

Learning from the Holocaust

LEAVING KRAKOW and AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU



Holocaust Education Trust Ireland

Contents

Reflecting on the visit 1

Auschwitz-Birkenau since World War II 2

Memoirs of Auschwitz survivors 4

The town of Oswiecim and its Jewish past..... 5

The Third Reich 6

The Krakow ghetto 11

Survivors of the Holocaust living in Ireland 12

Grodno, Byelorussia: A street in a shtetl 13

Letter from Mirele..... 15

The Butterfly..... 16

Europe – The number of Jews annihilated
by the Nazis in each European country..... 17



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Reflecting on the visit

Personal impressions

- What did you notice first on arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau? At Auschwitz I?
- Did your first impressions confirm your expectations?
- In what way is the site different from what you expected?
- How did being with a group affect your experience?
- How did the visit impact on you personally?
- What stands out in your mind and why?
- Was there a moment or place that specifically captured your experience of Auschwitz-Birkenau?
- How did you feel leaving the camp and starting your journey home?
- How did you feel a few days after the visit?
- In what ways will you express what you have seen and learnt?
- How has the visit influenced your understanding of the Holocaust?

Projects or activities to reinforce what has been learned

Many activities can be undertaken to reinforce what is learned from a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Invite the class or the whole school and perhaps the local community to view, attend or participate in projects such as:

- **Mark Holocaust Memorial Day, 27th January**
- **Visual displays – choose a theme**
- **Readings or poetry at assembly**
- **Essays**
- **Art**
- **Music**
- **Drama**

The Holocaust is unique – do not mix it with other genocides, with other atrocities or with other tragedies.
Each one stands alone.

Auschwitz-Birkenau since World War II

When the Red Army arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 1945, they destroyed some of the wooden barracks to control the spread of disease.

In June 1947, the State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau was created. It was run by a committee of survivors, to preserve it as a memorial to those who had been murdered and had suffered there. In the early years after the war, during the Communist era, the focus of the site was on the non-Jewish Polish prisoners who had died at Auschwitz. There was little mention of the fact that the majority of the victims were Jewish.

During the early 1960s, Auschwitz-Birkenau became an international symbol of the Holocaust. It was decided that the brick barracks at Auschwitz I should become national pavilions devoted to the different nationalities who died there. Although these buildings represented the international nature of commemoration, they were also seen as diminishing the enormity of Jewish suffering. Further controversy occurred when the Israeli building was closed by the Polish government after the Six Day War in 1967 and was not re-opened until 1978. The closure was said to be for renovations, but it coincided with anti-Jewish activity by the Polish government.

Conflict over the site has also developed with regard to religious representation. Although the majority of those who died at Birkenau were Jewish, the entire site is also seen as a place of Polish Catholic martyrdom (Auschwitz I primarily held non-Jewish prisoners). In 1984, the Carmelite nuns established a convent in the old theatre. This building had housed Zyklon B gas canisters during the war. It backs onto the camp and is close to the building where a Polish Catholic priest, Maximilian Kolbe, died. (He was canonised in 1982). Next to the convent a huge cross was erected, used by the late Pope John Paul II when he said mass at Birkenau. This caused offence to the Jewish community.

For Christians, the establishment of a permanent place of prayer at Auschwitz-Birkenau seems a logical idea. Within the Jewish tradition, however, a place of massacre can never house a sanctified place of prayer. Today the Carmelites have moved to another building outside the perimeter of the camp. The Papal cross has been left next to the old theatre and was the cause of further controversy in the late 1990s when over 300 small crosses were placed around it. Ultimately these were removed and taken to a nearby Franciscan monastery.

In 1989, on the eve of the fall of Communism, the Polish prime minister decided to change the way that the State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau was run. The old committee was replaced with an International Council. Its members include survivors and historians from Europe and Israel. The Council meets about once a year and is accountable to the Polish prime minister.

