

VOLIETTE FINTZ

Rhodes Island, Auschwitz, Dachau, Bergen Belsen.

My name is Violette Fintz (nee Maio). I was born September 1911 on the Island of Rhodes. On 19 July 1944 when I was 33 years old, I was arrested on the Island of Rhodes, together with my Mother and Father, two sisters (Sara 25 and Miriam 21) and a brother. I was the eldest of the children. (One sister was already living in the Belgian Congo). Nearly 1800 Jews were arrested that day.

On July 17, the President of the Jewish Community, Mr. Jacob Franco, received a letter from Athens from a group of three Germans known as the Rosenberg Commission. Mr Franco was told that he had to order all the Jews to gather together the next day (18 July) at the aeronautic command at Tchemenlik. They were to bring with them jewellery and all their valuables. We knew nothing about what was happening in Europe because our radios had been sealed and we were completely cut off from all the news.

As soon as we entered the aeronautic building, two German officials together with an interpreter, Costa, began with great brutality, to take our identity cards and Work Permits. What a terrible sadness it was for all of us there. We didn't know what was to happen to us. On 19 July, the Turkish Consul managed to liberate 39 Rhodes Jews because they had Turkish passports. Another 10 were similarly liberated on the Island of Cos. It is impossible to describe the sorrow and desperation of the next three days. The three people (two Germans and Costa) started collecting gold, jewellery and money with great cruelty, without any consideration for the old, the sick, the very young. The results of this collection were 4 bags of money, title deeds to property, gold, and jewels.

After 4 days in this building without food we were given soup and the order to leave. We had to carry our own luggage. It was terrible to go from this building to the port. The old, the sick, those who couldn't walk properly, the little children, were beaten, lashed, as they struggled to the port. We embarked in three small tankers that left Rhodes the next day (21 July). We had no bread or water. The Captain of the tanker that we were on was an Austrian. He called me to his cabin and asked me for details of the tortures we had been subjected to by the Germans while in the aeronautic building. When we arrived at the Island of Leros, the captain refused to sail further until we had been given bread and water. It was thanks to him, to this wonderful man, that we were given water and some food on the journey to Piraeus, which took 10 days. We arrived at Piraeus on 31 July. Conditions on the journey were very bad - shocking sanitary arrangements and very rough seas.

We disembarked and this was terrible.

The old and the very young were flung into small lorries. We traveled to the concentration camp at Haidari near Athens Conditions there were shocking; remember it was August and very hot; we had nothing to eat or drink; people were dying of thirst. We spent four days in Haidari under these conditions; only on the fourth day were we given

something to eat - a plate of soup and straight away we were marched to the station where we were put into cattle trucks.

Written on the outside of the compartments were the words: 8 Horses and 80 people. We were pushed into the train, with lashes, 70-80 people into each compartment. In the centre of the compartment was a barrel for toilet purposes; in one corner was a little stack of bread, and in the other corner a little stack of dry onions and a little barrel of water (imagine, giving onions to make us thirstier!). The journey from Athens to Auschwitz lasted 14 days.

The compartment had one little window with bars; we suffocated. Men, women and children were nearly naked because of the great heat. The toilet barrel was overloaded and, by the time the train stopped and we were told to empty the barrel, we were covered with the contents. Next to me, there was a mother with one child of a year old, who were related to us. The child was so thirsty that she cried continually and, like a little dog, she licked the sweat from her mother's face. This scene has never left my mind. Whenever I see a crying child, this little child comes to my mind.

We arrived in Auschwitz on 16 August.

We had been on the move for a month, having left Rhodes on 21 July, ten days having been spent on the boat.

When the train started to slow down we saw from afar through the window thin people without hair, and I remember saying to the people: I think we have been brought to a madhouse. Finally, the train stopped and straight away the Germans started their ferocity, and lashed everyone who couldn't move quickly enough. We heard an Italian voice saying,

"The children to the old".

In the camp, we came to realize what these words meant: every young mother who carried a child in her arms was sent to the left. To the crematorium. A few mothers were saved when they gave their children to the older women to carry. Thus were the children and the old people sent to their deaths. Some young girls lost their lives through trying to help their married sisters carry their children.

I came down from the train holding my mother with one arm and my sister Miriam with the other. An SS grabbed my mother by her hair and took her away from me. I turned back and said,

"Ciao, Mama,"

and an SS man gave me a lashing on the head for doing this. Crying, I continued walking with Miriam. We were taken to a place underground and given the order to remove our clothes. They started to shave us, our head, under our arms, our pubic hair. It was already

dark when they gave us the order to enter the bathing area. For one month our bodies had never had a bit of water. We were looking forward to this.

