

NELLY BEN OR CLYNES



When I was born in 1933 I was given a Jewish name which was Nechama, as well as a Polish name, Nelly.

Although we lived comfortably, it was not in luxury. My father was a travelling salesman working for a big firm which made

fountain pens and pencils while my mother looked after my sister and myself at home. We had a living-in maid, a Ukrainian girl, who helped mother with the household chores. While I remember both sets of grandparents, I recall my mother's parents more distinctly. My mother's father was the bailiff for a huge estate of a Polish

nobleman. As part of his payment he was given a big farmhouse with an orchard and some land along with some domestic animals. They had a family of seven, all of whom were married with families; for the long summer holidays the women and children would congregate on the farm, so I spent wonderful summers there. There seems to have been a little less contact with my father's parents, who were very orthodox, grandfather had a beard and grandmother wore a sheitel (wig). The majority of people in Lemberg, in those days, definitely followed the Jewish way of life. Both sets of grandparents ran strictly kosher households and kept all the Jewish holidays. Although I am sure we must have been taken to the Lemberg synagogue, I have no memory of it. However, I do remember celebrating Shabbat and the festivals at home.

I was six years old when the war broke out. After the Germans had moved through Poland, there was a pact between Hitler and Stalin which meant we were under Communist regime for a short time. At school I remember learning Russian as well as Polish. Later, Hitler also conquered our part of Poland and we were then under Nazi rule, which is when my Holocaust experiences really started.

When the Russian army left I can remember my father asking my mother whether we should go to Russia, as many other Jews were doing. My mother, who had built up her lovely home with such care, asked him 'how can we leave and just run away with a rucksack?' Not very long afterwards, of course, it was all taken away from us.

The Gestapo came to our apartment and pushed us out, taking many of our possessions, including our piano. We were given one room in a house filled with many other families. As well as the terrible physical conditions we had to endure, there was the constant threat of extermination and we were always trying to hide. Lorries arrived continuously, taking people to concentration camps or forests where they would be made to dig their own graves prior to execution. In the ghetto we knew that if you were taken on one of these transports, you were going to your death. Very occasionally, there were escapes from these places. My sister, who was barely sixteen, was caught in one of these transports, but managed to escape. Because of her experience and consequent intensity of feeling that we should not

let ourselves be slaughtered, the family was given an impetus to do something and try to escape.

Contact was made with my mother's brother, who was living in Warsaw under a false identity. Having quite a lot of money, he generously did all he could to help people to be saved. My uncle had contacts with various non-Jewish people who were willing to help. False Aryan papers were arranged for us. We were brought out of the ghetto by a Jewish Czech doctor who spoke perfect German and lived freely as an Aryan. He was dressed as an SS officer and after giving the guards a few orders walked out first with my sister then with my mother and myself. He had planned to save my father in the same way two days later, but, by this time father had been taken to a notorious place of torture called Janowski Prison, and executed there. We kept in touch with my sister throughout the war, but we could not live together as she had different papers with a different family name but looked very much like mother and me.

For two weeks, mother and I stayed with the doctor and a Polish nurse, who helped him in this work. The nurse taught me how to pray and behave like a Catholic. This was important if you were to live among the Aryan population without giving away your Jewish identity. On the day we were to travel to Warsaw, when we arrived at the station we found we had missed the last train of the day. A station worker, noticing my mother's dismay, introduced us to the German Station Master, who kept us in the safety of his office until a train — intended for German officers — arrived late at night. He personally led us into a carriage where several SS officers were sitting. They seemed delighted to see us, insisting I should be allowed to sleep — even covering me with one of their coats. Had they known we were Jews we would have been killed instantly.

Having arrived in Warsaw, we stayed with a wonderful family for about a year. They helped us all they could, but we had to move on when someone suspected we were Jewish and sent for the police — fortunately my mother was able to bribe the policeman to let us free.

My mother was advised to look for a position as a maid, eventually we found a home with someone prepared to take in both of us. This family - a couple, their son and daughter-in-law and grandchildren - lived in a two-roomed apartment, while mother and I shared a bed in the kitchen. Although it was too dangerous to attend school, mother taught me as much as she could and I was allowed to play the family's piano, and was even given lessons once a week along with the daughter of the older couple.

After the uprising in Warsaw during the summer of 1944, Aryan Poles were treated in the same way as the Jews had been - either being shot or taken to concentration camp. Consequently, we were put on the train to Auschwitz, but miraculously escaped into a village outside Warsaw when we were ordered off the train as apparently there was no more room in Auschwitz.

The villagers were supportive and let us live in a cleaned pigsty, providing us with bits and pieces of furniture. Again, I studied with my mother; a local wealthy woman let me play on her piano as well as giving us gifts including boots and clothes. Nazis would often raid the village looking for anyone from Warsaw; local children came to warn us when the SS were around. Until the moment we were liberated by the Red Army in May 1945, we lived in constant danger.

After the war I entered a specialised high school for musicians. I later emigrated to Israel where I completed my musical studies and began a career as a concert pianist and teacher, which still continues. I now live in Northwood with my husband; we have a daughter who is a jazz singer.

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BUT WAS NOT CONSUMED!'
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