The work of the Council can be seen across the Museum. At Birkenau, headstones in languages of the victims, including Polish, Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino, have been erected on the sites. The Council has also encouraged the re-wording of the tablets on the main memorial at Birkenau to ensure that they now say that the majority of those who were murdered were Jewish.

The Council also discusses the role of conservation and what should happen to the site. The question of conservation is controversial. Not everyone is in agreement. Some would argue that the site should be allowed to disintegrate into the ground, whilst others suggest that conservation should be carried out on all the buildings. Some buildings have now been renovated so much that little of the original exists, especially the wooden buildings. The concrete posts holding the barbed wire around the camps have also been restored.



The State Museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau has an education department and runs courses for Polish teachers. One of the issues faced is that many teachers grew up in the Communist era, and their understanding of Auschwitz-Birkenau was coloured by the site being depicted only as a place of Polish martyrdom. In recent years, the Museum's education department has worked on educating teachers about the destruction of the Jews and the wider issues relating to the site.

The post-war history of the former concentration camp is both chequered and complicated. There are no straightforward answers to the question of how to treat a site of genocide.

How could this have happened?

Pastor Martin Niemöller was arrested in 1937 for preaching against the Nazis, and spent until 1945 in Sachsenhausen and Dachau concentration camps. After the war, he was instrumental in producing the 'Stuttgart Confession of Guilt' in which the German Protestant churches formally accepted guilt for their complicity in allowing the suffering caused by Hitler's reign. His famous response to a student's question: *How could this have happened?* serves as a constant reminder about racism:

*First they came for the Communists,
But I was not a Communist, so I did not speak out.
Then they came for the Socialists and Trade Unionists,
But I was not a Socialist or Trade Unionist,
so I did not speak out.
Then they came for the Jews,
But I was not a Jew, so I did not speak out.
Then they came for me,
But by then there was no one left to speak out for me.*

Memoirs of Auschwitz survivors

Primo Levi

With the absurd precision to which we later had to accustom ourselves, the Germans held the roll-call. The officer asked 'Wieviel Stück?' The corporal saluted smartly and replied that there were six hundred and fifty 'pieces' and that all was in order. They then loaded us on to the buses and took us to the station of Capri. Here the train was waiting for us with our escort for the journey. Here we received the first blows: and it was so new and senseless that we felt no pain, neither in body nor in spirit. Only a profound amazement: how can one hit a man without anger?

There were twelve goods wagons for six hundred and fifty men; in mine we were only forty-five, but it was a small wagon. Here then, before our very eyes, under our very feet, was one of those notorious transport trains, those which never return, and of which, shuddering and always a little incredulous, we had so often heard speak. Exactly like this, detail for detail: goods wagons closed from the outside, with men, women and children pressed together without pity, like cheap merchandise, for a journey towards nothingness, a journey down there, towards the bottom. This time it is us who are inside.

It was the very discomfort, the blows, the cold, the thirst that kept us aloft in the void of bottomless despair, both during the journey and after. It was not the will to live, nor a conscious resignation; for few men are the men capable of such resolution, and we were but a common sample of humanity. The doors had been closed at once, but the train did not move until evening. We had learnt of our destination with relief. Auschwitz: a name without significance for us at that time, but it at least implied some place on this earth.

From: *If this is a Man* by Primo Levi, published by Abacus, UK, reprinted 2005

Primo Levi, from Turin in Italy, was arrested and deported when he was in his early twenties. He spent about 14 months in Auschwitz and survived to be reunited with his family after the war. He died in 1987.

Kitty Hart-Moxon

I lived through Birkenau without ever understanding how any members of a great nation could indulge in such wickedness. Not only that, but deliberately set about contaminating everyone else too. For that was a part of their policy: to turn their prisoners into beasts and then turn those beasts against one another. Only afterwards did I read the full history of those years and still I cannot fully understand. As it is barely credible to someone like myself who lived through the worst of it, perhaps I ought not to be surprised at members of a younger generation who cannot believe it happened at all. But I did live through it; and I do know it happened.

