



## Ella Adler Z"L

The wind gently rippled the face of the American flag while tears blurred my vision. I listened as my four-year-old daughter, Diane, pledged allegiance to America in Geneva, Switzerland, on July 4, 1959. I raised my left arm shielding my eyes from the sun. My tattoo A27331 emblazoned itself once more in my brain as those needling thoughts began again. Questions. Always those questions plowing through my thought's visions. "How is it possible that I am here?" "Why is it that I was chosen to share this joy and celebration of freedom and life?" "Why not the others?" "Why was I spared?" "Why only me?" Questions I shall never be able to answer; able only to ponder, imprisoned by their guilt laden burden.

As I look at my proud-of-herself, smiling daughter hoisted high above the crowd on her daddy's shoulders, a layered caravan of images and feelings kaleidoscope, sending me back through doors long closed on painful time. My mind shifts to frame the faces of a large family who lived together as one community at Miodowa 15.

### **KRAKOW**

Easily, I slipped my hand between the well-tailored sleeve and jacket of my father's dark coat and hung on tightly while he and I walked and skipped across and back over the parquet parlor floor; our feet moving in time to the Shabbat tunes he sang so wonderfully well while we waited to turn on the lights after Saturday's sunset. "Rozinkles mit Mandles," "My Yiddisha Mama," and "A Brivele Der Mamen," names only names, but melodies so poignant as to bring overflowing tears, even now.

Handsome and tall, with dark, wavy hair and moustache, appearing aristocratic, although he had come somewhere from an Orthodox shtetl in the south of Poland, my father, Murray Elbinger, had made a good marriage. Father, his brothers, and their father, having less than an eighth grade education, nevertheless, had ben textile merchants in a country which offered limited upward social and financial mobility.

Above the doorway entrance to our business house in Kracow, the sign read Spira-Rubin-Elbinger, but it wasn't always so. My mother's family was of the upper class, and had been in the textile business for over 40 years. Father's name, Elbinger, was added to the business when he married my mother.

Grandfather Spira, a Cohen, was a loving, charitable, community-minded man who donated his own Torah from which he read in the old, Orthodox synagogue which stood at the end of our long street. Grandfather was a man of depth and warm concern, especially when it came to his daughter, Frania, for whom he had arranged two marriages. Mother's first marriage was to a man whose main interests were studying Torah and praying; however, he did manage to produce a child, Lilka, who is my half-sister.

With this man, life was unbearable, so Mother and Lilka's father divorced.

My mother as a child, had suffered from typhoid fever. As a result, her life afterwards contained periods of emotional instability which ultimately we all had to live through. Relevant to re-marriage, this condition, plus the stigma of divorce made grandfather's task quite considerable, but possible, since a business partnership was offered as well as a warm, caring wife.

I do not remember my grandfather. I only know what I have heard, but the figures of my grandmother and Aunt Pitzelle, my grandmother's sister from Chicago, are clear in my memory.

Grandmother, small and stocky, wore a wig, lived in our house and always kept a bundle of money hidden in her skirts. My recollection of her is visual as I had not physical contact or conversation with her. I recall family conversations regarding her frugality, how she was in the way, and finally how she was bought out of the business. Grandmother died during the time we lived in the ghetto. I visited her there once in a place where they kept all the old and sick and dying people. I remember most of all that no medicine was available for her and there were crawling, incessant flies.

When I was very small, Tanta Pitzelle, my grandmother's sister, came all the way to Poland from the United States to visit with us. She gave me, and all the others, three zlotys. I truly believed I was rich. Those worn zlotys, a bright, big colorful ball given to me by my mother's friend for saying the word "dupa," and a doll for having my teeth pulled are all the tokens from the treasures of my childhood I can summon up.

Hopscotch, a holiday game with hazelnuts, ice skating, dreidels at Chanukah, were games I played and activities I took part in, but all in all, I was not gregarious or athletic.

Out of my heart's mind, indelible in my senses, my mother's strong, solacing warmth encompasses me. To me, she was simply beautiful, lovely, full of life and caring. Mother didn't play children's games with me, nor do I recall having meaningful conversations with her. The last time I saw her, I was seventeen. I have never forgiven myself when as a teenager, I called her "crazy." Nor have I let go of the guilt I felt when I could care for her no longer while we were in the ghetto, when they came, and when they took her away. Her pleading

cries, begging me to give her the ring I wore, lie lurking beneath the surface of my memory. My father told me not to give the ring to her; I might need it later. A few days after she was gone, we received a letter which simply stated that mother had been sent to another hospital and for us not to inquire. Later, I found out that she had been shot. I have clung to the hope that mother never knew what was happening to her.

