

The Red Jacket
and other stories

By
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In memory of my parents, Moshe and Rachel (née Pritzker), relatives, friends
and teachers, who perished in the Shoah.

The Survivor, a quotation from the "Collected Poems" by Primo Levi.

Dopo di allora, ad ora incerta,
Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
Ant till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns

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Introduction

I am a survivor of the Lodz-Ghetto, Auschwitz, Bad-Kudova, Graeben, and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps.

Although many years have passed, time has not diminished my memory.

These stories are echoes of my childhood, war-time and post-war experiences. They could not have been written without the encouragement and advice of Judith Breier, my instructor in the short story class at the Jewish Community Center in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

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Pre-War Poland

The Ring

Once upon the time there was a mother, father and three children who lived in a smoky industrial city. When the weather turned hot and sticky, they left for the whole summer.

Mother, children and the maid, a young country girl, stayed in a rented cottage in a lovely village not too far from the city.

The father came by train every weekend. The children played in the meadows, splashed in the lake and went to the forest with the maid to pick berries and mushrooms.

Time went by serenely and pleasantly in the lush, green countryside.

One day disaster struck. Mother's diamond engagement ring disappeared suddenly. No one could find it! Since no strangers or visitors had come to the cottage, suspicion fell on the maid.

She protested her innocence, nevertheless, she was dismissed.

The ring had lain in a brown leather box containing a silver cake server. A child's fingers had accidentally slipped it under the blue satin lining while playing.

It lay there silently, unable to tell where it was; neither could the little girl, who had not yet learned to speak.

Years later the Occupation Authorities forced the family to leave their apartment. In the chaos the child, now a big girl, accidentally stepped on the box crushing the lid.

Out slid the ring from under its silky hiding place and lay silently gleaming on the floor.

In Memory of Josef, 1922 - 1930

The doors of the apartment were opening to let in a steady stream of people. Men and women gave their coats and hats silently to Wanda, the maid.

In the far corner of the room, a dark haired, green-eyed small girl looked on with mute interest.

Her mother wore a pretty blue gown with gold buttons, but she looked distraught. Her Father, his face pale and drawn, was leaning protectively toward his wife.

“Why are there so many people here, why are the mirrors covered,” she wondered.

The Father noticed his youngest child. He took her hand and brought her to the neighbors across the landing. Herr Kelle, a short, rotund and friendly man smiled at the four-year-old, who sometimes played with his daughters. Frau Kelle, a nice looking, tall woman, led her to the bedroom. She bade her sit in one of the small chairs surrounding a wicker table, and left.

The child hoped that Anita and Vera Kelle would come to keep her company but the girls were not at home. She sat for a long time feeling lonely and scared, as it got dark and no one came to turn the light on. She wanted to go to the bathroom, but she was too bashful to cross the dining room where she heard several adult voices. She held out as long as she could. Finally she wet her panties and the cushion she had been sitting on.

Ashamed, she went into the brightly lit room, blinking her eyes against the chandelier’s glare, and she asked permission to leave.

She was happy to be back in her parent’s home, and relieved her Mother didn’t scold her for the accident at the neighbor’s house.

The apartment was quiet. All the visitors were gone.

The little girl searched everywhere for the blond boy she used to follow like a puppy, but he too was gone.

He was gone forever.

1934: Summer in Teodory

The horse drawn carriage bumped along the poorly paved road from the town railroad station to the villa in Teodory.

Wanda, our maid, had come a day ahead of us sitting next to the driver in a wagon piled with bedding, summer furniture, kitchen utensils and provisions. She had dinner waiting for Mother, my older sister, Bella and me. Father would come on the weekends.

While Bella and Mom were unpacking valises, I went down to explore the grounds and see if there were any kids to play with.

The villa, which was divided into four spacious units, stood in a large garden full of fruit trees, bushes and flowers. In a niche under the stairway, two fat geese honked in a cage. A few yards away, tucked in a corner, stood a white painted latrine. At the edge of the property a thatched roofed cottage housed the caretaker and his family. Beyond stretched field of potatoes, lettuce, cabbage, onion and strawberries, bordered by bushes of raspberries, blackberries and gooseberries. Often pots of berries simmered on the stove of our kitchen, to be made into jams and preserves for the winter.

Mrs. Tischler, a family friend who owned the villa, had a son my age. Sometimes Roman and I were allowed to pick a basket of strawberries. Once Mrs. Tischler, who was a dentist, took us on a visit to see her patient in an old country manor. I was afraid of the barking dogs that jumped all over us, but when assured they wouldn't bite, I relaxed and patted the puppies. We walked through the rooms full of tapestries and portraits of bearded ancestors and we went for a ride on the lake in a canoe, singing our favorite Polish songs.

Thursdays, Mother, Wanda and I went to the market. Large wagons filled with produce, dairy products and poultry lined one side of the road. The noise was incredible: ducks and geese quacking and honking, peasant-farmers and housewives haggling, kids running around laughing. I stood on the side watching the housewives and their maids blow away the poultry's hind feathers to see how plump they were. I waited for the birds to crap on the probing fingers, but it never happened. Wanda had a goose and small chickens in a sack, Mother carried eggs and cheese, while I carried two oval loaves of butter, wrapped in huge green leaves for freshness.

On hot days, Mother, Bella and I, with some neighbors, walked on a narrow path through fields of golden wheat full of cornflowers and red poppies to the woods. The forest was cool and dark. Heavy branches formed a dense canopy, preventing the sun from coming through. The silence was broken only by our feet crunching layers of fallen pine needles. Reddish-brown squirrels with bush tails rustled the branches softly, jumping from tree to tree.

