

SARAH JERUSALMI

Rhodes Island, Auschwitz, Lagers VII, XII, and V, Dachau

I grew up in the Jewish quarter of Rhodes Island, a very nice clean place surrounded by a citadel with several synagogues. We were like one big family. My own family was large; I had five brothers of whom four left Rhodes before the War. My father's uncles had banks. They built a school, the Joseph Notrica, which is still in existence. On the whole there was little anti-Semitism before the Nazis came although I remember that the Greeks would sometimes throw stones at us when we went for a walk outside the citadel on a Saturday.

Anti-Semitism came in 1939 one year before the war and we were no longer allowed to attend government schools. We decided to join my brothers in the Congo but it was too late and there were no ships. I had to start work because my brothers could no longer send us money. My father's business suffered because he was unable to import goods and he was not in good health.

We suffered a lot of hunger which is something in my life I cannot forget. When we had bread my mother would give more to my brother Salvotera than to me because I was a girl. We had a difficult time but we still kept kosher. I remember at Pesach my father went to the village to make the Hour and my mother prepared the matzos with it.

Then there was the BLACK PESACH.

There was a very big bombardment on Pesach as the people were returning from shul. Ten people were killed and we ran away from the citadel so when they caught us we were not even in our house.

The first time I began to see Nazis in Rhodes was before I was deported, in 1943 and we were very scared of them. The Italians had said that they would protect us but when the Germans took over power in Rhodes in July 1944 we knew it was the end of us because there was no possibility of running away from the island.

One day all the men had to bring their papers and the Nazis kept them. When my mother went to ask why they kept the men there - my brother was only 16 - she was told that if she wished to be with them she should go home and come back with her things.

So we took all our jewellery, some food and clothes and we went to join them. It was only when we were there inside that we realized it was the end of us because they took all the jewellery from us and started to hit the people because those inside wanted to communicate with those outside. We were so afraid.

It was like a nightmare. We were not even allowed to go to the windows to see what was happening outside. We were not allowed to do anything. It was terrible. They did not

give us anything, just water and coffee. We stayed there about two weeks. In the meantime the Turkish consul came to take our all the Turkish subjects.

They put us in a small open boat without cabins with two or three Germans and took us to Piraeus in Greece. The Germans took away my glasses. A blind man was behind us and he started to call for his daughter Joanna and a Nazi came and killed him. When we arrived in Piraeus they kept us in a block in miserable conditions and gave us only soup without any bread. Many people in our group died.

One of the things which I will always remember is this journey from Athens to Auschwitz, in those cattle wagons where we were treated like animals, with no water or food. The things that took place in those wagons were below any level of human dignity. We could already feel that we were going towards death.

It was the most terrible thing in my life. We could not breathe because we had only one small window. We had to lie down one on top of another, the children crying and there were old women. So many of us died in those wagons and were thrown out at the stations by the German officers as if they were rubbish bags. The officers had absolutely no feeling of compassion. At the stations the wagon doors were opened slightly to let in a little fresh air, and we received a little water from time to time, of course insufficient for the number of people in the wagons. Sometimes the people drank their urine. The little food we took with us from Rhodes was used up mainly in the journey to Athens and in Athens itself where we waited nearly two weeks for the train to arrive. I remember chewing on a few raw chickpeas. Some days we would get a stale bread to share among all the prisoners (about a hundred per wagon).

When we finally arrived at Auschwitz late one day nearly a month later, they put us in a queue, separating the men from the women, the children with the mothers. The scene of the selection, the separation of parents and children with the crying, the screaming, the beatings of the old, the young, the ruthlessness That I could never forget for as long as I live.

Those who were selected for work were taken to the disinfection room and showers and we never again saw our mothers or our fathers. They gave us a soap to wash with and shaved our hair off and took all our clothes and threw us old clothes and clogs, whatever size. They could not care! I got a short jacket, another was short and was given long trousers.