Mother spent her leisure time reading German romances. Also, she loved to dance. Even though she was heavy, she was light on her feet, and I loved to watch as she whirled about the dance floor, expertly led by one of the special men called fortanzers, who were hired by the coffee houses to dance with the ladies in the afternoon between coffee and schmoozing. Father did not mind as he did not dance, and he was proud of mother who won trophies for her dancing.

I shopped with mother on Wednesday afternoon for the big, fat carp which blissfully spent the remainder of its days swimming in our bathtub until it was time for cooking and our Shabbat dinner. Sometimes I would go with the maid to market and she would select a chicken which later would be picked and plucked and prepared for our dinner. Smells in the kitchen of challah, the trip to the baker with cholent, melted wax and polished candlesticks imprinted themselves into the fabric of my past.

I would often wonder what mother thought about as I sat looking at her deep, brown, almond-shaped eyes when she lapsed into one of her silent dreamy moments. Once mother had been in love with a German Baron, a gentile, but her father would not allow her to marry outside her faith. It seemed the wistful memory of that love haunted her.

Mama was a dreamer. Mama would also disappear. I was terrified during those times and haunted by her disappearance. No one ever told me why mother had to go away. I would hear her cry, but I never saw her in a state which might frighten me. I was protected from that and any discussion about mother's condition was taboo. One time when mother was gone, I poked holes in a hot water bottle with a pair of scissors. My father's answer to my actions was a sound smack.

I was well into my teenage years when I was told about mother's periods of insanity, her shock treatments, her visits to the neurologists and her

confinement in a strait jacket. Although I do not recall mother being violent with me, Lilka suffered from mother's problems.

I was never alone. From the time I was born until I was two years old, I had a nanny who nursed and took care of me. I, of course, was very attached to her, but mother sent my nanny away because she was jealous of her.

My name was Gisela. Mother called me Greena Jaba. She said it was the nanny's fault that my complexion turned green because I had been nursed by her.

According to my recollection, Ida was considered papa's girl while I belonged to mama. Every Saturday, mother, father, Ida and I would dress up and go to the park located in the middle of Krakow. Black bread and butter, along with a glass of cool, rich buttermilk was the treat father would buy for us, and except for whipped cream ·Neapolitan, the most regal lunch I could imagine. Although these were my favorites, I could also be talked into eating sauerkraut and knackwurst. Father's concerns the other six days of the week had to do with business. Mother was often gone. The maid or sometimes the other children in the family would play games with me. The person I was closest to was Ida, my sister.

Ida—it is hardly bearable to write her name—my raven-haired, dark, liquid-eyed sister. My most intense sense of loss comes from my memory of you. So full of life, you appeared to dance as you walked. You were father's favorite. You hungered for learning. I remember you reading Shakespeare to me and every time I hear Ravel's "Bolero" the hearing brings upon me an almost unbearable sadness, because you loved that piece of music so.

You were the one who so gently held me and told me the facts of life when I came running to you, scared to death of the bleeding when I was thirteen. You were the one who stood with me against parental restrictions. You, so intelligent, so clever. I always questioned why I was chosen to live and you to die. For years, I found it impossible to accept your death. You walk in my dreams, away from me on unfamiliar streets. I run forward to touch you. I reach for you. I scream, "Why haven't I seen you in such a long time?" When I arrive at your side, you slowly turn and look away. The person in my dream is an imposter, not you. My dreams do not tell me that death is forever.

The time we spent together was so brief—because of our difference in age—because I was not verbal, because I was too young (and aren't we all) to understand what it meant to have and appreciate you.

I do remember when you attended college and began breaking away. I know you resented living in the Jewish quarter and resented the fact we spoke Yiddish at home. You didn't want to bring your friends to our house. According to you, we had no "savoir faire."

Orthodoxy permeated the Casimir streets where we lived. Yiddish, loudness, along with strummels, caftans, pies, beards, black shoes, and white stockings made me feel, when I came home from school, that I had entered another world. In fact, I truly had. This was the world of our parents and, of course, our world. I had little contact with other Jews who lived in Krakow.

I did not speak Yiddish. Perhaps this was my way of rebelling, of rejecting what you were rejecting. The Christian students ridiculed those of us who spoke Polish interspersed with Yiddish. I, like you, Ida, made an extra effort to speak only Polish. And we both stepped across an imaginary line when we came home from school each day.