Wanda came at noon carrying a basket. She spread a tablecloth over our blanket. Out came sliced meat, small parsleyed potatoes still warm, bread and chilled fruit soup. We sat together eating and talking quietly, not wishing to break the soothing quiet of the forest. The dishes jostled lightly in the basket on the way back to the villa.

One Friday, we had an unexpected guest. Dr. Rabinovitz, a retired and well-known laryngologist, drove by in his carriage. He stopped by to talk to my Father who was with us for the weekend. Father invited his old friend to stay for dinner.

Mother changed the everyday tablecloth to her fine linen and napkins. Bella, who was artistic, picked and arranged flowers in a vase. She set the table on the glass-enclosed verandah. Platters of fried chicken, sweet cooked carrots, peas, sliced beefsteak tomatoes, and a deep dish of marinated cucumbers with onion crowned the table. Hard crusted peasant bread was passed around. For desert there were glass bowls of wild strawberries called poziomki, with cream and jam-nut cookies.

Excited by the company, I forgot my dislike of chicken and ate everything on my plate. The last rays of sun streamed through the colored panes, the murmur of voices and my full stomach made me drowsy. Half asleep, I heard cowbells in the distance. The herds were coming in from pasture.

The Summer Camp

The summer was hot and humid in the textile city in Poland where I lived with my parents and sister. It was usual for my mother and father to leave the city for a month, but that summer they stayed as the threat of war hung in the air.

The previous year I pleaded with my parents to allow me to go to camp with my school and they finally relented. This year permission was granted readily, however the location was not far from the city, unlike all the years before when the camp was in the South, in the Beskidy or Tatra mountains. The camp was much more fun for an adolescent than going to my parent's favorite Spa, having to dress up, and listen to grownups endlessly discussing politics.

I shared a clean but rather Spartan room with three of my best friends. We pooled our sweets and fruit, sharing everything during the rest period or in the evening after supper (dinner was eaten at midday) when we sat around and talked. The camaraderie was wonderful for me whose only sibling was a much older sister, a young woman about to be married.

Sports of all kinds took up much of the day. I enjoyed some of them but excelled in none. I did learn to play ping-pong and to ride a bike. Together with a friend I went on long rides on a borrowed bicycle.

Friday night was special. Everybody including the nurse and the two teachers who were in charge abandoned the usual gym shorts and shirts for nice clothes. We, the girl campers, took turns in the primitive shower, washed our hair and put on our best dresses for the Shabbat dinner. After dinner we sat around the long tables in the dressing room and sang Hebrew and Polish songs.

The special events were trips and excursions in the countryside and parental visits, two or more during the two months vacation.

One visitors' day my parents arrived in a shiny, black, chauffeur-driven Chevrolet together with the car owners, their acquaintances. What fun for them to ride in comfort instead of schlepping by train or bus. How happy I was to see them getting out from the beautiful car, a luxury in Poland of the 1930s.

Another treat were the prose and poetry readings of Professor Rundstein, the second of the camp's supervisors. Henryk Rundstein had degrees in psychology and the Hebrew language and was a very fine teacher. He was our favorite probably because he was still a young man, whereas most of the teachers were middle aged or elderly.

He introduced us to the beauty and richness of Yiddish literature. Most of us didn't know Yiddish and few were advanced enough to read it well. We spoke Polish and studied in the Polish language, with Hebrew lessons almost every day. At twelve we began learning Latin and English.

Time passed quickly in the peaceful village. Suddenly, two weeks before the scheduled departure we were called to the assembly place. With grim faces our teachers informed us that Poland was

mobilizing for war. We had to pack quickly for a return to the city before the trains became packed with soldiers.

On the first of September, German armies invaded Poland. World War II had begun and my life was never to be the same again.

The School on the Corner

A few blocks from the house I lived in many years ago, there was a Polish boys' elementary school, named after Poland's beloved poet, Adam Mickiewicz.

It was safe to pass by the corner in the morning because everybody rushed to class, but after school large groups of students milled around waiting for the Jewish boys who were on their way home from two high-schools nearby.

The badges on their caps and the numbers of their sleeves clearly identified them as students of the Jewish schools.

The Polish boys pounced on the Jewish kids shouting racial insults. Fights broke out resulting in bleeding noses on both sides, but woe to a Jewish boy who walked alone. The young ruffians waited for just such an occasion.

Although girls were rarely molested, I always felt uneasy passing the building on the way to my school. One afternoon as I was rushing to an early gym class I saw a group of the ruffians posted in front of the Mickiewicz school. My heart beating wildly I walked as fast as I could.

A tall Polish boy, a couple years older than I, passed by me. We were not really acquainted but he knew who I was having seen me in his father's apothecary shop in our neighborhood.

"You are afraid, aren't you," he said to me with a superior smile and walked on.

The Polish kids didn't bother me, nevertheless I decided to avoid going past their school again.

What angered me most was the apothecary son's superior smirk.

The Young Poet

The boy on the balcony of the adjoining apartment building looked up to me, standing above him, and smiled.

One day we met in the nearby park and got acquainted. His name was Ludwik, but he was called Lutek. Since my name was Lusia, right away we had something in common. He was twelve, just a year older than I, but not only did he tower over me in height, he also towered over me in knowledge and maturity. Lutek was the only child of well to do professionals who doted on their gifted son. He attended one of the most prestigious Polish gymnasias in the city, where besides German, he studied English and French. He was well read, another thing we had in common, as I too loved to read. He was articulate and wrote poetry, which he sometimes read to me.

Lutek suggested that we form a drama group. My two younger friends, Iwona and Ricky and I were invited. Lutek directed the play, based on a popular book for adolescents. He played the role of the Georgian prince, I was his beloved princess Nina, Ricky was the little niece, and Iwona her devoted friend and teacher. We spent many happy hours playing our roles in Ricky's spacious room, furnished with modern furniture, and enjoyed the delicious refreshments her mother would leave on the dining room table. We admired Lutek's brilliance and gift of poetry, and were flattered with this "older" boy wanted to spend time with us.