From: *Return to Auschwitz* by Kitty Hart-Moxon, published by House of Stratus, 2000

Kitty Hart-Moxon grew up in the town of Bielsko, 15 miles from what became Auschwitz-Birkenau. She survived numerous camps and death marches with her mother. She was a teenager when she was imprisoned at Auschwitz. Kitty lives in London.

Gina Turgel

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. They came out of a hut on our left hand side, playing their instruments. I remember thinking: "this is like a madhouse." It was too sweet, too good. I was suspicious because I felt that the sweetness of the music was likely to signify a brutal act. 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 dehumanised.

From: *I Light a Candle* by Gina Turgel, published by Grafton Books,

Gina Turgel was born in Krakow in 1923. She survived Plaszow, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen. Gina lives in London.

The town of Oswiecim and its Jewish past

Oswiecim today is a town with a population of 40,000. It is located on two rivers, the Sola and the Vistula, and on a major railway junction, where the lines converge from Warsaw, Berlin, Prague and Vienna. Most people have probably never heard of the town of Oswiecim, but most will be familiar with the Germanised name of Auschwitz. For over 60 years, the inhabitants of the town have lived alongside its former camp whose name has become synonymous with the Holocaust.



Oswiecim, like most other towns in Poland before the war, had a Jewish community that could be traced back to the mid-15th century, when the Jews were allowed to settle permanently. From that time onwards, the Jewish community flourished, erecting its first synagogue in 1588. By the twentieth century, the Jews were integrated into local life and were involved in the local council. The community was vibrant, and there appears to have been little antisemitism. When a new priest arrived in the town, the local rabbi greeted him and declared that the Jews and Catholics should work together. Before World War II 60% of the population of Oswiecim were Jewish.

Between the wars, brick-built barracks were constructed on the edge of the town. These buildings were put to different uses by the Polish government. Some were used to house Polish refugees and soldiers of the Polish army, whilst others were used by migrant workers. Later, it was these same barracks that formed the main camp of Auschwitz I.

In September 1939, within weeks of the Nazi occupation, the town's main synagogue was burnt down, and those Jews involved in the town council were removed from their positions. By the end of October, the entire administration was replaced by a Nazi one, including a Nazi mayor. Within a year, Himmler had ordered the establishment of the concentration camp in the town, making use of 300 local Jews as slave labourers in the conversion work.

During the war, an exclusion zone surrounded the camp, and many of the local population were forced out of their homes. In the first 'resettlement' in June 1940, some 500 locals were arrested, half of whom were sent to labour camps in Germany. At other times, families were evicted, and their homes were taken over by the SS. These 'resettlements' took place on a number of occasions. Other locals in the nearby village of Brzezinka were evacuated to enable the building of Auschwitz II, Birkenau.

Since the war, the inhabitants have had to deal with the economic problems and the stigma of living in a town associated with genocide. Economically, the town gains little. As the majority of visitors stay in Krakow and visit the museum on day trips. Recently, one of the town's former synagogues has been restored, and it is now a Jewish education and information centre.

The museum itself is run by an International Council and supported by the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. It recognises the difficulties for the locals and tries to discuss renovation and conservation plans with them. Today, Oswiecim is dealing with its difficult past, but the demands of modern living mean that it is rarely far from controversy.

The Third Reich

The Holocaust took place across Europe but emanated originally from Nazi Germany. To understand how it began we need to discover what life was like under the Nazis for Germans who were not Jews or Gypsies, left-wing, homosexuals or Jehovah's witnesses. Was it a reign of terror with everyone too frightened to stand up for what was right? Was Nazi propaganda so persuasive that there was no dissent? We need to begin by analysing what the Nazis offered the German people, and ask whether antisemitism was core to their appeal, or incidental. How much did people know about the T4 Euthanasia Programme? What was the impact of the Nuremberg laws of 1935 on the general population? How did Germans react to Kristallnacht in November 1938?

