

R.A.

Rhodes Island, Auschwitz, Bergen Belsen, Dassau, Theresienstadt.

I did not tell my children about my experiences for a long time because I did not want them to grow up with hatred. I cannot help but hate the Nazis with all my heart for what they did. It took many years for those feelings to lessen. My children often asked why I had a number on my arm, printed all skew because the woman who stamped it on was nasty and rough. I would tell them that it was a telephone number. My daughter once came to me with a rag and soapy water. I thought it was to wash her doll, but instead she told me that she wanted to wash my arm because it was "dirty". The number on my arm was a constant reminder to me and a constant mystery to my children. I thought about having it surgically removed but to me that would have been a betrayal of my parents and their memory. I would not have been able to live with the guilt of having been disloyal to my parents.

In Auschwitz we communicated with the Yiddish speaking inmates, it was from them that we learned about the gas chambers and the crematoria. The decision of who would live and who would die was left up to Mengele. Ironically, he was called "the angel of Death" and not the Devil.

In the camp we did everything in fives; five in the bunks, and five queuing at a time. The work that we were forced to do served one and only one purpose - to destroy us through suffering. The only way to survive was to erase the thoughts of losing one's family. Because of our hunger and deprivation, there was no room for sadness, a state of mind that renders one very weak.

The hardest thing to comprehend was that these animals had murdered my parents. The physical struggle was painful, but the moral pain was continuous and never subsided; the thought of having lost my loved ones made my heart bleed. My family of eight was no longer together as in the happy times we shared in the past. I had always been surrounded by relatives - now, I was alone for the first time ever!

After one of the selections, one of my sisters was sent to a military camp. My younger sister, aged 22/23 was one of the people kept in a sealed block separated from the others. They chose the youngest and most beautiful. From there they were taken to the crematorium. But before this happened I had the opportunity to visit her one last time. She knew the end was near and insisted that I take her jacket that she had bought in exchange for some bread, as she knew she would no longer be needing it.

Two days later we left Auschwitz for Bergen Belsen. After having been there for a few days the Germans came to ask us who would like a bath. We were apprehensive as we thought this might be a trap. By this stage I had given up hope and had nothing to lose so I got up as the first volunteer. From there many followed me.

When we arrived at Bergen Belsen some Hungarian women recognised some of our group. They said that we looked terrible. We had not realised how we had changed because we saw each other every day.

The saddest day I ever remember was Christmas Eve. The Blokova came to give us our daily ration of bread. As it was already dark, she switched on the light but got caught by the guards as this was not permitted. The following day, Christmas 1944, we were punished and had to stand deep in the snow without any warm clothes or food. Our days continued full of humiliating tasks to get our morale down.

In February 1945 we arrived in Dassau, where I went to work in the aeroplane factory. It was a long walk each day with mismatched shoes. There we were given striped prisoner uniforms and a new number. I worked shifts which alternated weekly, day then night. I never got much sleep because the food was served at lunch time and thus I could not rest during the day for fear of missing out. The day that we left for Theresienstadt, I actually had not slept for eight consecutive days. It's absolutely incredible how one can go without sleep, drink, food, warmth and hygiene when one has to.

April 12th 1945 we were deported to Theresienstadt. The Nazi officers wanted us to continue walking. There was one kind old captain who put his foot down and refused to allow it. He ordered trains to be sent to fetch us and if that were not possible he intended to leave us in the camp for the Americans to liberate us. Luckily for us the trains did arrive and we were transported in cattle truck with a ration of one loaf of bread to last for the journey of eight days. Naturally many, many more people died on the way.

On 20th April 1945 I arrived at Theresienstadt, weak from our long trip and very sick.

The 8th May 1945 marked our liberation by the Russians.

The very first time that I had sugar was in Theresienstadt. They gave me sugar in the coffee. It was absolute ecstasy! The Jew in charge even gave me an extra piece when he saw the way I reacted.

The very first time that I actually saw myself is a moment I shall never forget. This was after liberation and I got such a fright when I saw myself in a mirror that I screamed; I looked like a monster. My facial features were dented, my body was hollow, my hands were only covered with veins and skin.

After we had been liberated we were allowed to live in the deserted homes, and we had to go to, I particular place to get our daily food. The Russians who liberated us gave us soup in the morning, and tobacco at lunch which we would exchange for bread.

Seven of us lived together in one room, and we were all from different countries.

One day I was so hungry that I stole some apricots from a tree growing on someone's property. The owner ran out and wanted to kill us but we escaped.

There was a very special person whom I met in Bergen Belsen, **Anna Cassuto**. She was a woman of 34 who had four children in Italy. Her husband was a Rabbi in Florence who was tortured by the Nazis because he would not divulge information about how many Jews there were in Florence as many of them were in hiding. For this he was deported to Germany. He never returned. She gave me moral support in the camps. At night, she would say,

"A day has passed, one less day of suffering". One day when we were outside, she showed me how to dig and encouraged me all the time. She had a strong will to survive and she was like a rock to me. I was with her until my arrival in Italy on the 5th August 1945.

After spending a year in Bologna, Italy, I went to the Congo to find my brothers.

I tried to forget the nightmares but forgetting is treason, treason to our parents and family who perished. I think that survivors of the Holocaust who did not lose family members are more able to distance themselves from the memories of the Holocaust. I simply cannot do so. All along I think that the children knew that I was hiding something from them by my silence. They also knew I was different from the other mothers. For example I would never let them see me sad about anything. I wanted to teach them to love life. I think I did the tight thing because they grew up without hate.

R.A. was born in Rhodes Island. She was in Auschwitz, Theresienstadt and Dachau. After liberation, she went to the Congo and came to South Africa in 1974. She has one son and two daughters.

Source: "IN SACRED MEMORY" Recollections of the Holocaust by survivors living in Cape Town, edited by Gwyne Schrire.