War came in 1939 and with it the difficulties of going to school. Almost every day we gathered in a different place, attending in shifts, as there were many of us, Jewish kids from several high-schools. I saw Lutek frequently in the newly formed school in the Ghetto. He had grown very tall, with wide shoulders but was much thinner, because of the severe rationing. We chatted briefly whenever we met. On my fourteenth birthday Lutek presented me with a poem. "'Green Eyes' for my friend with the green eyes," he said. We lost contact when the school was closed and all of us had to work in factories. The last time I heard of my childhood friend was many years later. His name was mentioned in one of the post-war books on the Lodz-Ghetto. Fragments of his poetry were found in the ruins of the Ghetto, after we were all deported to Auschwitz. They are kept in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. These remnants and my memory of the tall, handsome, gifted boy are all that is left of the young poet, Ludwik Asz, who perished in the Shoah.

Ghetto

Dearer Than Diamonds

“Du hast Glück bei den Frauen, Bel-Ami,” sang the two children. Their sweet voices carried the lyrics about the charmer called Bel-Ami, but they sounded sad rather than jaunty.

The girl was about twelve years old, the boy a little younger. On their coats was a yellow Star of David edged in black, the word “Jude” in the center. It identified them as recent arrivals from Germany who were plucked from their homes and sent to the Ghettos of Eastern Europe, there to perish of hunger or be killed away from their homeland.

The sister and her little brother clung together for warmth against the chill of the Polish December. They sang and stretched out their thin arms, their dark eyes looking beseechingly to the passerbys for a crust of bread. Some people stopped and gave them a few pennies, but nobody gave bread for bread was dearer than diamonds.

The children trudged through the streets in the waning months of 1941, singing Bel-Ami and then were heard no more.

A Kilogram of Butter

In the summer of 1944 there were only seventy thousand of us left alive. Many had died of disease, hunger, others were forcibly sent away, never to be seen again. Food rations dwindled constantly. We no longer received a few grams of flour, sugar, margarine or smelly oil, just turnips or cabbage. One large, round loaf of bread per person had to last for seven days. Death came quickly to the starving who devoured more than a day's portion at once.

The year was 1944, the place was Lodz-Ghetto where almost two thousand Jews were forced in by the German authorities. Everybody worked because it was only for our skilled labor that the Ghetto still existed. In the factories, plants and offices, a bowl of soup was distributed. However thin and inadequate, it was life saving nourishment to the workers. Children ages nine to fifteen worked five hours daily, fifteen to sixty-five, ten hour day or night.

The little ones trudged to work where nurseries and kindergartens were organized, their eyes huge in emaciated faces, their thin bodies bundled in layers of worn clothing against the cold outside and the unheated rooms inside.

Not many children were left in the Ghetto. In the fall of 1942 most of the young children along with the aged, the sick, the insane, had all been loaded up on trucks. The Germans said they were going to be "resettled" in a better place. The words "resettlement" sent chills down my spine. Every time hundreds or thousands were "resettled" they were never heard of again. Only later, much later, did we the survivors learn the true meaning of that word. The Ghetto was surrounded by barbed wire with armed sentries who didn't hesitate to shoot. Communication with the outside world was completely cut off, but there were rumors and bits of information carried by word of mouth.

Suddenly a proclamation informed us that the Eldest of the Jews, a man chosen by the German authorities to represent us, would organize a special program for the two hundred children. They would be housed for a few weeks in the part of the Ghetto previously farmland where they would receive better food, spend time playing outdoors and be cared for by professionals. Two of the Ghetto's School Department supervisors and a small staff were to handle the registration.

On the day of the registration long lines formed at the crack of dawn. Pushing, shoving, desperate parents tried to be first in line, some even trying to climb to the windows of the second story office.

A well-dressed, robust man identified himself as M. Green, Supervisor of the Diary Department. A man of importance, he was admitted by the doorman. Mr. Green approached my Father whom he knew and asked that two little girls, children of a widowed relative, be placed on the list. The request was granted and the children, weakened by hunger and illness, were among the lucky ones.

A few weeks later a messenger knocked on the door of our room delivering a package from Mr. Green, the Diary Supervisor, for my father.

Mother and I opened the package. There under a protective wrapper lay a kilogram of yellow, fresh butter! We had not seen butter since 1939 when the war began and could hardly believe our eyes.

“Mama, Mama,” I said dancing around the room. “We’ll keep a little for you because you are not well. We’ll barter most for lots of potatoes and cook thick soup.”

Shortly afterwards Father came home. Excitedly I told him of the wonderful gift. He wouldn’t even look at it, just said quietly, “I can’t accept it, please return it.” Astonished I stammered, “Daddy, Tatusiu, why can’t we keep it? It is a present!” He answered, “I do not accept presents for my work.” Tears of frustration and anger rolled down my face as I shouted, “I don’t care if it is right or wrong, I am hungry! We are all hungry!” Father turned towards the window then turned back to face me, his eyes full of sadness and pain.

“The butter isn’t Mr. Green’s to give as a present, it is for the sick and the children. Please take it back.”

The Dairy Department was located a few miles away in a small building because few dairy products ever arrived in the Ghetto. I walked carrying the precious package, my fingers stroking the wrapping containing the yellow treasure.

I walked into the office and handed the package to the astonished clerk saying, “Please tell Mr. Green that Mr. Karo can’t accept his gift.” On my way home I became aware of something happening inside me. My disappointment was receding. I was no longer angry, I was proud of my Father.

The Red Jacket

“The red, please,” I said pointing to the red fabric on the shelf, ignoring the blue, pink and dusty rose placed before my enchanted eyes.

