A Holocaust Survivor's Story

We were taken to the Miskolc ghetto, where we stayed for three weeks. They separated the men from the women. I told my husband, "I have a feeling that whatever happens, it will be very bad. So wherever they take us, you go back to Miskolc and I'll go back to the city." I had a feeling that I'd never see him again.

We were smashed into trains like animals, without food or water. After three days, we arrived at Auschwitz. In the same train was my father-in-law, mother-in-law, my sister-in-law, my husband's sister-in-law with her two babies, six weeks and two years old. We were starving. It was hot, stinking, no food. You couldn't go to the washroom. Outside, all we saw was trees and forest.

When we arrived in Auschwitz, we were so happy! Anything was better than the train! Suddenly, we see fences all over. We see SS men and soldiers and Jews in striped uniforms. The Jews ran to the trains and cried "Give the kinder to der mamas!" But why? Why should we give the children to the grandparents? They had come to tell us that if we gave the children to our mothers-in-law, like my sister-in-law did, we would be saved. And the old women went to the gas with the children. If the mothers held on to their children they would die with them.

There was Dr. Mengele, in his white gloves — a beautiful soldier. Left-right, left-right, his hand waved. We had to run — no time to look or talk. Thousands of people!

We came to Birkenau and were deloused. They shaved my hair and gave me a striped outfit, no underwear. I did not know then that right was life. I heard after the war that a train with my mother and sister arrived on the same day as my train from Miskolc. She was only twenty-five, and was begged to give up her year-old baby, but she would not do it. So she went to the left with my mother.

We were sent to barracks of five hundred women in Auschwitz. Older inmates told us, "You just come from Hungary? Look how fresh and healthy you are! You see that smoke there? That's your parents and sisters and brothers and children! They are dead!" "What? Are you crazy?" we asked.

It had been so hysterical when they shaved us. They put brown hair in one pile, black hair in another. I don't know what they did with it. There we were, naked. And we looked into each other's eyes — that was the mirror. We looked and we started to laugh! We looked like idiots! Like monkeys! It was so terrible, and it was still funny.

I found out I was pregnant, in my fourth month. I didn't know, since no woman had a period at Auschwitz. And after four months, I felt something moving inside me, and I said to myself, "My God — I'm pregnant!" This was the worst possible thing, because every day I saw what happened to pregnant women. I already knew it meant death.

I didn't show until the fifth month, but I knew that every day I was waiting to die. Because one of these days they are going to catch me. And the hunger. There was no food. I begged for more food, and someone who knew I was pregnant would have mercy, and sometimes I'd get a peel of a potato. Each day's food was a tiny bit of margarine and a bit of bread. In the morning, black coffee. At night, soup.

I had been told, if they ask for a number of women to go on a transport out of the camp, to volunteer. And so, after about a month, they asked for five hundred to go to Plasow, another camp. It had been built in a Jewish cemetery.

BY MIRIAM ROSENTHAL

It was a horrible place. People worked on mountains, like slaves in ancient Egypt, carrying stones. When we arrived a Polish Jewish Kapo named Henry Reisfeld said to me. "I can use twenty women. I will save them in my barrack for work." He had been in the camp for three years already. He was unbelievable. I'd ask him, "Why are you helping me like this?" And he said. "You look like my daughter so much — she was killed here. I'll show you the grave." He survived the war — he wrote me right after. He knew I was pregnant and he got me food — bread, more bread, anything he could. But we didn't stay there too long, maybe a few weeks. It was terrible there, but still better than Auschwitz.

One day he told me. "We got an order; you must go back to Auschwitz. Don't go back. We'll be liberated soon by the Russians." I told him that I wasn't staying. I would go back with the rest of the girls. I wasn't going to leave my friends and my cousin. And so we were shipped back to Auschwitz. He ran after our train with a pail of water throwing it onto the train. Again, selections. Again, Mengele. Left. Right. And already he was selecting weak ones and strong ones. Or those who looked pregnant. I was pretty far — my fifth or sixth month, already showing. And in front of me was my first cousin, who wasn't even married! Mengele called to her in German "You are a pig." She replied "No, I am not a pig." "Yes you are, and don't you dare talk back to me. You go to the left." And he sent her to the gas. Me, he let go. "I can't believe it," I told the girls. I was expecting to die.