We were given soap; the soap was black, and only afterwards did we hear that the soap had been made from the dead. After the bath, we came out of another door, naked and wet; it was very cold.

They brought us a stack of clothing and everyone was given one item. It didn't matter what it was - two left shoes, a bathing costume, something too small or too big. It was already evening when we were ordered to walk and, after two hours, we entered the gates to Auschwitz. Then it was that we saw the name for the first time.

I was with my two sisters - Sara and Miriam. The women had been separated from the men. We had not seen my father or my brother since the train had stopped and I had taken my mother's arm. We were taken to barrack number 20. It was already full and with great difficulty, we managed to find a little place to sleep, after a month of continued torture.

Life in the Barrack was appalling. There were three bunks, one on top of the other. There were fifteen bunks in each row - five people to each wooden bunk. One blanket for five and because the bunks were one on top of the other, the wooden bunks would sometimes collapse and people and bunks would fall onto those below, and we used to hear screams. In the very early mornings, we were called to Appel, a call-up. We stood in lines of five, at a distance of half a metre from each other, so that we shouldn't be able to warm one another. If, by chance, we approached closer, we were lashed. If you tried to help someone who fell, you could get the death penalty. We would wait in line for hours. The Lager Kapo (a beautiful Jewish woman, dressed like a queen) used to count us.

I was "matriculated", i.e. tattooed, by a Jewish girl. My number was 24425. Menstruation stopped because of hunger. We had to wash a little bit in the toilets, in front of the men who tried to clean the toilets (a job often done by Rabbis). We tried to wash with a cloth and a little bit of water. We had very little food - one litre of soup for three - and one slice of bread a day. In the morning, as soon as we were up, we went outside the barrack where there was a barrel of green water. We were "lucky" if we were able to get a little of this water. The consequences of drinking this water were serious: it caused inflammation of the tongue and blisters all over the mouth. It was a bromide, a tranquilliser (worse than a tranquilliser) to keep us totally passive. After the Appel, we used to have to work moving heavy stones from one place to another for no purpose whatsoever.

During those first days that we were in Auschwitz, we had no idea of what happened to people whom we no longer saw. One day, when taking the stones from one place to another, the SS woman ordered:

"Italian women, sing."

We started to sing the beautiful song, "Mama" in the hope that our parents might hear us and then know that we were alive. Then the Polish girls laughed and asked whether we

wanted the Mamas to come out of the chimneys from which we saw the smoke. And that was the first time we realised what was happening to people whom we no longer saw.

Relationships with other people in the camp were impossible for us Italians. We spoke Italian - we couldn't speak Yiddish, German, or Hungarian. We Italians were so illtreated; because we couldn't understand, we were often slow in following orders and therefore we were beaten. We heard the guards shout,

"ITALIANS. DIE."

Many terrible things happened to us in Auschwitz but I must mention one that happened at Yom Kippur. Some of the men who were working in the toilets told us that the next day was Yom Kippur (1944). The Polish girls, the Kapos, who distributed the soup asked us on the morning of Yom Kippur whether we wanted the soup then or in the evening after the fast. We girls from Rhodes didn't understand what was happening and because we were very religious, we said we would have the soup after the fast. To punish us, we were given nothing to eat for 48 hours. Our soup was eaten by the others during Yom Kippur. 48 hours without food is a very serious matter. It was a madness to try to fast in Auschwitz.

The Kapo of my barrack was Rahela, the Jewish girl, beautiful but so cruel. There was no need for such cruelty. No German was watching us in the Barrack. I believe she was punished after the War. We saw the Germans only when we went out of the barrack to carry the stones. I never saw a German in my barrack.

So much happened in Auschwitz and even if everything didn't happen to me, I need to bear testimony to what happened to others. For example, one day the Kapo asked whether there was a pregnant girl in the barrack, in which case she would be given a double ration. Very kind! One girl from Rhodes was taken away. When she came back, thin, a black shawl over her head, she told me what had happened: she had been operated on, without an anesthetic, the foetus had been removed and put into a bottle and shown to her. She had not been closed up, so after a short while, she died from infection. Such things happened in Auschwitz.

