camp. We saw hundreds of dead lying in front of the barracks. Then we could hear the artillery behind us. We thought the end was near, but the Germans packed us in a cattle car filled with hundreds of us headed toward Berlin.

During the three day trip, we endured a tremendous bombardment by the American Air Force. ~~Again~~, unbelievably, our car did not get hit. We then arrived at Buchenwald . When they opened the cattle car door, half the people were dead or near death.

When we got to the camp they said we were going to the showers. I was sure that it was the crematorium. Again, unbelievably, it was a real shower. The only reason that I can figure is that the Germans knew that the end was near, and they were scared of repercussions.

During our stay in Buchenwald, for our work, we were given wooden script worth a nickel. For that we could get some soup.

By this time, all of the prisoners had been pooled together. We had Russians, Gypsies, and various others. We had to sleep with our eyes open because some of the Russians would sneak up behind us and choke us for the nickel. By this time, we could hear the artillery again. Just a week before the liberation, they took 10,000 people a day into the woods and shot them. They called my number, 142857, several times. I said to myself, "from here I will not move". I stayed under the barracks for 3 days and nights without food until Friday,

April 11, 1945. At 11:00 a.m., I met the first American soldier. He gave me a piece of a chocolate bar. It was the happiest day of my life. The American army fed

us. The first ^{FIEU} day hundreds died from overeating. Then the Red Cross came in and started feeding us properly.

After the Potsdam conference, we were given a choice of staying in East Germany or going with the Americans to West Germany. We settled in Landsberg, where we were taught to become people again.

Thanks to the UNRA and the United Jewish Appeal, which was then called the Joint Distribution Committee, trade schools were opened, and we were able to start looking for family. Again, lucky me, I found my two brothers, Leon and Bernard. They joined me in Landsberg. I found that my brother Leon and I were in the same camp at the same time and didn't know it.

Also, in Landsberg, I met my lovely bride, Bluma. We married there. We had the joyous celebration of having a double wedding with Bluma's dearly departed sister

Cela and her husband David, who is with us today. As most of you know, Cela was critical to Bluma's survival in the war. Her loss is indescribable to Bluma and the family. Later, our first born son, Henry was born.

We were settled in Columbia, via New Orleans. My dream came true. I had all of the bread I wanted. We were lucky enough to be together with Cela and her family and also our dearest friends, Ben and Jadzia Stern. Together, we learned the American ways and language (sort of), and eventually prospered in this wonderful community. The Jewish and Gentile communities were wonderful to us. I think the American people are the greatest people in the world. Eventually, my son, Karl and daughter, Esther were born here and with their spouses and our seven grandchildren we live a wonderful life together in

Columbia.

If you will allow me a few more minutes, I would like to quote from Mark Twain. He wrote, "If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is ^{EXTRAVAGANT} out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk.

His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine and abstruse learning are also a way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages, and has done it with his hands tied behind him. ... All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality? (End Quote)

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