

HOLOCAUST MEMOIR DIGEST

Author: Bertha Ferderber-Salz

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Title: And the Sun Kept Shining . . .

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Focus:

A woman survives in Poland and reclaims her two young daughters from hiding; the events take place between September 1939 and 22 October 1946.

Features:

Foreword Written by Menachem Z. Rosensaft.
Photographs Family photographs.
Documents The "Aryan" birth certificates of her daughters.
Maps Map of the Cracow region.
Afterword Conclusion written by the Author.

Contents: (by topic, with page numbers)

Pre-war Jewish home and community life

(201) Her grandparents in Rzeszow: "They had both died at a ripe old age, my grandfather at the age of ninety-six and my grandmother at ninety-seven, after having been happily married for seventy-seven years."

(204-5) Life in Kolbuszowa revolved around the water pump.

(214-17) The history of the pearl necklace heirloom: "Once our mother said to us, 'The pearls are not very valuable in money terms, but in our family they serve as a guarantee of the continuity of the generations.' "

(219-20) Memories of her home, 36 Starowisla Street, Cracow, a glimpse of life before.

The coming of war

(19-24) September 1939, Cracow is bombed, the family flees eastward, to Lvov: "The Germans would not get as far as Lvov, surely." First night in Bochnia, then on to Pilzno to friends where they rest, then to Rzeszow: "After a week of wandering we arrived in Lancut The Germans had already arrived."

(25-7) In Lancut: "The Nazi plague had spread to every side and there was no point in attempting to flee from it." They decide to return to Cracow; they obtain false documents and travel for five days and nights on the train.

Life under German occupation

(27-9) "My husband returned to his place of employment; a Nazi commissar had already taken over there." Salaries are cut, food prices go up, refugees crowd in, the Jewish quarter of Podgorze is searched: "Only the devil himself could have thought up deeds such as theirs."

(37-40) Forced labour, 1939-1940: "My husband had to report each day for work . . . even though he received no salary. He was also required to clear the snow and ice from the streets on alternate days. Since he could not be in two places at once I went in his stead to do forced labor, cleaning Cracow's main street, together with other Jews."

(46-8) Health care and hope: "Having no alternative, I wrote down the names of medicines for easing pain I knew that the medicines I had written down would not harm them, even if they did not help."

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Life under German occupation

(103-4) Refugees flood into Cracow at the beginning of the war: "There was not a single Jewish house in the city that did not take in a refugee family. . . . At the end of 1940 it was the turn of many of Cracow's Jews to begin wandering"

(105, 108-11) Life as refugees in Grodzisk: "The first words my younger daughter learned to say were 'Germans' and 'hide'."

(112-13) The blindness, the indifference of a nation, the Germans.

Creation of the ghetto

(30-2) Podgorze Ghetto of Cracow established, the end of 1940: "Before the war 3,000 people had lived there, and now they wanted to crowd in four times as many. Everyone knew what this decree meant: epidemics, hunger, poverty, and in addition a high wall all round, like the walls around old Jewish cemeteries, symbolizing the situation of the Jews who were being buried alive."

(32) Summer 1942: "They announced that . . . ghettos would be allowed to exist in five large cities: Warsaw, Cracow, Lvov, Radom, and Bochnia."

(41-2) They move into the ghetto, but she and her sister move with their five children to the village of Grodzisk; her husband and his parents remain in the ghetto.

Daily life in the ghetto

(67-8) March 1943, surviving the liquidation of the "little ghetto", she finds work preparing the houses for their new Polish occupants: "We had been given the task of erasing every trace of the Jewish children who had lived their miserable lives in these houses."

Resistance, ghetto revolts, individual acts of courage and defiance

(31) Resistance in Cracow alluded to: "But our heroic youth began as well to organize an underground resistance movement."

(33-6) Leaders Drenger and Liebeskind organized the Cracow underground; rabbis' blessing: "We must ask God to give us the strength to die bravely so that the generations to come can be proud of us."

(43-5) Ten-year-old daughter Rachel saves the family's sacred books from the book-burning, Grodzisk.

(49-50) Summer 1941, Grodzisk, she learns of important information: "All I wanted was to get away from my house as quickly as possible and run to the forest so I could pass on the information to the partisans."

(75-6) A "beggar" in the cellar of the building where the girls are being hidden worked for the resistance.

(87) Resistance by workmanship defects, Plaszow: "I decided to wage my own personal war against our oppressors and to undermine their war effort. . . . Not one pair of pants left my workbench without a serious defect made by me in some hidden part."

