

The Holocaust: Remember to Never Forget

As millions of Jews observe Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, on April 8, I want to share with you a remarkable story—an excerpt from *Hidden*, a memoir about 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. Through this, 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.

Jews observe Yom HaShoah on the 27th of the Hebrew month of Nissan. Two weeks ago, per the appointed time in the Bible, Jews celebrated Passover, the festival of our freedom and redemption from slavery in Egypt.

We end Nissan with memories of the horrors that we endured in recent generations. In Israel, already beginning the week before, TV, radio and print media will be filled with stories of survivors who are still alive to share their stories. High school students make regular pilgrimages to Poland to bear witness to the killing fields in which our people were slaughtered.

Even for Jews of Middle-Eastern descent who lost nobody in this greatest crime the world has ever seen (though suffered no shortage of discrimination and murder in their own former lands), the Holocaust is part of our national psyche. On Yom HaShoah itself, air raid sirens will sound for two very long minutes across the country, bringing cars and public transit to a standstill, stopping business meetings, pausing lessons throughout our schools and halting every form of commerce as

we stand, silently, at attention, wherever we are in silent reflection and prayer.

In an era of growing Holocaust denial, threats from Iran and others to incinerate Israel and the aging of the remaining survivors whose personal experiences will one day only be a distant memory, 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 place and 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, along with 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 kinship 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. Benny also remembered my great-grandmother, Dreizel Hamel Birnbach, who he credited with saving his life. As the Jews of Kanczuga were being 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 just in passing below.

I have never been to Kanczuga and can only imagine what life was like there before 1939. My sense is that just as in any community, there were rivalries and differences within the

community, yet there was nevertheless 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.

In addition to 6 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 but whose lives must be remembered nonetheless. 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 (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 into 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 (Sabbath), 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* (synagogue) 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* (pray), 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* (tunes) 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* (prayer book) 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 in 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.