“Touch it Miss, see how soft it is,” said the saleslady as she carried the heavy bolt to the window that I could see the finely woven, cherry red wool in all its beauty.

I was a skinny, timid twelve-year-old and this was the first time I was choosing fabric for a brand new dress. I often wore hand-me-downs from my older sister Bella, or new clothes made of remnants Mother bought and entrusted to the neighborhood seamstress.

I was thrilled. The purchase was made in the city’s most elegant store and my fitting appointment was with the same expert dressmaker who was sewing clothes for my newly engaged sister.

Bella helped find the right style for me in a fashion magazine for girls. We chose a dress with a straight skirt and a blousy top to give my thin frame a fuller look. After three fittings, the dress was finished and delivered to our house.

I stood in front of the full-length mirror in my parents’ bedroom admiring the dress before I went to my friend’s birthday party.

In time I outgrew the dress, but wartime scarcity made the usual giving away of clothes impractical. Instead, Mother’s tailor made me a jacket out of it. The jacket was beautifully cut, fully lined and loose fitting. I loved it as much as I had loved the red dress.

And it was that very red jacket that I wore for the last time as I boarded the cattle train – destination unknown.

Homecoming

Sometimes when sleep eludes me, the camera of my mind replays scenes of long ago.

I see my classmates sitting in rows, the teacher on a podium. I see our neighbors in the building on Magistracka 14, the interiors of their apartments with dark wallpaper and heavy furniture, places I visited often. I remember the long, oval dining table where I did my homework, the cream and gold narrow twin beds, which my grandfather designed and made for my sister and me, the massive furniture in my parent's bedroom, and Mother's crocheted bedspread which covered their wide beds.

Strangely, I do not see myself coming home to the apartment on the second floor, where I was born and lived until the War. Instead, I see myself as a teenager with brown, wavy hair, opening the door of one room, our home for the duration of the Ghetto. I see the cream and gold twin beds, now my parent's, the sofa on which I sleep. An old desk stands on a rag-woven rug, the naked windows are covered with black shades and my dead brother's portrait hangs on the wall between the windows.

Mother is wearing a heavy sweater in the unheated room. She is standing by the primitive stove, stirring, adding dry herbs and a couple of bread crusts to make the awful gruel into something edible. Nearby shelves hold a few pots and dishes. Not much is needed because food is terribly scarce.

Father comes from the office. He has lost so much weight that his winter coat hangs loosely from his once ample frame.

We sit down to share the thin but warm soup in silence, grateful that we are still together in our own, clean room. I look out the window on the quiet courtyard. The streets are deserted at the end of a cold, gloomy work-day in November, 1943.

"Will we survive?" I ask my father. He comes over, places his hands gently on my shoulder. "You must hope, never lose hope."

Months later the poor Ghetto room becomes a memory of a lost haven of love and shelter.

There is no homecoming for me. Never will I open those doors again!

The Fox Hunt

The fox hunting season had begun. The riders didn't come galloping on well groomed horses; they rode on military trucks. They didn't wear tailored red jackets and black yodhpurs; they wore military uniforms. Their legs were not encased in soft leather riding boots; their feet were shod in heavy boots.

The hounds didn't run freely through meadows, yelping excitedly. These dogs were big German Shepherds, held tightly on leashes, their snouts close to the pavement, sniffing the scent of the foxes.

The lair was upstairs in one of the empty rooms of the former School Department, where the quarries crouched and crawled on the floor, not daring to stand lest they be seen through the uncurtained windows.

While the widowed concierge kept watch at the door, her teen-age daughter lay sound asleep on a makeshift pallet, a pair of shapely legs showing from under the coat that covered her body. Next to her the office manager sat hugging his three-year-old daughter. His young wife cradled an infant son, crooning softly to keep the baby from crying. A married couple, teachers no longer young, and the man's gray-haired spinster sister, encircled a little boy, as if their arms could protect the beloved child from harm. The boy's beautiful green eyes silently asked the adults "why?" The middle-aged executive, his wife and eighteen-year-old daughter were in the corner, behind his desk.

With damp foreheads and clammy palms, their hearts beating wildly, the foxes prayed, "perhaps they won't find us, perhaps." But soldiers and dogs ran past the white plaster Madonna standing mute in the courtyard and raced up the stairs. The doors bust open. The hunters had found their prey.

Auschwitz, Poland

The Selection

I was dusting the furniture while my infant son lay sleeping in his crib.

My hand stopped in mid-air, still clutching the dust cloth, when suddenly my mind replayed the scene on the platform with absolute clarity.

“Get down and leave your luggage. Form parallel lines in twos, men in one, women and children in the other,” yelled the husky men in blue-gray uniforms.

I had lost sight of my Father, then spotted him in the long line next to the cattle train, which brought me, my parents and hundreds of people from the Lodz-Ghetto. I darted between rows of people, quickly handing over his small bag containing a clean shirt and underwear, then ran back to my place in line with Mother. My friend Gina and her Mother were right behind us.

Father warned me that families might be separated, so I said to her, “Let’s change places so they will not see the family resemblance.” Gina moved up to my Mother, while I stood behind them with Mrs. Olsher. She was in her fifties, short with snow-white hair in a bun. The line of women began to move forward toward three long tables, an S.S. officer stood in front of each. A strange calm enveloped me. I felt as if I were two persons, one moving forward, the other standing on the side observing.

Pointing with the index finger, officers were waving the women with children, the elderly and the infirm, to the right.

I saw myself in my red jacket standing in front of the officer on the far left. I noticed his lips were smiling, but his eyes were cold. He looked at the silver haired woman next to me and asked, “Is this your Mother?” I answered, “No.” His index finger pointed her to the right.