(91) "My husband worked gladly and devotedly for the resistance, and it was his task to supply the organization with paper and printing services for the underground news sheet that was published in the ghetto."

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Resistance, ghetto revolts, individual acts of courage and defiance

(93-4) She finds a way to make matzos in Plaszow, March 1944: "As a result there were Jews in that hell who ate unleavened bread, the symbol of our emergence from slavery to freedom, on Passover."

(135) Auschwitz "efficiency" compromised by revolt: "through an act of sabotage".

(143-4) Spiritual resistance to their fate: January 1945, Bergen-Belsen, a Hungarian woman remembers Shabbat: "It is our duty to praise God at all times and in every place. God hears our prayers, even when they are said from the deepest pit. And even if He does not come to our aid, there are other Jews in the world for whom we should request a good week."

Partisan activity

(48-50) In the woods they meet two partisans: "Our encounter with the partisans had encouraged us. We had seen for ourselves that there were people fighting our oppressors, trying to destroy them with every weapon they had." She is able to pass on helpful information to them.

Deportation

(31) "Suddenly there was a new concept in the ghetto: 'resettlement' (deportation). . . . The deportations continued from the first to the eighth of June, 1942." (to Belzec)

(34, 36) 28 October 1942 deportation from the Cracow ghetto (to Belzec), among those who are killed, the poet Mordechai Gebirtig, whose ". . . poems of the ghetto survived and reached freedom", and the painter Abraham Neiman, whose ". . . paintings were burned along with the ghetto"

(54-7) August 1942, deportations from Grodzisk to Belzec: "When the bitter day came and all the Jews were ordered to assemble in the marketplace, we knew what it meant."

(58-9) Cousin Lola's 10 October 1942 letter, Lubaczow: " 'On one of the hot summer days a transport arrived from Cracow and Wieliczka. There were eighty people crammed together in each carriage, and they begged for a little water for the children. Since I live near the railway station I see the convoys of miserable people, and my heart bursts with pity. I heard their pleas, took a bucket of water and managed to reach the carriages. Of course the (Gestapo) saw me. I knew that was the end but wasn't at all afraid.' "

(132-3) From Plaszow to Auschwitz by train, end of November 1944.

(140-1) Nine days train journey, Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen, December 1944.

Specific escapes

(51-3) Summer 1941, arrested for sending food parcels to her husband in Cracow: " 'Don't you know that you violated German law by sending the parcels?' " She is freed after interrogation at Gestapo headquarters in Jaroslaw.

(117) Released from the prison in Plaszow: "A senior officer entered, and I explained to him that we were being held for a minor offence. We had to get up early the next morning in order to work To my immense surprise he listened to what I had to say and released us."

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Stories of individuals, including family members

(39-40, 56-7) Her sister Feiga contemplates suicide. She and her husband and one son die in Belzec: " 'Our fate has been sealed. We go to meet our death without fear or dread. Our suffering is coming to an end. But you, my poor sister, are going into the unknown.' "

(61, 69, 82-4, 178) Nephew Romek hidden with a Polish carpenter, survives surgery, his secret identity intact, finds her at Bergen-Belsen.

(60) Cousin Lola in Lubaczow reports in a letter: "She wrote that the son of my oldest sister, a young man of twenty-two, had jumped off the train taking them to Belzec, together with a relative of ours from Grodzisk. They hid in her house and then went to the forest, hoping to join the partisans, but were caught and shot."

(70) "I looked back for the last time at the ghetto as it emptied. I saw a little boy of about three walking along a deserted alley, crying and calling for his mother. A murderer in SS uniform silenced him forever with one shot from his pistol. Later I met the child's mother in the camp but did not dare to look into her eyes. Her sobs echo in my ears to this day."

(70-1) Neighbor's daughter taken out of hospital, carried to Plaszow, liberated at Bergen-Belsen.

(89-90, 178) Cousin Abraham, 13, hides as a member of the Hitler Youth, is liberated by the Russians, finds her at Bergen-Belsen after the war.

(87, 90-2, 95-7, 134-5) May 1944, her husband is deported to Auschwitz; in the ghetto he had worked for the resistance: ". . . the ability to continue the struggle had left him." His death in Birkenau (Auschwitz II) is confirmed: "They had been taken straight to the gas chambers."

(106) Reb Tuvia survives an attack by "two murderers": "He regained his strength and by the irony of fate was as healthy as he had always been when he was killed in the gas chambers of Belzec."

(114-17) Olga the dancer, Mira the puppeteer, Steffa the artist find outlets for their pain, Plaszow.