A girl from Rhodes had, as her duty, to light heaters with petrol. She forgot to light one. The German came and asked who had been responsible and she was given 25 lashes on her shoulder. I saw her in Brussels in 1984. I hadn't seen her since Auschwitz. She told me that when she screamed from the pain of the lashes, the German saw her gold teeth and took something from his pocket and pulled out the teeth. When she cried out again, in pain, the German stamped on her feet with his heavy boots. This girl today lives in Toulouse.

Another girl, Mathilde, was one of twenty girls sent to a little river to do certain work. One girl ran away, was missing. Five girls had to be shot the following morning because the one girl was missing. Mathilde was one of the five. She told me her story in Brussels. Imagine how you feel when you know that you are going to be shot the next morning.

You're crying. In the morning the girls were lined up to be shot, the Germans were ready with their guns and suddenly the missing girl was found.

I was in Auschwitz from 16 August 1944 till after Yom Kippur. On my last day in Auschwitz, we heard there would be a transport. My sisters Sara, Miriam and I were naked and had to pass in line before Mengele. I passed, my sister Sara passed and then I turned my head and saw that Miriam had been made to stand in a line behind Dr. Mengele. Sara and I started to cry because we knew that a selection was being made. We continued to walk. We were in the street of Auschwitz, Lagerstrasse (in the camp but outside the barrack). We heard a voice from the men's side asking in Greek,

"Where are they taking you girls?"

We told them, "To the transport."

And the answer came back, "Poor girls!"

They knew we were being taken to the crematorium. We arrived at a big block (Birkenau). We were about 1 500 girls and we were given the order to undress completely. It was already late at night. One after the other we entered the barrack and there we were, awaiting the order to enter the gas chamber although we didn't know this at the time. Hours passed and about dawn we heard a voice, "Raus" and we dressed and we went out. We saw a train outside with dead bodies inside and we were put into the train with them. The train left Auschwitz. Afterwards we heard that we were the first people to come out of Auschwitz alive.

After two days and three nights, we arrived at Dachau. There were 84 girls from Rhodes and all were very sick. The German woman in charge asked me to take care of these girls. (I was not as sick as they were.) They led us to a sort of cellar (no windows with two benches on either side) and I managed to accommodate the girls like sardines. The place was filthy and we had nothing with which to clean it. With my hands I managed to clean it up as best I could. There was very little water, but the soup was a little better than the soup in Auschwitz. We had a slice of bread and a little bit of margarine. The German girl used to come every day and shout that if we didn't go to work we would have to go to the crematorium. How it was possible for such sick and weak girls to go to work, I don't know.

While we were at Dachau twenty of us were sent to clean the German barracks.

The snow was deep and we had a long journey. I took a blanket and put it on my shoulders. I had two left shoes. It was a calvary to walk. We arrived at a little hill and on this hill there were barracks. I heard an Italian voice saying,

"Here's an Italian girl."

These were Italian prisoners of war! They got permission for me to stay there. They dried my dress, gave me another blanket and something to eat and told me to have patience because the War would soon be ending. When I left, they gave me a packet of bread. I'll never forget these brave young men.

I had last seen my brother Leon on the train that took us to Auschwitz. He was 24. I found him at Dachau. I could hardly recognise him. He was very thin and sick. One day the girls told me that my brother was in a line moving out of the camp. I had the courage to jump through the wire and put my arms around him. He said "Look at my leg." It was gangrenous. He had spilled a barrel of soup over it. I told him to have courage because the War was coming to an end but he said that he had no more strength and had bad diarrhea. Later some girls told me that they saw his body lying in a camp near to Dachau (about a month later). He was my only brother. He was 24.

I can't remember exactly when we were taken by train to Bergen Belsen - probably about January 1945. Sara and I found Miriam there. She was already in a line going on a transport. When she saw me, she put her arms around me, and said that she would not leave me. I asked a girl to take her place. That girl survived; Miriam was a die at Bergen Belsen. That is what is called luck. Miriam was not well and was very thin.

All the German camps were terrible - they were Hell, they were Purgatory but for people to survive Bergen Belsen is a miracle. For me, Bergen Belsen was the worst camp. As the Germans realised that they were losing the war, they began to send Jews from all over to Bergen Belsen, hoping that they'd manage to get rid of all of them that way. Everyone in this camp was sick with typhoid or cholera. Every day, they died in their hundreds. We were covered with lice. Miriam had a very high temperature. She needed water, I took a tin to find water. What I saw as I walked to get the water, was unbelievably horrible. Corpses were piled up. I managed to get some water. Miriam washed her face, drank a little and kept the rest.