Rise of the Nazis

- Treaty of Versailles
- Imposition of liberal democracy
- Weimar Republic
- Economic crises across capitalist world
- Political crises in German government

Life in the Third Reich

What historians suggested in the decades after the war:

- That people were generally too terrified to do anything to challenge the Nazi regime – that any challenge was brutally suppressed.
- That the Gestapo were everywhere.
- That Nazi propaganda was so subtle and persuasive that it overcame all opposition.

Recent research has challenged the idea that much of the Nazi terror had been carried out in secret. It has been revealed that the German people knew about the secret police and about concentration camps – they were supposed to know!

With the appointment of Hitler as chancellor in 1933, he and his Nazi party were able to exploit the mood in the country. Solid German citizens, not just Nazis, were disillusioned with the failed experiment of the Weimar Republic that had promised a free, democratic society. They were fed up with what they saw as the decline in 'German moral values' and the level of crime and decadence. In the prevailing atmosphere of the early 1930s, the Nazis had little trouble in acting decisively against democratic and liberal activists, outlawing the Communist Party, trade unions and other political opponents. In general, the German people were pleased that the Nazis were eliminating certain kinds of people from their society.

Initially, the Nazis implemented a reign of terror. However, once the main opponents of the regime were imprisoned or murdered, or had fled, terror was no longer required to keep most people in line. The Nazis gradually took over all aspects of people's work and social lives, charity and sports clubs, children's organisations and women's networks.

Propaganda

Nazi propaganda was not crudely forced on 60 million German people. On the contrary, it was designed to appeal to them and to match up with everyday German opinions. It was meant to be attractive and convincing, and was an indicator of what people sincerely hoped to be true. They wanted an end to unemployment, to crime and to perceived 'decadence'; they were told that was what they were being offered. In exchange, they abandoned their own moral barometers.

Nazi propaganda, was a serious business. Hitler devoted two chapters in *Mein Kampf* to propaganda in which he stated that it should be simple, repeated constantly, although not in exactly the same way; also, it had to be one-sided. Above all it had to appeal to people's emotions.

Hitler's rhetoric appealed to the anxieties and hopes of most Germans. They liked what they heard and became instrumentally and emotionally invested in the Nazi dictatorship. On balance, most people seemed prepared to live with the idea of a surveillance society in return for stability, crime-free streets, the promise of an improved economy and restoration of moral and civic order.

Goebbels was appointed Minister for People's Enlightenment and Propaganda in March 1933. However, he was not the only leading Nazi to be responsible for propaganda. Hitler gave his subordinates overlapping areas of responsibility, so leading Nazis were always watching their competitors and jealously guarding their power.

The working class

In the years after the World War I, sections of the German working people were very radical, active in trade unions and left-wing political parties. The Communist Party was one of the largest political groups. The level of repression adopted towards the working class by the Nazis in the first months of the Third Reich meant that expressions of hostility were voiced less readily and more carefully.

Work programmes were popular with the public because unemployment figures appeared to drop dramatically. Initially, people were delighted to have work again. This was an illusion. Work schemes forced people to take jobs which were short-term, poorly paid and under bad conditions.

The nature of industrial work and the existing traditions of class consciousness prompted an increase in active dissent and opposition. The Nazis knew that working-class dissent potentially endangered the stability of the regime. In 1938, Hitler banned any rise in food prices because of its likely effect on morale. In late 1939, an attempt to cut wages and abolish bonuses was abandoned after protests by workers and the threat of strikes in industrial regions. It seems that when galvanised, the working people of Germany could still organise and assert their power. Rising levels of employment, albeit with lower wages than in the mid 1920s, reassured some.

For others, government schemes such as building the motorways, promises of a Volkswagen (people's car) for each worker, and Strength Through Joy holiday schemes were enough to keep them happy.

The lack of organised opposition must be due to the fact that most of the time workers didn't feel the need to challenge the regime. They might have resented working conditions, living standards and the corruption of bosses backed by the might of the State, but they engaged in work excursions and outings to concerts organised by the Nazi Party, they welcomed the return of the Rhineland to Germany, and they were pleased that the Olympics were held in Berlin in 1936. To many, Adolf Hitler was a great leader.