(118-26) The workers in the sewing workshop, Plaszow; Gisa and Benek in the camp; Gusta and her husband; Mekhlovitz finds his place.

(157) Her sister-in-law survives to liberation: ". . . but could not take the liberation itself." She dies two weeks after.

(197) Nineteen-year-old Simon returns to Grodzisk, she is told he: " '. . . hid in the surrounding forests and returned to the village immediately after the liberation. His parents "heirs" shot him, fearing that he would demand what they had stolen.' "

(210-11) Rabbi Menashe Levertov, rabbi of the remaining Jews of Cracow helps her: "Each time I felt despair getting the better of me, I hurried to the rabbi's house to hear some encouraging words."

(212-13) Two weddings in Cracow 1946: "My heart bled at the thought that I would have to take the place of mothers, aunts, sisters, relatives, and friends at the marriage of two people who were the sole survivors of large families."

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In hiding, including Hidden Children

(54-6, 60-1) August 1942, hiding with a peasant to avoid deportation, Grodzisk: "The peasant remained firm; he was not going to risk execution to save us. In the end he agreed to a compromise: he was prepared to conceal one of us and one alone for a few days in his neighbor's attic. There were five of us."

(62-3) Disguised as a sick Pole she returns to the ghetto. Mrs. Lublin retrieves her niece from her hiding place in Lezajsk.

(61, 69) Nephew Romek hidden with the Polish carpenter, the Lublins; her girls taken out of the ghetto by Polish protectors, before ghetto liquidation.

(69) Before they are moved to Plaszow, she sends her daughters into hiding: "I do not know from where I drew the strength - maybe because of the one thought that kept going through my mind: We have nothing to lose."

(73-8) Children's life in hiding with Poles; she tries to protect them, although she is in the Plaszow camp; sees them from a distance, summer 1943: "For a moment our eyes met. How can I put into words what went through my mind during those seconds."

(78-9) Her friends Rushka and Halina help her to reconcile giving up her daughters to save them: " 'Your daughters need you. Some sixth sense tells me that they will survive, and they are going to need you so much after the years of suffering and fear.' "

(107) Children robbed of their childhood: ". . . the fact that I had to leave them when their lives were in constant danger tortures me still today."

(178-80) She finds her daughters after the war. At night the younger one kneels down in prayer: "Their rescuer stood in the doorway, a smile of satisfaction on her face. 'You see,' she said to the kneeling child, 'because you asked the Virgin Mary to help you every night your mother has been saved and has come back to you.' "

(183-8) Her difficulties to retrieve the children from their Polish rescuers: " 'The children have to be educated among their own people, with their family.' "

(199) Reb Moshe's daughter in a Christian orphanage, protected from her past she grew up: ". . . without knowing that she was Jewish." Grodzisk.

Righteous Gentiles

(54, 60, 64-6) "Our benefactor, the teacher Sigmund Szeliga, was different from the others and acted without asking for payment. . . . When I met him again after the war, he still spoke with deep regret of the failure of his plan to save us."

(61) Mrs. Lublin from Cracow: "That good woman was a support to us throughout the war. In our darkest hours she was our salvation."

Witness to mass murder

(37-8) Refugees from the area move into Cracow during the winter of 1939-1940, live in schools and synagogues. One spring night they are taken away: "I ran to the synagogue and found it deserted. Clothing, utensils, and rags lay on the floor. It looked as if the people had not even had time to pack their belongings properly. In the dead of night they had been taken into the unknown."

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Witness to mass murder

(72-3) Liquidation of the ghetto in Cracow, March 1943: "As we walked to work we would encounter wagons piled high with corpses. We realized the liquidation of the ghetto was continuing. The victims, whose blood flowed onto the road, were being taken to a mass grave at the new cemetery near the Plaszow camp."

(95) The patients in the camp infirmary are all killed except: "My husband and the other survivor had been the only ones not suffering from an infectious disease, and for that reason had been left behind."

(96-8) Children in Plaszow coaxed out by deception, taken by truck to Auschwitz with those who had not passed the selection, 13 May 1944.

(99-102) The "eternal flame" at Plaszow, which "kindled human bodies": "It was situated at the foot of a hill on the outskirts of the camp, and Jews who had been caught on the 'Aryan' side and Polish resistance members were taken there and burned."

(131) Plaszow, autumn 1944: "Only a few thousand people were left in the camp, the rest having been taken to the various sites of destruction. We continued taking bodies out of the mass graves and burning them."