To think that when we arrived, we thought, due to the smell of barbecue, that we were going to be fed a decent meal; we had no idea that this was the smell of burning flesh, as the SS later told us laughing: "the smell of your parents and children". This was the hardest shock, the hardest thing to understand, the hardest thing to believe; it numbed us totally.

Without being given food, we were shown to our block where other inmates were sleeping squashed like sardines, but worse. We were shocked that the Germans had the

audacity to put us together with men because all we saw were shaven heads. Then we realised that this was a block of women and without our hair, we too looked like men. We went into these blocks crying because we had been the whole day without eating or drinking. We thought that at last we could lie down and get some rest but we were thrown all together five on a bunk with one blanket to share between us. At 2.00 a.m., we finally put our heads down, only to be woken up at 4.00 a.m. for roll call outside the block. Still without food, we were sent straight to work. All the time we could smell that smell of burning meat, but we were still unaware of its significance, unaware of the fate of our relatives and friends. When we asked the German woman officer if we were going to be fed we were told that the only meat available was that of our parents.

This was such a blow to me. It totally broke my heart. I understood from that moment that these people were out to end our lives and the lives of our people. This is when I told myself,

"Sarah, do not let them destroy you, you must fight and stay alive to tell the world what you saw."

And I did. I did everything that was humanly possible to stay alive, whether it was stealing from the kitchen or singing for the officers for an extra bread portion The things I did not do to survive!

It was vital to me to survive to tell the world what these people were capable of doing. I received my strength from my strong faith in G-d. There were so many times when I came so close to death and somehow my life was spared.

A Hungarian woman with two daughters had a piece of wax that they used to liquify every Shabbat night and all the girls with her would pray saying, "C-d, please let us see another Shabbat with our families."

We lit the lamp inside the block, it was just a symbol of Shabbat, it was the only thing we had and everybody would cry. We knew when it was Rosh Hashana and when it was Yom Kippur we fasted, we did not have much to eat but still we fasted. We did not pray, we did nothing.

We would sleep, eight or ten girls on a bunk. The girls would fight for the blanket. Others would cut up small pieces to make some underpants. Among ourselves there was stealing; the girls who had arrived before us were very experienced. They had no pity for us and generally gave us no advice or help or compassion. People who could not work were sent to the sick bay and were never seen again. Looking healthy was vital! I remember once I had a terrible pain in my leg and a girl whom I had befriended, a Belgian nurse, gave me an injection to relieve the pain. Unfortunately, the needle was infected and I developed a huge abscess. Luckily the German who saw that I was absent from roll call came to ask me what my problem was. I told him that I had scraped my leg on a rusty nail in the kitchen so he sent me to the doctor so that I could receive proper care.

One day I saw my 16 year old brother crying because he was so hungry. He said he was going to die here, he had nothing to eat. I consoled him and promised to take care of him and bring him a blanket for he was so cold. I tried to organise something for my brother. A German caught me and they made me stand outside the entrance holding four bricks in my hands outstretched over my head, I thought I was going to collapse but I held on. Luckily another officer came past and said,

"What are you doing here?"

I said, "I don't know what I am doing here" so he said, "Raus, Raus! Go to your block."

It was a miracle that I came back to the block alive. No one could believe it! I heard that later when my brother was working in the coal-mine he ate a piece of charcoal which poisoned him.

I remember one day they took us to a place where there had been a bombardment and we had to remove all the things from the mess. It was a terrible day in November and it was dark with fog, I don't know how many kilo metres away from Auschwitz this place was, perhaps five. Nobody could take a tool in her hand it was so foggy. I saw a stable for horses nearby and I said to my friend,

"Let's go there. At least it will be warm and the Germans can't see us in this fog."

Four of us went inside and we saw a little German boy with two goats. His mother saw us from the window and she sent the little boy with bread, potatoes and salami saying, "My mother sent you this. Don't tell anyone we gave it to you."

We ate and then put our coats back on and went back. That was the only time I thought of escaping but we realized that when they counted us and found some missing, they would come with dogs to find us. But I shall not forget that kindness.