Some of the political and social certainties of working-class behaviour were changed by the Third Reich; older loyalties were disrupted by massive turnover of workers during wartime, as workers were sent to the front and slave labourers arrived to replace them. One effect of Nazism was to influence the breakdown of traditional working-class solidarity and replace it, especially among younger workers, with the individualistic, performance-related attitudes to work which were generally seen in the post-war 'economic miracle'.

The middle class

The middle class in general wanted a stable and trouble-free life. For them, the price of a perception of lower crime, the removal of street people and Roma, and the challenge to the Trade Unions was worth paying. They didn't mind the loss of certain freedoms. Where there were lower-level rivalries, as with academics, lawyers and doctors, the removal of Jewish 'rivals' was seen as a positive step.

Farmers

Farmers expressed discontent about labour shortage and about the intervention of the Reich Food Estate in marketing and production. But they did not object to the help received from the Nazis, who supplied slave labourers from across occupied Europe.

Academics and teachers

In response to the Nazis' expulsion of Jewish academics from their posts at universities, some academic rivalry was removed, and academics rushed to join the Nazi party.

The rich

Who funded Hitler? The Nazis offered an end to the fear of a Bolshevik revolution, still prevalent in the imagination of the very wealthy who had come from Russia in 1917. Although the best remembered attempt on Hitler's life came from the ranks of the upper classes – the July 1944 bomb plot – life for the very rich was generally better under the Nazis than it had been in the Weimar Republic. Their property was safe, their investments not under threat.

Women

Was the Nazi regime's attitude towards women just a question of *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* (children, church, kitchen)? Did this policy apply to women from all social groups? Were women happy to give up their paid work and return to home and hearth?

Nazi ideology viewed the family as a place of comfort from the complexities of daily life. The Nazi regime had a more clearly defined and more self-conscious attitude towards women than perhaps any other modern government, a strangely protective attitude. Women were seen as wives and mothers – policies for women were policies for the family. At a Nuremberg rally in 1934, Hitler said that the big world could not survive if the small world (the family) was not secure. Keeping the home and family was the women's role in the Third Reich, until there was a shortage of labour once the war had started – then the propaganda had to change to incorporate the need for women to return to paid work.

Children, young people and students

The Nazi 'product' was very clearly aimed at young people. Youth groups offered activities and fun, and an image of independence from parents. Boys in the Hitler Youth and girls in the BDM (*Bund Deutsche Mädchen*, League of German Girls) were encouraged to inform on parents and teachers – a task they adopted with enthusiasm. Outdoor pursuits and craft activities initially mirrored the Scouting movement but became increasingly militaristic for the boys and emphasised racial purity and preparation for motherhood for the girls.

However, there was some opposition from groups of teenagers, including the Edelweiss Pirates who broke up Hitler Youth camps and the Swing groups who listened to American music. The Nazis were worried by these groups and set up concentration camps for young people. Eventually, some students formed opposition groups – most notably the White Rose Group – which were ruthlessly destroyed.

The role of Antisemitism

Antisemitism was a central issue for Hitler and the Nazi leadership, who had little trouble rousing antisemitic activity through stirring pronouncements or the possibility of an antisemitic riot. This provided activists with a channel to let off steam. However, it couldn't be relied on to mobilise the masses. Unlike the leaders, initially the German people were not particularly interested in nor troubled by the Nazis' anti-Jewish policies. They didn't really care what happened to the Jews.

1935 Nuremberg laws

Posters of the Nuremberg laws were displayed everywhere from park benches to private and public buildings. This challenges the claim of German people who said after the war that they knew nothing about the Holocaust; they may not have known everything about the Final Solution, but they were aware of the steps towards it.