“How old are you?”

“I am eighteen,” I answered truthfully, and he waved me to the left. This was the first thing I understood in all the confusion and chaos. I knew from past experience in the Ghetto that the German authorities had no use for children. I was old enough to work!

I walked behind my Mother and Gina, who had both been waved to the left, on the sandy road, covered with gravel. I heard the German voice asking, “Is this your Mother?” Had the officer not stopped to ask, had he assumed we were mother and daughter, his index finger would have waved me to the right.

I would have walked with the silver haired woman to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, on August 17, 1944.

Ave Maria in Auschwitz

Irma Graese, S.S. Kommandant of the women's camp accompanied by several women guards, enters barrack 20.

"I have been told that one of you is a singer, some forward," she commands.

A short girl of about twenty emerges from the rows of prisoners.

"I am the one, Frau Kommandofuehrerin. I have been training for the opera. With your permission I shall sing Ave Maria."

The barefooted girl in a ragged dress, her head clean-shaven, mounts the low brick oven in the middle of the barrack. Her name is Esther Kaner.

"Ave Maria, Ave Maria, Ora Pro Nobis," rings the beautiful strong voice. Tears, like round pearls roll down Esther's pale cheeks.

The slender, blond Kommandant in perfectly fitting military skirt and blouse, a leather whip in her long fingers, stands listening quietly.

Rays of sun glisten on the golden haired, murderous Lorelai. "Why are you crying?" asks the surprisingly soft voice which sends Jewish women to their deaths day by day.

Exit From Hell

“If it were not for the bosoms, I would have taken you for boys,” said the S.S. man laughing, a rifle slung over his shoulder. Indeed with thin bodies and shaven heads, we looked more like boys than women. It was very hot in the cattle train, which was taking us from Auschwitz to one of its sub-camps. Perspiring and terribly thirsty, we forgot hunger and sat numbly, our ragged dresses pulled down to the waist.

The long line of cattle cars carried several thousand young women for slave labor in Germany. Five hundred of us were crowded into the last two or three cars. I was one of the three girls who by a miracle had not been separated from their mothers. Almost all sisters, mothers and daughters were separated, and those told to stand aside were never seen again. Exhausted, we huddled on the floor while the train chugged through the night.

“Rauss,” yelled the S.S. men and women when the train stopped. Blinded by the August sun we got down. The sign above the entry to the spotless depot said, “Bad Kudova.” “This is a lovely, well-known Spa I have always wanted to go to but it was too expensive. What a coincidence,” said my Mother quietly, a tiny smile on her pale face.

War-time Germany

For Paolo and Gaetano

The huge airplane factory was located in a picturesque Spa, hidden in a valley in Eastern Germany near the Czech border. Two thousand men and some women from many parts of Nazi occupied Europe were forcibly sent there to labor in twelve-hour shifts. There were civilian Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Belgians, Czech men and women and hundreds of prisoners of war. Russian soldiers, their uniforms and greatcoats in shreds, lived behind barbed wire in a camp close to the small concentration-labor camp where I was with four hundred and ninety-nine women and girls from the Lodz-Ghetto. In Nazi ideology the Russians and all Slavs were considered inferior, their lot was just a little better than ours. The next largest group of P.O.W's were Italian anti-Fascist soldiers, who had fought under General Bagdolio. The remnants of their uniforms clean, but oddly assorted, testified to their long captivity.

Oh, these Italians! They smiled encouragingly as they walked by our machines, gesturing with their hands to work slowly. Their fine voices filled the cavernous halls. It is there, of all places, that I heard many Italian popular songs and arias from operas just vaguely known to me.

My head was shaved, a green dress, thrown at me after a cold shower in Auschwitz, covered my naked body. What the dress had in length it lacked in modesty, the top gaped open when I bent down towards the machine I operated. Nearby at a long table, girls from my camp sat filing and polishing air plane wheels. Their foreman was a decent ethnic German from Silesia. His assistant was an Italian P.O.W. He was in his late twenties, short with a pockmarked homely face. He wore army pants and the same clean, ragged sleeveless t-shirt every day. I noticed he looked in my direction frequently. It was probably my slim, but still curvaceous figure which caught his eye. After a couple of days, he walked unobtrusively by and placed a safety pin near the machine, pointing to the plunging neckline. I was deeply touched by the man's sensitivity. We both risked punishment if observed by the S.S. guards, although my punishment would have been far greater.

Our daily food consisted of a bread ration, supplemented only by dried turnip soup. The Italians saw and smelled the vile "soup" and knew we were terribly hungry. Many of them began to share their meager rations. Some flirted with the S.S. women to distract them while others smuggled bits of bread into the Jewish girl's eager hands.

I had my own supplier! Forming words without sound the Italian and I communicated across the aisle. Pointing to himself he mouthed "Paolo Mongelli, Roma." My lips formed, "Lusia Karo, Lodz, Poland." He repeated "Lucia" and smiled. I pointed to my shaved head, the pale mark where my watch used to be and whispered, "Auschwitz." The look in his eyes full of understanding and sympathy was balm to my aching heart.

One day he noticed that I moved with difficulty and his eyes asked, "What is wrong?" I pointed to my throat which hurt badly. My thin dress and shoes with holes offered little protection in the late autumn weather. I had strep-throat and a fever but had to work nevertheless. Paolo looked toward the latrine and discreetly beckoned me to go. Standing at attention I asked the nearest S.S. woman for permission to go. In the corner of the tiny entry, Paolo had placed a container of hot coffee and milk. I drank fast feeling immediately better and was able to continue working. Often Paolo sneaked some bread of spaghetti to me. Once, after the nightshift, he and his friends waited outside

as our column went by. Quickly he reached out with a portion of bread, but before I could take it another woman grabbed it although she knew for whom it was meant. It took much whispered and angry persuasion to get the bread, which I divided into four and shared with the line. I was lucky the S.S. women were in front of the column and busy talking.