(132) Plaszow liquidated, those remaining are loaded onto a train: "The first carriages went to Stutthof, near Danzig. The train reached the seashore, and the people were put on ships, which were sunk in mid-ocean." The last carriage goes to Auschwitz.

(137) In Birkenau (Auschwitz II): "We were forbidden to be outside when the people were being taken to the incinerators from the nearby blocks. Only yesterday the block beside us had been full of gypsies; today it was empty."

(143) In Bergen-Belsen: "It was clear to us that this was where we were to end our lives. Our murderers had condemned us to a slow death, without using ovens or poisonous gasses. They did in fact achieve their aim, for hundreds of dying women occupied the wooden bunks in each block."

(148) Hauling garbage, Bergen-Belsen, spring 1945: "On our way to the mill pit we passed the crematorium. This was the first time I ever saw the entire building; before I had seen only the smoke."

(149) Death by running, Bergen-Belsen, spring 1945: ". . . they would take groups of people out of the camp and make them run across plowed fields for days on end until most of them collapsed from exhaustion and sank into the muddy ground. Only a handful survived this immense effort and returned to the camp."

Slave labour camps and factories

(31) "Workshops were established in the ghetto, where we performed manual labor for our oppressors. Jews sought ways of becoming useful and necessary in order to save their lives."

(33, 36) Plaszow under construction, 1942.

(68-9) Niece Sabina already at Plaszow, then: "One day the order came through: the ghetto was to be liquidated, and all the Jews were to be transferred to the Plaszow camp. The order also included a statement to the effect that old people and children would be taken elsewhere."

(72, 86-7) March 1943, arrival at Plaszow; smuggling of extra food for her husband and niece Sabina.

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Slave labour camps and factories

(80-1, 131) Amnon Goeth's torments and tortures in Plaszow; his excesses, his greed.

(83-5) No longer being sent out of the camp to work, she still finds a way to maintain contact with the outside.

(94, 96) May 1944, selection at Plaszow of 1,600 by Dr. Blanke from Auschwitz, among them, her husband.

(118-19) Labouring in the sewing workshop, Plaszow: "There were eight of us Each day we had to sew sixty-four items - that is, every one of us had to produce eight pairs of pants."

(127-30, 132) Torturers add to hunger, cold, Plaszow, 1944: " 'Finish it up,' he bellowed. . . . More than twenty women from our group went without food that day, and that girl almost died from overeating."

(131) Yom Kippur: Kol Nidre in Plaszow, 1944: "We had threaded the needles of the sewing machines and placed cloth underneath them, so that everything would be ready if we had to jump to our places if surprised at our prayers."

Concentration camps

(141) Entrance to Bergen-Belsen: "Immediately upon our arrival we were given rusty bowls and spoons. Each of us tore off a strip of cloth from her dress, passed it through the handle of the bowl and hung this priceless jewel around her neck. We had learned to appreciate the value of eating utensils."

(142) "When we reached Bergen-Belsen, at the end of December, the camp was full to overflowing. Until there was room for us in the blocks, we were accommodated in tents outside the camp. . . . One night the wind blew the tents away Many among us did not live to enter that 'paradise' called Bergen-Belsen"

(145-7) Forced labour at Bergen-Belsen: sorting the stolen property, "Each time we touched these objects we felt as if their owners' souls were fluttering beneath our fingers, bemoaning their bitter fate." Hauling carts of garbage: ". . . considered a good place to work, as from time to time one could find among the garbage a piece of potato peel, which the women ate hungrily."

(148-50, 154) Beatings and tortures, Bergen-Belsen: "We waited for the fateful shot, but none came; they were not going to waste precious ammunition on us."

(151-3) Delivery of her "last bequest": two potatoes. Lying with the sick and dying: ". . . the transition from life to death was almost imperceptible and unimportant there." Bergen-Belsen, spring 1945.

(155-6, 160-1) ". . . our emaciated bodies like fleeting shadows on the walls." Gaining strength, "organizing" food and clothes, and "hygiene".

(158-9) " 'Are children born in this hell?' " Bergen-Belsen, winter 1945.

Death camps

(40, 57) Her sister, brother-in-law, and one of their son are taken to Belzec: " 'You took our money but did not give us refuge. At least go after the convoy and find out where they are being taken.' . . . A week later he returned with the information that all the convoys were being taken to Belzec."

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Death camps

(57-60) August 1942, area convoys taken to Belzec; October 10 letter from cousin Lola in Lubaczow, reprinted.

(92) Her view of the purpose of all of the various camps: ". . . all the camps had one aim and one alone: to put us to death in a variety of ways."