Two weeks later, I was put on a transport to Augsburg, in Germany — a Messerschmitt airplane factory. Everyone was so happy! A factory! Better than Auschwitz! And this was the first time we saw other people — Germans. Political prisoners from Holland, Belgium.

Deportation to Auschwitz during WWII **Photo: Nazi files**

We got better food than in Auschwitz. We were still hungry, but it was better. The political prisoners were allowed to go and live in the city at night. The Jews were kept in the barracks. I worked next to a Christian communist. All day on the machine, to help build airplanes.

One day, as I worked, two SS men came in to look closely at every worker. One said to me in German "You pig woman! What are you doing here! You are pregnant? Let's go! Where? Back to Auschwitz." I said good-by to my friends, who were crying. But it was a relief. I couldn't care anymore. Thank God the suffering would be over. And the fear of what would happen to the baby. But my husband didn't even know that I was pregnant! There was no one there to help.

So they put me on a passenger train. This was December, 1944. I had on big wooden shoes and no stockings, and it was snowing. The two soldiers were very decent. They knew the war was coming to an end. They bought my ticket. I had a classy trip! There were civilized people sitting all around me, and I still didn't have any hair, and I was pregnant, and I looked crazy.

People kept looking at me, and the two soldiers went out to smoke. And a German lady said. "What is happening here?"

"Don"t you know?" I said to her. "I'm Jewish. They're taking me to the gas, in Auschwitz. Don't you know what is happening to the Jewish people?" She said she didn't, and was so concerned that she opened her purse and took out a piece of bread and handed it to me. The other people were all staring. They really didn't know. They were polite to me.

The train stopped after a few hours, and the men said, "Let's go. Get off the train." "What happened?" "They bombed Auschwitz. You won't be going to the gas now." "Where are you taking me?" "To Landsberg."

It was a special *lager*, a horrible camp where they worked people to death. They handed me over like a parcel, giving my number, and they left. The work camp was called Kaufring. The same setup. Barbed wire. Electrified fences. No Mengele. I saw men and women in different parts of the camp, with only barbed wire between them. Skeletons. They could hardly work anymore. An SS woman took me to a cabin. My God, what I see in this cabin!! Six other pregnant women like me! I went hysterical crying, "Why are you here?"

They called us the Pregnancy Commandao. Every day we worked. But we had food. The Germans knew they had lost the war. They wanted to use us as alibis — that they didn't kill infants. So we worked every day. I was in my eighth month. It was bitter cold. We worked in a laundry, to wash lice out of prisoners' clothes and hang them out to dry. Some days we had to carry dead bodies in a

wagon, dump them in a big pit, and the SS would dump lime on them.

The women started to give birth — first one, then another. I was the last, the seventh. I helped the first six into the world. The midwife. There was a doctor, a Jewish prisoner. But he was skin and bones. He had been a gynecologist in Hungary. One day the SS brought him to us "He will be your doctor!" We started to laugh. He couldn't even stand up. He should help us? After the SS left the doctor said, "Children how can I help you? I have no strength left. I'm dying!" He was about fifty-five and looked terrible.

him — he was a little Aryan! I had a very difficult delivery. The doctor told me "Miriam I'm trying everything. I can do nothing more. Only God can help you."

Finally, my son was born. I didn't even know, on the other side of the electrical fence, where the men were, they were praying all night — psalms — for me. The whole night. Because they heard the screaming from me. I was so overwhelmed by pain, when the men yelled out, "Do you know what day is today — the day you had the baby? It's Purim! It's Purim!"

But then I was very sick. The placenta

engine and the first two cars filled with Jews. We kept waving frantically: we are not Nazis! We are Jews! But how could they see?