Paolo looked in my direction a lot, rolling his eyes and mouthing, "Bella, bella." It was nice to be called beautiful even though I knew well that I looked awful. He clutched at his heart saying, "Amore, amore." I found it quite comical, yet very touching.

Then a tall, handsome Italian electrician, Gaetano, took to walking by my machine. He and I could only exchange fond glances under the watchful eyes of the S.S. while Paolo looked on unhappily. When Gaetano smuggled a letter to me, I ran to the only person in camp who knew Italian and begged her to translate it for me. She was reluctant and afraid, but after some persuasion she did. I have memorized the few lines he wrote.

"Cara Lucia, I shall not speak of love, not because you are unworthy of being loved, but this is not the time to speak of love. Do not lose hope because the war will be over soon. Perhaps we'll meet after the war and then talk of love. Courage, amica. Gaetano."

To my great sorrow I was transferred to another camp. The support group we formed in the camp was lost and I missed the friendly Italians and Czechs. Most of all I missed my two friends Paolo and Gaetano, but I have never forgotten them. I hope they made it safely back to their beloved Italia.

Food of Gods

Bent under the weight of heavy pieces of machinery I carried on my back, I dared not stop by the mound of black skinned sugar beets. They lay in the middle of the flax factory yard, right under the Director's windows

How could I take one or two without being seen by a foreman or an S.S. guard? If caught, I would be severely beaten or worse, depending on the mood of the guards.

Stealing food from the Germans, "organizing" in the camp's parlance, was not considered wrong, just a means of survival. It was they who were stealing our dignity, our labor, our possessions, our very lives, and hunger was stronger than fear. I looked around quickly, seeing no one, I grabbed two large beets, put one in my pocket and slid the other down my baggy pant leg where a tight band at the ankle, stopped it from falling out. Then I picked up my load and walked slowly on, praying nobody would pay attention to my peculiar gait.

On the way to the storage shed there was a mountain of smoldering ashes. Two Jewish slave laborers, twins Sonya and Eva, emptied wheelbarrows of ashes from the furnace onto the pile. I knew their foreman had them bake his potatoes in the hot ashes. He was a cruel man, who not only ate in front of the hungry girls, but beat them often with his wooden leg. Eva was terrified of him, but Sonya was stronger and braver. I handed the beets to Sonya. "Bake them, one for you and Eva, one for me," and I went on my way. Shortly before the end of the twelve-hour workday I asked permission to go the toilet, so I could pick up the baked and cooled beet from Sonya. Down the pant leg it went to escape the watchful eye of the S.S. guard who walked us girl-prisoners back to the small concentration camp nearby.

My Mother, who worked in the camp, waited for me in the barracks. When she saw me pull out the beet, her eyes grew big with fear and wonder at my daring. She knew well the risk I took. Taking turns drinking the grey, watery gruel from the one pot we had, we also shared the "organized" sugar beet, savoring every bit. Ambrosia, the food of the Gods, could not have tasted better.

The Bedroom Window

Five hundred Jewish slave girls marched through snow-covered roads of East Germany sleeping in barns at night. On the third day we reached a town where a long line of roofless cargo trains stood waiting. Men prisoners of many nationalities, collected from various slave labor and concentration camps traveled for days, packed tightly without food or water. We were being transferred to other parts of Germany, away from the oncoming Russian Army and our long hoped for freedom.

We girls occupied the last three cars. Exhausted and hungry, we sat mutely, hugging close for warmth in the cold of February, 1945.

The men in the train ahead of us fared much worse. They were hardly visible, only a few had the strength to get up. The living sat on the frozen dead bodies because the S.S. guards didn't want to dispose of so many corpses in full view of the civilian population. The prisoners in charge of the men in the nearest car, a German Gypsy, beat the men mercilessly, his course but handsome face contorted with malice and pleasure.

During one of the stops, the train halted at the railroad station of a provincial town. Not far from the tracks to the left there was a row of old, soot covered apartment houses. Straight ahead of me the curtains were drawn back on a window and I could see part of the room clearly. There was a wide bed covered with a snow-white featherbed and pillows, and a wardrobe in the corner. The furniture was made of light wood, a little old fashioned but nice. A teenaged girl, not much younger than I, opened the wardrobe. As she took out a jacket and put it on, I had a glimpse of a small face with an upturned nose, framed in blond hair. Then she disappeared from view.

Grief and longing flooded my whole being. How I yearned for a place to call home, for a clean bed, for all that had been taken from me, as if in another life.

I don't remember the name of the town where I glimpsed the bedroom from the train but in the camera of my mind, the picture is stored forever.

The Gray Silence

Fine drops of rain fell on the bent backs of women digging potatoes with their bare hands, their thin bodies in ragged clothing marked with a red stripe. Beefy, blond women in warm S.S. uniforms, with woolen capes for added protection against the cold, gray mist of the north German February, strolled among the prisoners, watching them closely.

The women worked silently, without food or rest. When the guards relaxed their vigil to eat, some of the prisoners hid a few potatoes under their clothing to eat later in the barracks, and perhaps to share with an equally starving friend.

At dusk the women were ordered to line up. Wearily, the column started to walk back to the concentration camp a few miles away. As they began approaching the gate, a whispered message went from mouth to mouth: "There is a body search, they are checking everybody." Panic spread among the prisoners. Potatoes tumbled onto the roadside in full view of the women guards, who ran around trying to restore order, fear visible on their normally arrogant faces.

One by one the line went through the gate. A tall S.S. man stepped out from the guard house. One after another he searched expertly, and when his huge hands felt a lump, heavy blows fell on the shoulders and the shaved heads of the women. The gray silence was broken by the sound of the blows and stifled groans.