We were one of the last wagons that arrived at Auschwitz. Soon after our arrival the crematorium stopped burning. I was so scared that I might be sent there because I was getting thinner and thinner that I would rub some beetroot on my cheeks to appear healthy and strong. In Auschwitz, after one such selection we were sent to another camp, a small camp, Lager VII. We were given coats in the train because it was freezing. We grabbed them only to realise that they were riddled with lice and fleas. On arrival we went straight to the disinfection.

Lager VII had only two hundred prisoners and no crematorium just a communal fosse. The commander was very good. Fortunately I was sent to work in the kitchen cleaning pots. I had enough to eat and enough to bring to my friends and cousin. It was the first time that I began to feel like a human being again, with hope of surviving this ordeal. No longer did I have to carry bricks from A to B, or to remove the rubble from bombings, or

clean railway tracks all day long. Prisoners were the cheapest form of labour! The work itself was not unbearable but the conditions and treatment we endured in the camps were.

One day I saw a cart being wheeled in with five Rhodesli girls on it, totally emaciated and on the verge of dying. Over a short time I managed to steal quite a lot from the kitchen and they gradually recovered. One day it was one potato, another time beetroot. Once when I came out from the kitchen [put a piece of meat in my trousers and a SS man said to me,

"Where are you going?"

I said, "I am going to the toilet." He said, "OK, go quickly."

If they had found me with a piece of meat in my pocket I would have been killed.

Today, most of these girls are alive and well.

As we approached the end of the war they sent us on to Lagers XII and V, and the camp organisation began to deteriorate.

One evening in one of the camps where we arrived, a young girl saw her mother in another section behind barbed wire and ran to talk to her. They were so emotionally involved that they did not hear the whistle for roll-call. The Germans felt nothing and ordered their electrocution through barbed wire.

At the very last camp, I remember that we lived with the uncertainty of what they would do to us, One night, the Germans told us that as the Americans were arriving they were going to set the whole camp on fire. We waited anxiously, knowing that there was no escape from this situation,

In the early hours of the next morning, we heard SS commands to hurry up and get on the road. For three days and three nights they led us walking. Allied planes would fly over us, and not bomb us as they could see by our uniforms that we were prisoners. Finally, we arrived at Dachau. Although there were no more selections, people still continued to die of hunger, sickness and fatigue.

One morning we woke up to a deadly silence outside. We went out and saw the Americans arriving. It was the Liberation! They brought an enormous amount of bread; unfortunately the starving prisoners attacked the food like flies. Many ate so much that they actually exploded. That was to me the worst thing. After all that suffering, the nightmare wasn't over; people were still dying from sicknesses like cholera, typhus.

After the Americans had arrived, I did everything in my power to get out as soon as possible. They had told us that Italians were to be repatriated last and I just could not wait any longer. I managed to get out with the Belgian group of prisoners. When they found that T had never been to Belgium, they sent me to Paris to the special camp for survivors.

After T sent a cable to my brothers in the Congo I met some families from Rhodes who had emigrated to Paris who welcomed me into their homes. Life began to smile at me again. After eight months during which I was well taken care of, I was re-united with my brothers.

That reunion was something very special and emotional. When the plane landed I was so excited and overwhelmed that my dream was coming true that I could hardly walk off the plane.

There are some nightmares that haunt me and will continue to haunt me for the rest of my life. Those scars are forever! However, there are survivors who have come to appreciate life so much. The life that I lived after the Holocaust in the Congo with my friends and family who spoiled me, was for me like having been born a second time. It was like going from hell to paradise!

I have asked myself what was all this suffering for, was it worth anything? I have never looked back, I just wanted to go forward. However I am not ashamed to say that I cannot be with Germans. I simply cannot erase all that happened to me and my people.

SARAH JERUSALMI nee Notrica was born in Rhodes Island in 1920 and went to school at the Jewish Alliance Francaise and trained as typist. She survived Auschwitz and Dachau from where she was liberated in April 1945. She moved to the Congo, arriving in South Africa in 1974. She married Gabriel Jerusalmi.

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