

JOSEF PERL



I was born on 27 April 1930 in Velicky Bockov, Czechoslovakia. My parents, Frieda and Lazar had nine children; I was the eighth child, the only son. In my part of the world there was very little anti-Semitism. At school, where about one quarter of the children were Jewish, we all played happily together. However, in 1938, our teachers were dismissed and replaced by Hungarian teachers who were specifically trained in Nazi ideology. When we arrived at school, instead of sitting in our usual places, we were told where to sit. Suddenly we were told that we were different, that we were to be segregated: Jews on one side of the classroom and Christians on the other. Our happy, peaceful world was shattered. Within two to three days, children who had been my friends would no longer talk to me. When I approached one of them, he spat "Don't come near me, you dirty Jew!"

In the spring of 1940, the Hungarian militia working under the command of the Germans, ordered us to leave our homes. We were pushed, shoved, kicked and beaten in the direction of the railway station where a train of cattle wagons was waiting for us. I was with my mother, father, my youngest sister, Priva, and my three oldest sisters, Frimid, Rivka and Leah and their five children. You can't imagine what it was like – packed in like sardines, unable to move, we had to perform all of our bodily functions where we were. Some people fainted, a few suffered heart attacks, others died, but they had to remain in the wagon with us for the next two days and nights. The air was foul. We were placed in a camp where I would sneak out at night to find food – it was on one of these nights that I returned to find that everyone was being forced into lorries and driven away. For the next year, I wandered around Poland on my own, always hoping to find my family. Eventually, I came near to a prison camp, when I saw a column of naked men, women and children being marched out, hundreds of them, five abreast. I heard the sound of machine gunfire and as I neared the front of the column, I could clearly see what was happening to each row. They were brought to the edge of the trench, then with their backs to the soldiers, they were shot and fell into the pit, and the next group was brought forward. As I neared the pit, I began to distinguish the features of those who were dying in front of me. To my horror, I recognized the whole row. It was my mother and four of my sisters. I wanted to call out, to say goodbye, but it was too late, they were gone. Then my five nephews

and nieces, aged between three and seven years old, were pushed forward and told to 'hold hands' by their murderers. The bullets hit them so hard that they were lifted off the ground before falling into the pit. Soon it would be my turn to step forward and die. Suddenly an air raid siren sounded and we were all ordered to lie facedown on the ground. Instead, everyone began to run all over the place. I ran straight into the forest knowing that I would never see half of my family again. Finally, I was caught and marched into Cracow-Plaszow concentration camp. The camp commandant, Amon Goth, was overweight, an ugly-looking brute. Every morning he would go out onto his balcony and shoot at anyone he could see. One day as I was kneeling down working in the camp, I saw a pair of hooves near me. Without thinking, I looked up. There was Goth astride his beautiful white horse. He leaned down and slashed me across the face with his riding crop. "No one looks at me!" he snarled and rode on. I was lucky. Others had been shot for much less.

In late 1942, a 'selection' was made in the camp and again we were tightly packed into cattle wagons. Again, we had no food, no water, no sanitation and insufficient air. We were in Auschwitz. The doors of our wagons were unlocked. Dr Mengele was standing there and with a casual flick of the wrist would send you to the left or the right. Over seventy per cent went to the left, straight to the gas chambers. Those to the right had been selected either for work or experimentation. I was sent to the right where we were ordered to undress and our hair was cut off. We were crowded into the 'shower' where we were overcome by cold and fear. To our utter relief, cold water rained down on us. Afterwards we were given striped uniforms and marched back to our blocks. There were a thousand people to a block and we were counted every morning and evening.

Later I was transported to Dachau in open train wagons. Passing under one bridge in Czechoslovakia, we were showered with pieces of bread thrown down by the locals. It gave us a wonderful feeling to realize that some people out there were still willing to put themselves at risk for us. Dachau had different work groups, kitchen groups and those dealing with the disposal of the dead. Initially, I worked in the kitchen, but I never stood still, believing that as long as I worked, I would stay alive. One day, people were rounded up once again and I was sent to Belsen. In 1943, I was put on another transport to Gross Rosen camp in Lower Silesia. Shortly after my arrival, I was sent to Bolkenhain, to work at a factory called VDM, which manufactured aircraft parts and explosives. It was here that I was asked by an underground movement to help sabotage the factory by sending a hand grenade down a chute. It caused a loud explosion, which brought the guards in firing with their guns and screaming. They were shooting randomly and I was sure we would all be killed so I ran forward and shouted, "stop! I did it!" I wouldn't admit as to who helped me, so they tortured me by putting needles under my fingernails and giving me electric shocks. My feet were whipped until they were raw and bleeding. I managed to escape a public hanging, which was supposed to set an example to anyone who was thinking of causing trouble. By the end of 1944 about 5,000 of us started out on the death march, those who

slowed down or collapsed from weariness were shot or clubbed to death. When our journey finally came to an end there were 178 of us left. We eventually stumbled into Buchenwald camp and on the 11 April 1945 the Americans entered the camp to find that most of the German guards had fled and the prisoners had liberated themselves. It was sixteen days before my fifteenth birthday. Of the 21,000 people who were liberated, only about 700 were alive a few weeks later, and I was one of them.

Adapted from 'Faces in the Smoke' - The Story of Josef Perl
ISBN: 095412-330-1 by Arthur C Benjamin

Further copies of this leaflet can be downloaded from our website
www.northwoodhmd.org.uk

Northwood Holocaust Memorial Day Events T: 08456 448 006
PO Box 288 F: 01923 820357
Northwood E: enquiries@northwoodhmd.org.uk
HA6 9BT www: northwoodhmd.org.uk
Facebook Group: Northwood HMD Pass It On

HMD
'...AND THE BUSH BURNED WITH FIRE,
BUT WAS NOT CONSUMED'
NORTHWOOD HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL DAY EVENT

JOSEF PERL'S STORY



Josef Perl 3 months after his liberation in 1945 – Buchenwald