Auschwitz-Birkenau

(133-6) Entrance to Birkenau (Auschwitz II): "When we entered the block we found hundreds of women there, their heads shaven, staring at one another. We were all unrecognizable. We looked terrible, even more ghastly than death itself."

(137-40) November, December 1944, in Birkenau (Auschwitz II), hunger and cold: "Auschwitz had deprived me of fear and of the will to continue the fight."

Liberation

(15-18, 165-6) Liberated at Bergen-Belsen, May 1945: "In the camp there were almost sixty thousand people struggling with death. Our liberators could do little to help us, for how could they breathe life into living skeletons?"

(162-4) A block supervisor taken prisoner by an English soldier, Bergen-Belsen: " 'I'm taking her round the camp, collecting evidence from survivors.' I told him everything I knew about her, about the torments, humiliations, and distress we had suffered from her."

(167-8) With a Canadian Jewish soldier's help, she contacts her brother in New York: "A week later he brought me a reply from my brother in New York. The rumor about the letter that had arrived from overseas spread like wildfire through the camp. There was a great commotion, as it was the first letter ever to reach our closed and enclosed community."

(168-78) August 1945, she decides to return to find her children. She and her niece Sabina make the perilous four week journey to Cracow to retrieve the children.

(189-95, 200-8) After finding the children: "For weeks and months I wandered the length and breadth of the Cracow region in search of my relatives. I found no sign of life, and nearly all trace of the dead had been wiped out too."

(196-8) In Lezajsk she overhears a discussion on the murder of nine Jews who had returned: "The customers in the inn were divided into two camps, one of which claimed that the right thing had been done. . . . The other group maintained that . . . they should have been informed that they had better leave, and only afterwards, if they had insisted on remaining, should they have been killed."

(209-11) She takes out birth certificates for the children: "I wanted the children to revert to their previous identities, with their original surnames, leaving their false identities behind with their foreign names."

(221-4) Her three-week return from Cracow to Bergen-Belsen, spring 1946.

Displaced Persons camps

(170) Used for safe passage on her journey from Bergen-Belsen to Cracow.

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Displaced Persons camps

(225-6) March to June 1946, in Bergen-Belsen and Zeilsheim: "New life had been breathed into the walking skeletons I had left behind me when I went to Poland, and a vital Jewish community had been established."

Post-war life and career

(228-33) From Bergen-Belsen to Paris, and on to her brother in America, on the "Isle de France", arriving in New York on 22 October 1946: "How could we adapt to being among people whose flesh had not been scorched by the fires of hell?"

Personal reflections

(18) "Maybe it was the ancient precept 'And you shall tell it to your children' that impelled me to tell the world what the Nazi beasts of prey did to us. Perhaps this is the price that those of us who survived the fires of hell are required to pay."

(9) From Menachem Z. Rosensaft's Foreword: "It is generally forgotten by these so-called 'experts' on the Holocaust that the survivors are the only ones who can discuss the experience from a personal, authentic perspective. It is their words which must form the basis for any historical understanding of the event."

Places mentioned - in Europe: (page first mentioned)

Akra (173), Auschwitz Main Camp/Auschwitz I (16), Belsen/Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (15), Belzec death camp (40), Berlin (174), Bochnia (20), Cracow/Krakow/Krakau (19), Dabrowa (190), Danzig/Gdansk (132), Debica (190), Frankfurt-on-Main (188), Grodzisk (41), Görlitz/Zgorzelec (185), Helmstedt (223), Jaroslaw (51), Jaslo (101), Jaworow (201), Kolbuszowa (203), Lancut (22), Le Havre (229), Leipzig (223), Lezajsk (60), Lodz/Litzmanstadt (28), Lubaczow (57), Lublin (30), Lvov/Lemberg/Lwow/Lviv (19), Magdeburg (174), Mielec (191), Montelupich Prison (Cracow) (35), Nowy-Sacz (70), Oswiecim/Auschwitz town (44), Paris (228), Pilzno (21), Plaszow slave labor camp (33), Podgorze (Cracow) (27), Potsdam (174), Przemysl (42), Przeworsk (200), Radom (32), Rawa-Ruska (201), Reinharz (170), Rozwadow (193), Rzeszow (22), Stalowa-Wola (193), Stutthof/Sztutowo concentration camp (132), Tarnopol (65), Tarnow (21), Wannsee (174), Warsaw/Warszawa/Warschau (32), Wieliczka (58), Zeilsheim Displaced Persons camp (225)

Places mentioned - outside Europe: (page first mentioned)

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