Euthanasia Campaign

One of the first and most extreme measures of extermination introduced by the Nazis during the early years of the Reich was the T4 Euthanasia Programme. It was established on Hitler's orders to kill people with mental and physical disabilities, whom the Reich claimed were a burden on the state. This programme provided the prototype for broader genocidal actions. The physicians in the T4 Programme first experimented with gas vans, later developing gas chambers disguised as shower houses. The programme was discontinued in 1941 due to public outcry led by the Catholic Bishop of Münster, Clemens August von Galen, and the T4 Programme officially ceased operation after 70,000 victims had been murdered. However, the programme continued clandestinely and it is estimated that some 200,000 disabled persons were put to death by the Nazis. The doctors and nurses who trained on T4 were transferred to work in concentration and death camps as the Holocaust developed across Europe.

Kristallnacht – the night of broken glass

In November 1938, Herschel Grynszpan, a Jewish student in Paris, assassinated the third secretary of the German embassy, Ernst vom Rath. In retaliation, or as an excuse, the Nazis launched *Kristallnacht* – The Night of Broken Glass – on 9 November 1938. This orchestrated pogrom resulted in hundreds of synagogues, Jewish homes, schools and businesses being smashed and burned to the ground throughout Germany. More than one hundred Jews were murdered. The German people stood by and watched this take place before their eyes; few raised a hand or a voice in protest. German Jews who had hoped the Nazi regime would be short-lived now realised that they were not safe, and many tried to leave. However, it was clear since the Evian Conference of July 1938, that the rest of the world did not want to offer asylum to Jewish refugees. Most of the Jews of Europe were trapped.

Conclusion

Any sympathy for the Jews or anger at the events of *Kristallnacht* came from intellectuals and from some Catholic churches. 'The road to Auschwitz was built by hate but paved with stones of indifference' (Ian Kershaw). Worse than people being indoctrinated by Nazi propaganda into becoming ideological antisemites, was the fact that they so easily condoned barbarous discrimination and persecution. They witnessed what was happening to the Jews right in front of their eyes, in their villages, towns, streets and workplaces.

The Krakow ghetto



...Heavy freight trucks arrived at the front gates. The crowd swayed, rose from the ground. People squeezed through the open gate. SS men standing in the passage yelled like maniacs, kicking and pushing people to the exit. Cries of the separated children and screams of the parents froze the blood in the veins. Children were left in their carriages to meet an uncertain fate. The parents accurately guessed what lay in store for them. The shooting did not stop for one moment. Time and again, a new group of Germans led children to the courtyard of a building ...a series of shots left no doubt what happened there. People fled the ghetto in a rush. They would quickly climb into the trucks because the SS men standing by were beating them mercilessly....

The square was emptied. The liquidation of the Cracow ghetto was drawing to an end. In the Plac Zgody, as on the battlefield – thousands of bundles, luggage was left behind, and, here and there, small children played on the asphalt wet with blood...In the pools of blood were mired bundles, packages and parcels of food prepared for the last journey. Next to them were discarded items of religious ritual wrapped in velvet – prayer books, kittel (prayer gowns), and prayer shawls, strewn about by the Germans looking for treasures.



Ghetto Heroes Square in Podgórze, a symbolic monument devoted to the Jews of Krakow. Photo by Piotr Trojanski.

The ghetto died, and it would seem that this was the last act of the tragic drama. However...

From: *The Cracow Ghetto Pharmacy* by Tadeusz Pankiewicz, Holocaust Library

Survivors of the Holocaust living in Ireland



Suzi Diamond

Suzi Diamond was born in Debrecen, Hungary, and was with her mother and brother on the last transport to leave Hungary in 1944, which, miraculously, was diverted from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen. Her mother died just after liberation. Suzi was a very young child when she was found with her brother, Terry, by Dr Bob Collis, who brought them back to Ireland where they were adopted by a Jewish couple, Elsie and Willie Samuels. All of the rest of Suzi's family perished in the Holocaust.

"My brother passed away a few years ago. Now there are only a handful of us Holocaust survivors living in Ireland. Apart from my personal loss, Terry's passing underlines the importance of telling our story to the next generation. It is important that we pass it on to our children and our children's children."



Tomi Reichental

Tomi Reichental was born in 1935 in Piestany, Slovakia. In 1944 he was captured and deported to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp with his mother, grandmother, brother, aunt and cousin. Tomi was just 9 years old when the camp was liberated. 35 members of Tomi's family were murdered in the Holocaust.

