

Auschwitz Liberation: Remembering to Never Forget

Jan. 27 is the day most of the world observes Holocaust Remembrance Day. It is the date in 1945 on which Auschwitz was liberated.

Auschwitz is one of the more well known of the Nazi death camps, where more than 1.1 million people, mostly Jews, were murdered in the most inhumane and systematic way. But there were many more concentration camps and death camps in which the most of the remaining six million were murdered.

The further it gets from 1945, the harder it is to remember individual stories of the survivors. Though we know the horrors they endured, hearing them in person is an invaluable way to remember, and never forget. During the recent snowstorm that Israel went through, a neighbor who sits near me in synagogue commented in passing that while on the death march in the winter of 1945, being forced by the Nazis to flee in advance of the allied troops, all he had to eat for 10 days was snow. He survived to build a family in Israel and share his testimony. Six million others didn't, 1.5 million of which were children.

Though only one uncle and cousin of my father survived, the Holocaust has always been deeply personal. I have stories, and photos, of my relatives who were murdered, and transmitting these to my kids is a responsibility I do not take lightly.

The following excerpt is from "Hidden," a memoir of the survival of a brother and sister from Kanczuga, Poland, the town in which my paternal grandmother's family once lived for generations. Their account of life in Kanczuga and their lives in hiding is deeply personal. I hope to add a moment of meaning and a personal reflection on the Holocaust for those

who read this, and for future generations, even if it is only those who are my own descendants.

I share this account both because it is personal and vivid, and also because, while I do not know the Rosens and did not know their family, the life and murder of their relatives as noted here were lived, and ended, in the same way as my grandmother's family.

In the event that one day someone should ever doubt the veracity of these accounts, I take the liberty of sharing something that is also deeply personal and connected to my own family in Kanczuga, and the recount below. In the early 1990s, I became president of the First Kanczuger Society, a *Landsmannschaft* (welfare and cultural associations for Jews from cities, towns and villages throughout Europe and Russia established to provide fellowship and support for émigrés, survivors and their descendants) established by my great-grandfather, Shalom Yakov Birnbach, in 1901.

In the course of meeting several of the members who were born in Kanczuga and who remembered my family, I got to know Benny Shanzer (Yankele Kelstecher*). Benny shared with me that when my father came to the U.S., Benny got him his first job. And Benny also remembered my great-grandmother, Dreizel Hamel Birnbach, who he credited with saving his life. As Jews of Kanczuga were rounded up to be murdered, Dreizel turned to Yankele and said, "You're too young." Yankele knew that meant they were going to be murdered and used this as the impetus to escape, and survive, as is recounted in passing below (*).

I have never been to Kanczuga and can only imagine what life was like there before 1939. My sense is that there was a great sense of community. This sense of community was what motivated my great-grandmother to inspire Yankele to save himself. It is what brought Yankele, Bernie and Yehuda to come back to Kanczuga in April 1945 to bury the seven Jews murdered in a pogrom after the War ended and to protect the survivors. It is

what made it second nature for Benny to help find a job for the grandson of Dreizel who saved his life when he arrived in the U.S. as a new immigrant himself. It is what lives in me, and makes it my responsibility to recount, to never forget.

In addition to six million Jews who were murdered, this week I remember relatives who neither I, nor my father, ever met. They were murdered as per the scene that is recounted below, with their neighbors witnessing it all standing by as spectators, on a hill on the outskirts of Kanczuga. I remember my great-grandparents, Shalom Yakov and Dreizel Birnbach, their children, sons and daughters in law, siblings, cousins and grandchildren who were murdered in a hastily dug ditch in the summer of 1942. I also remember the relatives on my grandfather's side whose names are not all known. While the account below is not about them, their lives were lived alongside those who are mentioned, as were their lives taken from them in exactly the same way.

May we, and the generations that follow, always remember to never forget.

Hidden – Fay Walker and Leo Rosen

Prologue 1942

"We were hidden in the countryside by the time the war flooded the streets of tiny Kanczuga, until the screams and bursts of gunfire were as familiar as the cries of the peddlers hawking their wares in the rynek, the town's main marketplace. More than a hundred of our people were executed at point blank range in front of the Brill's house. Then early one morning, two young SS men, ably aided by the Polish police, rounded up the hundreds of Jews who had not managed to hide themselves in time. The officers deposited them in the main square, where they stood in shocked silence, some of them still in nightclothes, shivering in the sparkling dawn.

Now the police herded their prisoners past the jeering crowd

and in to the synagogue. Our people struggled to stare straight ahead, but, as they trudged the dusty streets, they found themselves peering into the faces they had known all their lives, into the flat features and pale eyes of their closest neighbors, empty and cold as death.

Kanczuga's newest synagogue was a good quarter mile from the Jewish cemetery on the edge of town. It was not quite complicated, but already it was the pride of our community, a spacious sanctuary large enough to seat several hundred people. That Shabbos, every inch of the shul was filled for the first time. Yet it was eerily quiet, the low murmurs punctuated only by the occasional barking of a policeman.

Our family, apart from the two in hiding, filled the floor by the eastern wall. Tata's brother David sat with his wife and three of their five children, Aron, Runie, and little Golda, named after our grandmother. The other two children had been on vacation with their mother's parents and had already been captured and sent to Siberia.

Wordless and watchful, our Tata fingered a pocket of his long, black coat and stroked his beard. Beside him, Mamche, her face raw from weeping, rested a delicate hand on one of my sisters' shoulders. Now and then she whispered to little Tunia, who was serious even in the best of times. The child's face, olive-skinned as a Gypsy's, glistened with tears. Pretty Senia, Aryan-blond and almost a teenager, seemed out of place in this group of frightened Jews. She scanned the wan faces, searching for friends from school.