The train stopped, so we thought the war was over. I tied Leslie to my neck with a piece of cloth and I jumped from a high trestle. It was near a forest, near Dachau. I ran toward a village, and a peasant woman threw bread to me.

All of a sudden, the Germans shot at us, and began to force us back to the train. I had put Leslie by a tree trunk and covered him with leaves and my body. There were bombs falling and the Germans were

German-Jewish Refugee Children arriving in Great Britain before World War II

Photo: Yad Vashem, Israel

David, who was the Jewish Kapo in the kitchen, he saved our lives. He used to hide meat under the coal in a pail. He told us "Look, you have a doctor now. I'm going to fatten him up so that he should have strength to help you have the babies!" So he snuck extra food to Dr. Vadasz. He survived the war; I sent him clothes then, and wrote to him. He soon after passed away. But then the doctor said, "I have no needle, no medicine, no nothing! No diapers! No soap!" But David once stole a sheet, which he tore up for diapers.

One day, he came in with an SS man. He had been a teacher. And he wept and said, "Look, I'm an SS officer. There is no excuse. I know I am going to die. The Americans are very close. But please believe me — I have children at home, too." And under his coat, he had pieces of rags, soap. Two or three times he did this.

The doctor delivered each of the babies. I was very sick. Leslie was ten pounds — and with all that lack of food! I had forty-eight hours of labour. He was a beautiful baby with blonde, curly hair and blur, blue eyes, and the SS men went crazy over

stayed in. I got fever and was unconscious. My friend who delivered six weeks before me — she now lives in Brazil, and came in for my son's wedding — she nursed Leslie. She saved my son's life. She told me later that she didn't think I would survive, so she had decided to adopt him.

And then the order came that the Americans were coming, and we had to evacuate the camp. We had to go to Dachau — to the gas — with our babies. So they started to empty the camp, but they couldn't take me, because I was so sick. Four soldiers lifted the bed and began to take me to the infirmary. But as they were walking, I started to hemorrhage, and the whole placenta came out. They ran to Dr. Vadasz, who made a cleaning.

I felt better. Leslie was being nursed by my friend. I had one more camp to go to — Dachau. We walked and walked. I had little milk and Leslie began to lose weight. We were put in an open cattle-car in April, 1945.

We saw airplanes and bombs falling. They thought we were Germans! They bombed our trains — they blew up the

shooting... we were led back to the train. They brought a new engine and we continued toward Dachau.

Dachau is a city, and we went through it, in our open car. The train stopped in the middle of the city, across from apartments. We were held up because they could not gas the Jews fast enough — so many were being shipped in from across Europe. So we had to sit and wait. This was already early May. And the baby was hungry and I was hungry and I had very little milk.

Ever since Leslie was born, I had such a will to live again! I had a child, I must take him home, I must save him. He was beautiful! And he never cried. It's as if he knew that he was not supposed to cry. Somehow he knew.

So I got off the train. People cried out: "They are going to shoot you! The war is almost over!" But I said, "I don't care! I have no milk and my baby is hungry." And I left off the train with Leslie. It was daytime. I crossed the street, went upstairs into an apartment building, knocked on the door. A German woman opened the door. "What do you want?" "I'm hungry.

I need milk for my baby. We are Jewish and we are going to be gassed."

She almost went crazy. And I'll never forget that in her hallway there was a long mirror. It was the first time I'd seen myself since before the deportation from the ghetto. I had a little bit of hair. She quickly got a piece of bread and a glass of milk. She knew what was happening, since she must have seen all the trains filled with Jews every day going to Dachau. Where could they have been taking them?

I came back to the train with Leslie. The women were like animals, grabbing the bread from me. A man — a dentist — from our town —a skeleton, came to me and begged for a piece of bread. I gave him my last piece. He survived the war.

Then the train started to go. We got into Dachau at night. There was shouting and yelling and screaming: "Free! Free! You are Free!" It was American soldiers who had broken in. At four in the morning, dead bodies everywhere, chaos and American soldiers. We were screaming. One American gave me a little prayer book — I never part with it — it's in my purse even now.