Before we went to Bergen Belsen, we were put into bunks. I had the sickness of the lager - I couldn't swallow. This was because there was no saliva. And on the third day, a Hungarian girl was eating an onion. Sara put a little bit of onion into the bread and at last] managed to swallow and so my life was saved. At Bergen Belsen there was no work - we lay there, sick, eaten by the lice. As Liberation was approaching (beginning of April 1945), they gave us no food for] 5 days. No food, nothing to drink. The block was full of girls dying. From these girls we heard the sound of dying. There was so much diarrhoea.

About 10 April 1945 we began to hear the sound of gun fire. The Kapos told us that within a few days the Red Cross would be arriving, that no one was to leave the barracks because if we did so we'd be killed, so everything was done in the barracks. On 15 April the first English tanks entered the camp. The soldiers had to wear masks because of the disease. For two weeks after the Liberation we remained in the same situation for the English gave us nothing. They said that those who could walk should walk to the Barracks. The sick would be taken by ambulance. I could walk, and I left behind Sara and Miriam, believing the promise that had been given about the ambulance. A month later,

my sisters had not yet arrived. Then Sara arrived with a bicycle and told me that Miriam had died. She had been given a bath in cold water and she had died from pulmonary pneumonia. I found it impossible to console myself. A girl of 21 who had witnessed the Liberation and yet died so soon afterwards!

For five months we were in Germany without any change in our circumstances. The British did not help us. In one of the camps (after Liberation) prisoners of war arrived. I met an Italian prisoner of war who took care of me - Enrico Marino. I always hoped to find him later but failed. Had it not been for Enrico, I would not be alive today. He wanted to marry me but he wasn't Jewish. I went, as his wife (as many girls did) to Rome. Of the 84 Rhodes Islanders who were in Dachau, only nine were left. Three of them were sent to Sweden by the Red Cross, two died there. With the help of Enrico, my sister and I arrived in Rome on 8 September 1945. We were put up at the home of a woman from Rhodes who lived in Rome.

In November, Sara and I returned to Rhodes because I hoped to get my job back with the Singer Sewing Machine Company. After a year I couldn't stay in Rhodes because of my health. We returned to Rome and from there we went to the Congo where we had a married sister who had been there since 1938. Sara took the plane to the Congo. I wanted to go by boat from Marseilles but I became so ill that I spent 2 years in hospital in Lyons. Only in 1949 did I get to the Congo. I worked for Singers. Then I went to Rhodesia because the climate in the Congo and the dust from the mines affected my breathing very badly. In Rhodesia I married. My husband was also from Rhodes but he'd come to Rhodesia in 1926. I married in 1951. I have a son. After 23 years of marriage, my husband died and because my son had come to South Africa, I came here in 1974.

I have been so disillusioned by life and people. I expected things to be better after the War but they have not been. I thought that, coming out of Hell, things would be better but look at the world today. There is no peace, there is always fear of the future. I can't sleep in peace because of nightmares. I remain very sensitive. I was not like this before the camps. I cannot bear it when I hear people say that the Holocaust never existed.

I often speak to people about my experiences. Some cry with me, some don't want to hear. If G-d made a miracle which enabled me to survive then I must give testimony. I must never forget and I can never forgive.

POST SCRIPT

In October 1994 I was invited to return to Rhodes Island to tell my story in a film commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the deportation of the Rhodes Island Jews being made by a Belgian film company, Les Films De La Memoires. It was an emotional experience revisiting my old home, the palace where we had been imprisoned and the harbour where cargo boats identical to those we had been transported on were moored. Rhodes was like a lost planet. The Jewish community have all gone, there are no familiar faces in the streets, the buildings in the Judairia are delapidated, the great synagogue damaged and barred. At times I was surprised that I had had the heart to relive my past

for the camera. I am happy I had the opportunity to participate in recording our experiences for future generations to see but it was hard.

Violette Fintz nee Maio was born In Rhodes on 15.9.1911 and educated at the Alliance Israelite Universelle Rhodes. She was a manager at the Singer Sewing Company until being transported from Rhodes by the Nazis. She was liberated in Bergen- Belsen on 15.4.1945. She subsequently spent two and a half years In the Congo, 23 years in Rhodesia and has been in South Africa since 1975. She is widowed and has a son Nissim Isaac.

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