

I was born Mala Helfgott on 24 September 1930 in Piotrkow Trybunalski, Poland. After the outbreak of the Second World War on 1 September 1939, life changed dramatically for us. Although we were full of hope that hostilities would soon be over, five and a half years later I emerged alive – but only just – having gone through the experience of being hidden with a Catholic family, the ordeal of the ghettos, a slave labour camp, concentration camps and finally being liberated in Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945.

The Nazi invasion started with the bombing of Polish towns. By October 1939 the new, brutal Nazi regime issued orders that all Jews in our town were to move to a ghetto by 1 November. The ghetto became more and more crowded. In some instances there were two or three families to a room. Those over the age of 12 were ordered to wear armbands with the Star of David and we were not allowed out of the ghetto at any time. Anyone found outside was severely punished and often shot. Within the ghetto, there were curfews and we were not allowed on the streets after 8pm.

As time progressed, things got worse. In 1942 rumours began to circulate that the ghetto was to be reduced and that the majority of the inhabitants were to be rounded up, selections would take place and people would be deported to labour and concentration camps, and in the majority of cases to their deaths. My father knew a lot of people outside the ghetto and managed to secure the services of a Christian family in the town of Czestochowa. This arrangement concerned myself and my cousin, Idzia Klein, who was almost 11, one year younger than me. We were both taken to Czestochowa to pass as Christian children and stay there for the duration of the deportations. The arrangements went according to plan and we found ourselves in a house on the outskirts of the town. Life there was very precarious and we were extremely vulnerable. We were frightened and homesick and exposed to many dangers. My father smuggled me back into the ghetto and I was relieved to find my mother, sister Lusia and brother Ben there. Soon afterwards, when people thought it was safe, they started returning to the ghetto. Over the next few days, people were rounded up and gathered into the Great Synagogue, once a beautiful and imposing building. They were kept there under dreadful conditions, without sanitation, light, food and water. To amuse themselves, the Ukranian guards would shoot into the synagogue through the windows, killing and wounding people. Among the victims incarcerated in that hell were my mother and Lusia. My father used all his influence to get them released but they were not letting children out under any circumstances and since my mother would not leave Lusia, her fate was sealed. On the morning of 20 December 1942 they were taken out in groups of 50 and marched to Rakow forest, where newly dug

mass graves awaited them. They were told to undress and stand at the edge of the graves where they were shot. The wounded were buried with the dead. My mother was 37 and Lusia was 8 years old. The SS were always rounding people up and sending them to various labour and concentration camps. During one of these raids, my aunt Irene was torn from her 5 year old daughter, Hania (her husband Fishel having been shot about two weeks earlier) and sent to a labour camp shouting “who will look after my child?” We were the only relatives left: my brother Ben who worked in the glass factory, my father and myself. As the only female relative, it fell to me to take care of Hania. I was 12 years old. At the end of 1943, the ghetto was liquidated. At the end of November 1944, we were all marched to the railway station and various groups were led to different places. My father and Ben, I learned later, were sent to Buchenwald, Hania and I ended up in Ravensbruck concentration camp. We travelled in cattle trucks without food or water; we did not know where we were going. On arrival in Ravensbruck, we queued at a reception centre where all personal details were recorded. Our few possessions were taken from us, we were told to strip, our heads were shaved and we had communal showers under cold water. We were then given the typical concentration camp pyjama like garb and clogs. Now we were really stripped of our personality as well; we could not recognize one another. The years of suffering, deprivation and the deteriorating conditions were taking their toll; depression and despair were setting in. My aunt Frania Klein died soon after arrival and a few days later so did my friend Penna. Hania was getting thinner and my main worry was how to keep her alive. After about two and a half months there, we were again put into cattle trucks to travel to another concentration camp Bergen-Belsen, where we found total chaos. There was terrible over crowding, sanitation in the form of open pits and hardly any food. People walked around like zombies and looked like skeletons; there were piles of corpses and dead bodies lying around everywhere. Typhus was rife and there was an air of utter hopelessness. The degradation, humiliation and despair was clearly visible on people’s faces. You could be speaking to someone and she would literally drop dead in front of you. Hania and I managed to search out a children’s barrack which was run by Sister Luba and a team of Jewish ‘nurses’, themselves inmates, who were very kind and devoted. I know that they used to beg, steal and do everything in their power to obtain a little extra food for the children. They also gave us loving care. The barrack was situated opposite a large hut with a pile of corpses. I recall a procession of women dragging bodies in blankets or by a limb along the ground, adding to this pile all day long. A typhus epidemic was raging throughout the camp and many children caught it, including me. There was no medication and no treatment of any kind. I just lay there semi-conscious, quite oblivious of what was happening around me. My bunk was near the window and one day I suddenly became aware of people

outside running. My only thought was one of amazement that they could run when I could not even move a muscle. The British Army subsequently liberated the camp. It was many weeks before I could walk again. Hania was going through the same experience, but I was not aware of it at the time. A few months after liberation, we were sent to Sweden with a group of other children and spent the following two years there. I was in Sweden, not really expecting anyone from my family to be alive, when one day I received a letter from England. It was from my brother Ben. Of our immediate family, we were the only ones still alive. Ben learned from a witness that my father was shot when trying to escape from one of the death marches. Tragically, this was only a few days before the end of the war. Hania's mother survived the war and they were eventually reunited. I came to England in March 1947 to be reunited with Ben. In 1949 I met Maurice Tribich whom I married in 1959, we had two children, Shannon and Jeffrey.



MARLA TRIBICH'S STORY



With friends post-war in Bergen-Belsen. Marla is second from the left and Soked after them in the children's barrack, is the lady on the right.

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