

GENA TURGEL

My story, the story of a survivor, is the story that six million others cannot tell. I was, and I am, and I always shall be a witness to the mass murder and systematic destruction of a civilization.

I was born on 1 February 1923, the youngest of nine children; five boys and four girls. We lived in Cracow in Poland, a very select and central part of the city. We were a respectable, affluent, middle-class family, well-to-do in every sense of the word. My parents, Samuel and Estera Goldfinger, ran a small textile business a few streets away from home. My father was in the Austrian Army during World War I. He was ill for several years with lung trouble, as a result of his war wounds, but I am sure that Adolf Hitler's growing influence in Europe also contributed to his poor health. He died the year before Hitler came to power.

After a few weeks of the German occupation of Poland, all sorts of restrictions were introduced. Jews were banned from trains and trams. We had to wear the Star of David at all times, a blue star on a white band which had to be 'pure' white. The slightest blemish could mean that the wearer might be shot. Jewish people no longer had rights. Even when we walked in the street, if we saw a German approaching we had to get off the pavement into the road to let him pass.

From the moment the Germans entered our city, we had to fight for our lives. I had to forget my dreams of being a doctor. In the first week of the war, Jewish and Polish schools and colleges were closed down and the Germans began commandeering all Jewish businesses. Each major Polish city had a ghetto. It was autumn 1941 when we moved into the ghetto in Cracow. First, we were taken to a place where we were allocated accommodation. We were crammed into a dark ten-by-eight ground-floor room which looked onto a courtyard. There were five of us. We had to share a kitchen and bathroom with two other families, one next door and the other family in a room across the corridor. It was a very hard winter and we slept in our thickest clothes. We assembled on 1 March 1942 for our departure to Plaszov camp, a distance of about ten kilometers, as the ghetto was about to be liquidated. All means of identification had been taken away from us: birth certificate, passport, all personal documents.

In December 1944, word came that the camp was about to be liquidated. More and more of the SS were needed at the Front. We heard that Auschwitz was to be our next destination and that we were to leave that very day. The temperature was about 20 degrees below freezing. I had to go exactly as I was, the clothes I was standing in: dress, coat, boots, a thin pair of knickers and stockings. The snow was deep and thick, and we were flanked by guards and Alsatian dogs on both sides. We must have been walking for about three weeks and it snowed all the way. Sometimes we were made to walk overnight. We kept wondering: 'When will it end? how much further?' As we got nearer to Auschwitz and the German border, some people came out of their houses with buckets of water and deliberately poured it on the ground in front of us, to mock us. Some stood eating chunks of bread as they watched us pass by. But only a minority acted in that way. We experienced compassion and humanity, too. Incidents like this gave us faith that there is some goodness in people.

The first sight that greeted us as we walked through the massive iron gates into the muddy compound at Auschwitz was a small group of women fiddlers. We learned later that it was standard procedure for these musicians to play for the incoming transports on their way to the gas chamber. As soon as we arrived we were segregated. The guards there told us that we were going to the shower room and that our clothes would be disinfected. We undressed and left our clothes in a heap on a bench outside. There must have been about a hundred of us squashed into the stone-walled room, with no windows and narrow openings in the ceiling. We stood there for an hour or so, and nothing happened. The waiting seemed endless. Nobody spoke.

I shall never know how we came out alive. The gas chamber was operated from another part of the camp. Had the gas supply suddenly failed? Why did the guards, usually so super-efficient, fail to discover this and not send us back inside again? The same procedure must have taken place with people from previous transports. They too must have stripped and had their clothes destroyed but, unlike us, they never came out again. At Auschwitz, every last remnant of respect and dignity was squeezed out of us. In our loose, striped, insect-ridden clothing and with our hair cropped or shaved, we felt completely dehumanized.

We left Auschwitz in January 1945 for an unknown destination. We marched in the middle of the main roads, through built-up areas and villages, accompanied by the familiar battalions of SS guards and Alsatian dogs on both sides of us. We marched and marched deep into Germany. After several days we came to Leslau, a small town with a railway station, where we were loaded on to long, high, open trucks. We were horribly cramped in those trucks. We sat on the floor like heaps of cabbages, our knees up against our chins. It was absolutely freezing. The snow drifted into the trucks and down onto our shoulders, we were brushing it away and clinging to each other to keep warm. Hundreds died on the journey. When we stopped at some stations in the country, we had to throw the bodies out into the fields. The Nazis did nothing. They only gave orders. They wanted, as always, to degrade us. The lifting up and disposing of corpses – mothers, fathers, children – were left to the inmates. We traveled in these confined conditions for three or four weeks. One night we found ourselves in Buchenwald camp. First we unloaded the dead bodies. Then we were ordered down from the trucks and told to stand in a queue. The prisoners there took pity on us and gave up their soup for us. We must have looked ravenous. After we finished drinking the soup, we sat around the camp compound for a while. A few hours later, we had to go to the opposite side of the station where we were loaded onto closed-in trucks. It was February 1945 and we entered (Bergen Belsen) camp through heavy, soggy snow-covered mud. The camp was a wild, open complex surrounded by searchlights and barbed wire, a huge expanse of long, shell-like barracks with openings for windows. In the morning, when daylight broke, I saw people wandering about outside. They looked thin and emaciated, starved and disease-ridden. I noticed three of these walking skeletons coming towards me, their eyes bulging out of their sockets. At Belsen people finally lost all sense of morality, pride and dignity. They became like animals. When hunger takes over to that extent, nothing else seems to matter.

Anne Frank was in my barrack. She was already at Belsen when I arrived and lay a few bunks away from me, dying from typhus. I can remember so clearly my mother telling me about this Dutch girl in the barrack who had apparently written a diary.

After I had been at the (camp) hospital for several weeks, I noticed that the SS were burning stacks of papers. At the time we thought they were having a general clear-up, but later we realized that they must have been deliberately destroying all the evidence. They probably sensed the Allies were on their way and the camp would be taken over. When the British entered, they found numerous pages missing from record books – pages recording the names of inmates, many of them distinguished men such as consuls and ambassadors. I longed for pencils and paper. I used to say that when the war ended there would not be enough ink in the world to write down all the events and experiences of those years. Normal Turgel, then a sergeant working for British military intelligence, was among the first to enter the concentration camp at Belsen on 15 April 1945. Rounding up the SS guards for interrogation, he encountered a young woman, one of the inmates. Three days later he held an engagement party for himself and Gena. When she married Norman in Germany in October 1945, in a wedding dress made of British parachute silk, the British Army Rabbi proclaimed their love a symbol of hope after so much death.

To find out more about their remarkable story read: 'I Light a Candle: ISBN: 0 85303 315



ABOVE: Norman and Gena in April 1945, on the eve of returning to Belsen for the 40th anniversary of the liberation.
BELOW: Romtues' gallery. The man I am pointing to is Josef Kramer, camp



GENA TURGEL'S STORY



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

Northwood Holocaust Memorial Day Events
PO Box 288
Northwood
HA6 9BT

T: 08456 448 006
F: 01923 820357
E: enquiries@northwoodhmd.org.uk
www: northwoodhmd.org.uk
Facebook Group: Northwood HMD Pass It On