"In the camp I could not play like a normal child, we didn't laugh and we didn't cry. If you stepped out of line at all, you could be punished and even beaten to death. I saw it with my own eyes."



Jan Kaminski

Jan Kaminski was born in Bilgoraj, Poland, in 1932. When he was 10 years old, he managed to escape a round-up of the Jews and fled, leaving his family behind. He survived the war on his wits, running errands, working on farms and even becoming a mascot of the 21st Artillery Regiment of the Polish army. Jan lost most of his family in the Holocaust.

Inge Radford

Inge Radford was born in Vienna in 1932, one of ten children. She now lives in Millisle in Northern Ireland. She lost six members of her immediate family in the Holocaust.

"Five of my family were spared the unspeakable ordeal of ghetto living, imprisonment and violent death. That we five grew into relatively unscarred and useful citizens was due to many people – Jewish and non-Jewish – who minimised the trauma of family separation and loss for us and for hundreds of other refugee children."

Grodno, Byelorussia: A street in a shtetl



Suddenly, all those places where Jews had lived for hundreds of years had vanished. And I thought that in years to come, long after the slaughter, Jews might want to hear about the places which had disappeared, about the life that once was and no longer is.

Yad Vashem



Photograph: Peter Thorpe

Letter from Mirele

Dear Readers,

Miracles happen – my mother’s letter stayed with me, sewn into my undershirt and I am getting old myself and have decided to share it with you. After almost fifty years of keeping it private, why did I translate it from the Yiddish and decide to share it with you now? A few reasons...

Firstly one doesn’t hear much about the Holocaust anymore very much these days. There are even those who claim it was made up, not true, a brilliant Jewish ploy for sympathy. My mother asked me to remind you that it wasn’t “just a war”. It was a monstrosity.

Secondly, my mother’s faith in G-d, even at that dreadful hour, never ceases to amaze me. Even though she was almost certain that she would soon die, as indeed she did, she believes firmly in G-d to whom she can turn both before and after her earthly life ends. This strengthens my faith and perhaps it will strengthen yours.

And lastly – I know I’m from a different generation. Nowadays, I’m told, all mothers work. But sometimes I look out my window and see little children, just two years old. That’s how old I was when my mother was forced to give me up to strangers. And I look out my window and see these two-year-olds cry because they want to stay with their mothers, but their mothers are putting them on the bus because they want to be free of them – and sometimes it doesn’t seem right.

You mothers who are lucky enough to have babies – raise them too. Don’t throw them out before they’re ready. Don’t leave them before they’re ready. Go now. Rock them in the sunlight. For my mother.

Miriam bas Leiba

(in my mother’s letter, she didn’t leave her name, but I always think of her as Leiba – “Love.” I’m lucky. Many of the children rescued with me don’t even know their own names.)

This authentic document is reprinted by courtesy of Rabbi L.D. Sandler and Gila Sandler, Brooklyn, NY.



The Butterfly

The last, the very last,
So richly, brightly, dazzlingly yellow.
Perhaps if the sun's tears would sing
Against a white stone...

Such, such a yellow
Is carried lightly 'way up high'
It went away I'm sure because it wished to go
Kiss the world good-bye.

For seven weeks I've lived in here,
Penned up inside this ghetto
But I have found what I love here.
The dandelions call to me
And the white chestnut branches in the court.
Only I never saw another butterfly.

That butterfly was the last one.
Butterflies don't live in here,
In the ghetto.

*Pavel Friedmann,
murdered in Auschwitz, September 1944, aged 17*



Europe – The number of Jews annihilated by the Nazis in each European country



The white figures on black relate to the approximate number of Jews that perished in each European country between September 1939 and May 1945. The total of just over 5,750,000 does not include thousands of infants murdered by the Nazis in late 1941, before their births could be recorded. Thousands of people from the remoter villages in Poland were added to the deportation trains which left larger localities, without any record of their existence or of their fate.

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