When he had searched the last prisoner the guard signaled for the S.S. women to move the column on into the camp. Only the clatter of wooden clogs was heard in the stillness.

A Birthday Potato

It was grey and cold on that day in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The ground was still frozen, too hard for the weak hands of the women prisoners to dig graves. Thousands of skeletal bodies, stacked like cordwood, lay between the barracks.

Small groups of emaciated, ragged girls were crawling through an opening in the barbed wire. “There is a potato field nearby. The S.S. are gone but the Hungarian-Nazi soldiers ate there,” said a girl coming through the gap.

I returned to the barracks to get my cloth-sack. I placed my dead Mother’s bag with its long strap over my head, and went to the barbed wire fence. Weakened by typhus and hunger, I was slow in lifting my legs. Impatient and frightened, the girls behind me pushed me through. Swaying on my stick-like legs, I forced myself to follow the others. Some shots were fired by the Hungarian Auxiliary guards but nobody paid attention. “What difference will it make if I die from a bullet or die of hunger,” I thought, continuing to stuff the bags. With tremendous effort, groaning with every step, I carried the life-saving treasure, and I walked back.

Two healthy, strong Ukrainian girls stood on each side of the opening, looking for victims. When they saw me struggling to come through, they pounced on me, grabbed my large bag, threw me to the ground, and ran away. I fell flat on my stomach, my body covering the small bag hanging from my neck.

There were only eight potatoes in that bag. I was too weak to make a fire, so I gave two raw potatoes as payment for roasting six. I hoarded them, eating only one per day. After six days there was nothing left, and I was starving.

The lucky ones sat by fires cooking their stash. Rose and Hannah, two girls I shared a corner with in the barracks were building a fire between two bricks. They were peeling a few potatoes and placing them in a pot of water. I sat down a few feet away, turning my back from them lest they see the longing in my eyes. Suddenly I noticed something on the ground. It was a large potato, half rotten. I cut away the bad part and peeled it carefully. I approached Rose and Hanna asking if my potato could be boiled with theirs, and they agreed. Now, that I had a small part in the meal, I felt free to move closer to the fire, inhaling the aroma of the cooking food. When the potatoes were ready, Rose placed mine in a bowl, adding a tablespoon of the hot liquid. I ate very slowly savoring every bite, tears mingling with the salty water.

The date was April 12, 1945, my nineteenth birthday. It was a long time ago. It was yesterday.

Post-War

Where to go?

The time is July, 1945, the place Bergen-Belsen Displaced Person's Camp in British occupied Zone of Germany. Thousands of concentration camp survivors, slave laborers and other victims of the Third Reich find themselves stranded among former enemies without money, documents and homes to go back to. I am just one of the multitude, a young girl alone, just barely recovering from the nightmarish experience. What shall I do with my life? Where should I go? I know that I will not return to Poland, my native country, because it does not want me. Besides, I have no one there, and I do not like the Communist system.

Palestine beckons. I know the language and my people's history. I want to live there and contribute to the establishment of a Jewish homeland, but doubt I can survive the hardship, though my heart yearns for life in my own country, among my own people. I have no legal papers allowing me to enter, and I am too weak and malnourished to undertake the difficult trip from Austria via the Brenner Pass to Italy and then by ship through the Mediterranean to the shores of Haifa. Decrepit ships smuggling Jews to Palestine are being intercepted by the British Navy, and the passengers are sent to a detention camp in Cyprus.

My mother's last words echo in my memory, "You are young, I am dying, you live! Go to Uncle Leo."

I establish contact with my relatives in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Uncle Leo mails me all the necessary documents for entry under the Polish Displaced Person's quota. On April 8, 1948 I come to the United States.

Encounter on a Train

In early autumn of 1946 I went for a visit to a small town in the French Zone of occupied Germany, near lake Constance.

A pass was required for travel between the Zones, which I didn't have, but the afternoon local train which stopped in every town usually passed without inspection. After a few days in the lovely area, I boarded the same train to return.

One stop before the border, the conductor asked passengers to prepare their passes, thereby alerting those of us without them. Four people got off immediately, two German women in their thirties, a young man in his twenties and I. We women looked around not knowing where go, when the young man said, "Come with me, I know the area and will lead you out." We walked quickly through town, ducking into doorways when the M.P.'s drove by, then headed across fields. We walked silently in twos, I in the front with the tall, handsome young German who wore a clean, white shirt and a worn Air Force cap.

The day was hot and soon we were sweaty and tired having walked several kilometers. At last a flatbed truck going towards the American Zone stopped for us. The two women ran ahead, quickly climbing into the front seat. The young man and I walked toward the back. My left arm was sore and I couldn't grasp the side by myself. The young man helped me up with ease and we rested on the bench. He told me he had gone home to visit his mother who had remarried a man he didn't like. Now he refused to live in his mother's house.

During the war he had flown, mostly over North Africa, until he was taken prisoner of war. Released just a few months ago, he had no steady job and lived alone in a rented room.

I told him I was a Jewish Displaced Person from Poland, a former concentration camp inmate. I asked if he knew of the camps. He said no, adding that a fellow airman who had expressed criticism of the Reich's policies had been shot. His denial didn't surprise me. I had heard it many times before, always feeling contempt. This time I merely felt sad. I sensed the young man's loneliness and his uncertainty about the future, both feelings I knew only too well.

I didn't ask his name, nor did I tell him mine, but I shared my sandwich with him. We sat quietly until we arrived in Ulm, a city I had never visited before. He walked me to the train station. We shook hands, and just before I boarded the train, I opened my wallet and gave him all the money I had. He stood on the platform until the train started to move, then turned slowly toward the city to pick up the pieces of his life in the turmoil of post-war Germany. I looked forward to my journey out of Germany to start a new life.