The Americans wanted to take away the babies with their mothers to a home, to keep us strong. I didn't want to go. I said, "No, I want to go home as soon as I can."

One day I walked through the barracks and my husband's cousin recognized me. "Miriam! My goodness! What happened! Whose is this baby?" I told him. "Are you hungry?" he asked. "I'm going to bring you a chicken!" He wrung the neck and plucked it and cooked it and brought it to me. He laughed, "Nice and kosher — you can eat it!" Whenever I see him nowadays, he says, "Remember the chicken?" Who cared if it was kosher or not kosher, as long as you had food?

They drove me in a jeep with a doctor and a nurse from Dachau to Prague. Then I went again in a train — on the top of a coal wagon. Can you imagine? I was nursing and not nursing. I once went to the engineer and got hot water for the baby.

I finally arrived in Komarno. My brother had survived a forced labour camp. He didn't recognize me, and didn't know I had a baby. He took me back to what was left of our family home. Russians lived there —Russian soldiers.

The cousin who I met in Dachau went home before me and he met my husband. He told him, "I met your wife. She's coming home with the baby." And he said, "Yah? What baby?"

Bertha Katz working with welfare children in Frankfurt on Main, 1927

Photo: Courtesy Bertha Katz

"Your Baby! He looks like your father — exactly! It's a beautiful baby!" My husband told him, "You're crazy!" Then he realized that I had probably become pregnant. He said, "Maybe a German soldier. Maybe she was made pregnant by a Nazi." It did happen in the war, of course.

And he started to walk. I don't know how many days, but he walked all the way to my city, Komarno. There was no train. His shoes were completely gone from walking. He had been in a slave labour camp during the war. Until the moment he came to my door, I didn't know he had survived. He knocked and there I stood. He just cried and cried: "He looks like my father." I told him, "You know he has your ears." One of Leslie's ears is bent, just like my husband's. Our reunion was unbelievable.

We wanted to start living like normal human beings. We had thought that after what had happened the world stopped, and everyone would be crying for us. But the Hungarians would say, "Oh look! We thought you wouldn't come back." Or, "Look — more came back than went!" Things like that. We came home broken in body and broken in soul, and that was the welcome. One day I saw a woman wearing my mother's coat walking down the street

I wrote to my sister in Canada. They wrote back. We had to go to Cuba first. Canadian immigration wasn't open yet, and the United States wouldn't give us a permit to stay temporarily. We had stayed ten months in Paris waiting for papers, and then ten months in Havana. Then we were congratulated by the Canadian consulate: "Good luck!"

First we were in Timmins for a year, where my husband served as rabbi. From there, we went to Sudbury. We stayed sixteen years. We came to Toronto sixteen years ago, and we opened Miriam's Bookstore.

Leslie has a Ph. D. in organic chemistry, and works at Honeywell. He is married with two girls and a boy. Lilian is thirty-two, has a teaching diploma, and has taught kindergarten. Murray is doing his Master's in medieval Jewish history at McGill. He is single.

I tell you, Canadians don't appreciate where they are. To be here in this blessed country — nothing else but freedom! They don't know! To be free; to walk in the streets; you can go to synagogue, do whatever you want, speak your mind. You don't have to worry. What it means to be a person — to live like a human being! People have to learn to appreciate Canada. We have to be thankful every day we are here.

I have nightmares. Not often, but I have them. I feel that I can't find my baby Leslie, and we have to run. Again we are in the trains.

My daughter asks me, "How can you divide yourself and live still like a human being?" And I answer her, "I have to cope. You live, you work, you don't think about it." I very seldom tell my story. And this is but a nutshell of what happened.

I used to feel guilt. Not any more. Why me, I would ask, why did I come home, and not my mother, who was such a pious, honest Jew? Why me?

And the whole question comes up, about religion: why am I still religious? I am asked. And I tell them, "I brought a son back from Hell — how can I not believe in God?"

This article is excerpted from "We the Living," Alan M. Gould, Toronto Life, *(November 1981); it was reprinted in a North York Board of Education book* The Holocaust *and appears here by permission of the author.*