With so many bodies huddled together, the room was close with the odor of human flesh. People slept standing, straight as sentries; others twisted into unnatural positions on the floor. At some point, rain tapped a somber staccato on the roof and windows.

A poor tradesman, reverential and cowering, broke off from the

crowd to consult with Tata. "Do you think they'll deport us instead of killing us? Maybe send us away and spare our lives, God willing?"

Our taciturn father shrugged and shook his head. "Who is to say?" he asked. "I have heard that the families who didn't come to the square to be picked up were shot in their homes. We can only wait and put our faith in God. God will provide for us. God has never forsaken us."

Like everyone else, my parents had come to the shul without packing a bag. But my best friend, Bruchcia Laufer, whose family had been temporarily spared because they were engineers still useful to the Reich, visited every day with supplies. That Friday morning, she brought two white Shabbos candles. The crowded room was hushed now, as Mamche lit the trembling flames. For a moment, her face was illuminated, as if from within. When she said the bracha (blessing), her shimmering soprano could scarcely be heard, so quickly did it make its way to God.

Blessed are You, oh Lord our God, King of the Universe, who commands us to light the Sabbath candles.

Shabbos morning arrived warm and bright, but the synagogue was musky with fear. Several men began to daven, and Tata joined them in prayer, swaying back and forth to the familiar chants. Mamche, as a woman forbidden to pray with the men, hummed the wailing nigunim under her breath, her voice sweet and smooth as her homemade jam, her pitch never wavering.

The families were still praying when the police ordered them to leave their families and trek the short distance up the hill to the cemetery. Mamche gripped the girls harder, her fingers digging so deeply into their flesh that they squirmed, but they did not break away. Our father, never a demonstrative man, reached for our mother's hand. The gesture was so unexpected that she met his eyes with a smile. Then the butt

of an unseen rifle knocked Tata squarely between the shoulder blades, and he flinched and moved on without speaking.

They traveled a short distance in wagons. A boy named Yankele Kelstecher jumped out of his wagon and disappeared into the woods before the policemen could fire.(*). Then the men were ordered out of the wagons. Perhaps the thought of Yankele gave the men strength as they climbed in a thin, halting line along the muddy path that wove through a cornfield. They passed a scarecrow, mocking in unfettered repose. At the crest of the hill was the tree-lined cemetery, its tombstones swathed in even rows of shrubbery. As if on command, the men paused to catch their breaths and to wipe their brows. They gazed out over the crest of the hill to the patchwork of fields below. For a moment, they forgot their terror and shook their heads at the lush landscape. It could not be helped; they loved this country.

A straight-backed officer handed out shovels and told them to dig. "Keep digging," he said. "We'll tell you when you're finished."

Most of the men were spindly and weak, with soft palms more used to the Hebrew siddur than to the spade.

"Dig, keep digging! Thought you could get away with something, eh? Thought you could hide from us, you filthy Jews?"

When at last they were allowed to stop, the men stood in silence beside the freshly dug earth. Their faces slick with tears and sweat, they stared at the raised rifles in astonishment. At eyes opaque as marbles, that didn't look back.

Then they saw the other eyes, those of their neighbors, the customers in their shops, the people to whom they had just last week sold a loaf of bread, who gave them a good price on chickens and eggs. The goyim stood or sat on their haunches in unruly rows alongside the policemen. Whole families, with

baskets of cheese and bread and homemade wine, little ones scurrying along the fringes of the crowd, hunting down field mice. The chattering spectators were in an edgy, festive mood, the women's heads bobbing in their colorful scarves.

"Zyd!" they cried. "Jew! Out with the Jews!"

The policemen raised their rifles. One hundred hearts were broken before a single shot was fired. When it was over, the audience applauded and cheered.

The next day, the sunlight was so fierce that the women shielded their eyes when they were led outside. They climbed through the tall grass directly to the pit, as if they had done so many times before, their children sobbing at their skirts. A fetid smell they did not recognize reached their nostrils, and they covered their faces in horror.

When the policemen loaded their rifles, Senia clutched Mamche's waist. "I don't want to die!" she cried. "The sun is shining so brightly, and I am so young, Mamche. I want to grow up in this beautiful world."

For the first time in Senia's life, our Mamche could do nothing to help. She could not hold her any closer; she could not love her any more. One policeman who witnessed this scene was so moved that, later, he would recall Senia's words to the Kwasniaks, who had worked for us back in town.

Then a bullet shattered our little sister's face, and she collapsed at Mamche's feet, spraying blood on her new white shoes. Next, Tunia dropped onto Senia, her breath a shallow purr. Even before the third shot was fired, our mother fell on them both, trying to protect what was no longer hers. Beside the gunmen, the onlookers, some of whom had tied handkerchiefs over their noses to stave off the scent, clapped and shouted their approval. A burst of laughter skimmed the crowd. Neighbors clapped each other on the back, not quite meeting each other's gaze.

Jonathan Feldstein is the director of Heart to Heart, a unique virtual blood donation program to bless Israel and save lives in Israel. Born and educated in the U.S., Feldstein emigrated to Israel in 2004. He is married and the father of six. Throughout his life and career, he has been blessed by the calling to fellowship with Christian supporters of Israel and shares experiences of living as an Orthodox Jew in Israel. He writes a regular column for Charisma's Standing With Israel. You can contact Jonathan at firstpersonisrael@.