A New Life

I saw an airplane swooping down like a bird, opening its big belly to welcome and carry me across the ocean to America. It was only a daydream, a yearning to leave Germany and the painful past behind.

The dream came finally true after three years of waiting when I was granted a visa to enter the United States.

I waited at the Frankfurt/Main airport where two young women about my age spoke to me. The blond one babbled about the boy friends she was leaving for her American future husband. The dark haired girl turned her back to me, muttering ugly remarks after she had learned that I was Jewish, but I didn't care anymore, I was leaving! I was leaving the country where every man and woman I met felt compelled to assure that he or she had never been a Nazi, and had no knowledge of the concentration camps. Never mind that many large concentration camps and a myriad of their satellites dotted the whole land. Nobody saw the synagogues burning, nobody saw their Jewish neighbors disappearing. All the citizens were deaf and blind!

We boarded the plane and my misery began. The old military plane lurched, and so did my stomach. The stewardess handed me a bag, which I used immediately. In passing the co-pilot saw my green face and kindly returned to place a cold compress on my forehead.

The first stop was Shannon, Ireland. I loved the beautifully set tables and the delicious breakfast, but could only keep some weak tea down. I sat alone and nobody paid the slightest attention to me although it was obvious that I wasn't feeling well. Still I didn't care. I knew my discomfort would cease in just a few hours when I landed in New York.

I was looking forward to my future in a free, democratic country where I would be free of persecution and be able to start a new life.

Return

I returned to my native city after many, many years and walked along the streets of my childhood, now smaller and shabbier than in my memory. I went through the entry of the apartment building where I was born and lived until the war, into the courtyard where I had played so many happy hours. The fence separating the buildings was gone, so with a few steps I crossed over to the next courtyard.

When I was a child my favorite neighbor was Mrs. Pick, a slim woman of medium height with a husband who was tall and portly. They lived in the apartment building next to ours and were very friendly with my family.

The Picks had no children of their own, just two nieces who came to visit their aunt and uncle occasionally. Mr. And Mrs. Pick liked my sister and me very much, though Mrs. Pick focused her attention on me since I was younger. She never failed to give me a birthday present and it was she who coaxed me to swallow medicine and juice and sponged me during my frequent illness.

I loved to visit Mrs. Pick and she always greeted me warmly, inviting me to her spotless, blue and white tiled kitchen. Maciús, the pretty and affectionate canary chirped happily in his cage, while Mrs. Pick spoke softly to him in Polish and German as she grew up in a German speaking region of Poland. Mrs. Pick usually offered me some of her delicious cookies and allowed me to wander through the spacious apartment, while she busied herself preparing one of her fine meals she was famous for among all the neighbors.

First I went to a small music room on the left of a long hallway. A delicately carved etagère stood on its slender feet along one wall, filled with crystal bowls, figurines and vases. A harmonium presided on the other wall. Sometimes while I visited, Mr. Pick played it and the deep, serious music resonated through the rooms. Next came the bedroom whose door was closed. One day I got a glimpse of a quiet, large room with a wide double bed. A beautiful doll sat in the middle of the gold bedspread, a gold ruffled skirt spread around her small torso.

At one time when I slept over because my parent's house was full of out-of-town relatives, I heard a loud noise coming from the bedroom. There stood Mrs. Pick holding a strange hose attached to a tank, cleaning the wallpapered walls. Seeing my astonishment, she explained that it was a vacuum cleaner. What a wondrous sight in Poland in the 1930's!

At the end of the hallway was the bathroom and on the right my least favorite room, a combination salon and dining room. One wall opened into a balcony, the other walls were covered with heavy Gobelin tapestries. The dark, solid walnut furniture and the tapestries made the room look formal and very gloomy.

Just outside the dining room was a niche that held a tall, wide grandfather clock. The beautifully carved mahogany was carefully polished and shining in the dim hallway. The Roman numerals, clearly visible, stayed erect like soldiers on parade, the golden chains with their pendulums swung, chiming the hours away.

I would stand there for a long time, mesmerized by the clock's majestic beauty, too awed to touch its gleaming face. Then, with one last look at the grandfather clock, I peeked into the kitchen, politely curtsied and said goodbye.

The war came. Maciús the canary was the first to die, Mr. Pick who was no longer portly, followed. Mrs. Pick was the last one to disappear into the abyss.

Standing there remembering, I raised my eyes to the Pick apartment. For a moment I thought I saw the grandfather clock through the windows, and heard the words of the beloved poet, Julian Tuwin:

“The clock is ticking; Never never...”

“And the heart is beating; Always, always...”

As quoted from the poem, “Epistola Sentymentalna,”

“A zegar cyka; Nidgy, nidgy...”

“A serce bije; Zawsze, zawsze...”

Epilogue

Fear and Love

Fear is the soldier in a green-gray uniform,
his rifle raised for a blow.

Love is my grandson
with light brown hair and big blue eyes.

Fear is the line of cattle cars packed with human cargo,
destination unknown.

Love is the child's hand in mine with wonder in his eyes
when he looks at the cascading water.

Fear is the barking dogs and the shouts, "Raus, Schnell"
when the bolted doors are opened.

Love is the scent of the child's body
after the evening bath.

Fear is the march along a road between tall electrified fences,
the chimneys spewing smoke.

Love is the small figure in a crib,
falling asleep to a lullaby.

Fear is the sleeper's scream in the night,
wakening drenched with sweat.

Love is the smile on Aidan's sweet face
when he awakens in the morning.

Fear is the destruction of
the heart's faith in goodness and hope for justice.

Love is the tender grandchild,
a fragile link between past and future.