Nowhere was there for you to turn as you became more and more uncomfortable regarding your Jewishness. No conservative congregation existed. All around was Orthodoxy and that for you, I recall so well, was out of the realm of consideration. Perhaps consciously or unconsciously you knew that your only possible escape from what befell you ultimately was to become Christian. Mama and Papa did not sit Shiva, but I remember their silence and their hurt when you moved out and converted. I want you to know that I felt I understood your reasons, even though, looking back, you must have known how devastated our parents were.

Your picture on my dresser is an ever-present reminder, along 'With all other thoughts of you that remain. Never will I forget the letter and the pair of slippers you sent to me while I was still in the ghetto. I held on to that letter until it was taken from me in Auschwitz. The slippers which I held every night, I left behind when we were moved to Plaszow.

## The Ghetto

At the time we were forced into the ghetto, you lived outside. Even though you had the opportunity to be with us after you had been denounced to the Germans by the parents of your Christian boyfriend, you were Christian and did not, you felt, belong with the Jews.

In my mind's eye, I can see you writing to me. I still know how it feels to touch the folded edge of that soft, tattered paper. I still know what those faded lines said. You told me that you loved me. You asked me to forgive you for all the sisterly disagreements we had and you hoped that we might see each other once again.

If there could be a way to tell you, or if somehow you could know, I would say: you meant so much to me. I love you, and thank you for helping me grow. I hope you didn't suffer, that the pain was small, the ending swift. When those moments crush their weight against me, that is how I wanted it to be for all of you.

Papa and I were the only ones left after mother was taken. Ida was never with us in the ghetto where we were herded and penned like pigs as they wanted us to appear. Scrounging, filthy, crawling shredded beings, fatless, leftovers hauled away dead after the long night's longer torment in wheel-squeaking wagons pulled by another, soon to join with them. We began to become who it was they said we were—dirty, stinking, lousy, contentious Jews.

Father was able to go in and out of the wall they built to keep us out. Because he knew about textiles needed for uniforms, blankets and other supplies for the German army, they needed him. He was allowed to leave and return each day, sometimes smuggling bits of food back in with him. I prepared whatever we had and attempted to keep our small, crowded space as clean as possible. For one and one half years, we had one room in which we were trapped with or fears of raids, of beatings, of hunger, of pounding, and of dirt. It was here I learned to live one minute at a time.

Selected meant being chosen for a journey whose destination we never knew. One day, father was gone and they came for me. They told me to carry with me a small bundle of belongings and line up at the appelplatz. My Uncle Spira, head of the Jewish police who took orders from the Judenrat, was nowhere to be seen. I spoke to one of the

policemen who knew me and told him I was Spira's niece; they let me go.

Uncle Spira who lived in our house before we lived in the ghetto conspired with the Nazis. He felt that doing this would insure his family's, as well as his own, survival. On many occasions, Spira would warn us of an impending selection and this time, his power or his powerlessness, saved my life once again. I believe that without his presence, I would not have survived.

In 1943, the ghetto of Krakow was liquidated. A German commander, Franck, was in control of the city and vowed as all other Nazis had in other cities to make it "Judenrein" (free or clean of Jews). Father and I, along with all those from the ghetto still alive, were moved to Plaszow, a labor camp situated twenty miles away and built for twenty thousand inmates upon a Jewish cemetery. I clearly remember the marking stones in the ground as I looked down when we marched in over them.

Before we were moved to Plaszow, an announcement was made over the public address system: "All children must remain in the ghetto and will later be moved to a children's camp where care will be provided." My sister, Lilka, had two children. The Nazis gave her the choice of staying with her children in the ghetto or going to Plaszow with her husband who would not leave without her. Lilka left the children in the police station with the hope that our Uncle Spira would look after them. The Nazis relished choiceless choices. Lilka chose to stay with her husband, go with him to Plaszow, and suffer untold terrors of guilt-ridden years. Today, she lives in Israel and has another husband and two adult children, Fannie and JoJo.

I must say that one never exactly knows what one will do in any given situation under stress such as we had to endure. Uncle Spira helped the Nazis and in that position pulled me from selection, that is, death on more than one occasion. If he had not chosen to be a member of the Jewish police, I would not be here. Uncle Spira was still in charge of the ghetto when father and I were taken to Plaszow. We heard shots and saw fire and smoke as we were taken away, but it wasn't until later that we learned through whispers passed by the Kapos that he had been shot and burned.

## Plaszow

In Plaszow, at first, we were placed in a heavy labor area and told to carry heavy stones across a field, pick up another stone and carry it back across the field again. This went on for hours and days; we were being worn out. There was no purpose in our work and those who could not continue were shot. Nazi guards moved among us with German Shepherd dogs trained to kill those who were pointed out to them. Indiscriminately, we were torn to pieces by dogs and shot at by S.S. using us for target practice.

Our daily life was guarded by death, dogs, Nazis, and by senseless, unending roll calls when we would stand in the rain at attention for hours in the bitter cold, pinching our cheeks until they bled so that we would look alive, so we wouldn't be selected, so we could survive a little longer. Some fell, left to die in the mud. Those of us who endured—bony, grey-skinned grimy ghosts of ourselves—looked forward to stinking hours of bodies in wet rags, unbathed, freezing cold, and crawling.

Our existence? Water was our soup; sometimes containing a piece of flesh or dirty bread. Foul latrines where you never knew when the guards would enter and order everyone out. No time, no privacy. Eyes always watching. Eyes in my sleep or that which I willed myself to escape into; a semi-wakefulness waiting for the next scream or shout or shooting raw hunger, raw nerves, raw intensity. I shall probably never be rid of them for they loom over every today's shoulder. Was there ever another existence? Was there ever really a god of any kind?

Not one day, but one second at a time. I climbed those painful seconds every day, crawling through endless eternity one over until each not new morning came, looking forward to nothing, encapsulated into each second as if it were forever.

Once at the end of one long hungry day, I was part of a group which was told to carry stones. The Nazis decided to punish us for our apparent slowness, or their entertainment. We were assembled into rows and the Nazis' guns were pointed at us. I remember wishing I could be an insect, and at that moment my eyes became blind. Out of fear, I could not see. I waited for the shots to put an end to the unbearable fear, but no shot came. Instead, one of the guards pointed to me and I was made to lie on a table where they

whipped me into unconsciousness. Bleeding and stripped of the skin on my back, I was left without aid. The others dared not help for fear of their own punishment. I managed, in spite of the blood and pain, to get to my barrack. I knew if the guards found me on the table where I was whipped, I would have been shot. At least, we weren't all killed. The blood and screaming must have assuaged their savageness for the time being.

At other times, I was hit on the back of the head or on the back. Now, in restaurants or other public places, I find myself wanting to sit with my back to the wall. In this way I feel less threatened.

Death lay everywhere. Life meant nothing. I watched while my friend was hanged. The rope didn't kill her the first time, so her friends had to retie it and hang her until she was dead. She had been one who had tried to escape and we, as a warning, had to watch her execution.

Lullabies were played over the loud speakers at Plaszow as children were marched past their parents to Chujowa Gorka, a hill where they were shot. We who watched saw a parade of tiny shadowed marionettes slump clumsily to the ground as those who held the strings released them.

Amid insects and without anesthetics, I had two operations. One occurred when my fingernail was removed and another took place after a cyst was discovered under my arm. I was taken care of because I was in a labor camp and since I was relatively strong, I was kept at slave labor to provide supplies to the German soldiers.

Plaszow contained Jews who were found hiding, as well as slave laborers, and German political prisoners.

In 1944, rumors of Germany's loss of the war were already circulating among the inmates of the camp. The Germans were afraid of the evidence which they had created and which would indict them if it would be found.

We were ordered to open the graves of those buried under the ground, stack the bodies, and burn the stacks with torches while the Nazis stood by with guns and dogs. The stench of that burning flesh and dead bodies became a part of the atmosphere and all that stood or lay in it. For years afterward, I was not able to go near a spit or open barbecue as that smell would always bring back what I so much wanted to forget.

At night, I was allowed to see my father, but every time we met and every time we parted, we never knew whether or not we would see each other again.

Father was involved in some kind of work for the Nazis and when possible, smuggled food to me. Others smuggled in eggs and small amounts of sugar. One woman in my barrack would beat an egg and a few grains of sugar together in a glass and whip the concoction into a glass full from which she would allow me to have two or three teaspoons.

Overriding my hunger and bad treatment was fear. I worked in a factory which made brushes and I was transferred to night work. Not able to keep my eyes open, I was incessantly trapped between sleep and fear of being shot, webbed in the horror of not ever seeing my father again.

As time went on my hunger grew worse as less food was available and more energy was expended in working and searching for food. We were doled a watery coffee and less than an ounce of black bread each day. Interwoven among my thoughts of finding something to eat was a prayer for my father's safety and a dumbly mumbled "Shema."

In March of 1944, Soviet forces advanced westward and as they did so, the Germans began a systematic evacuation of the slave labor camps in their paths. From Plaszow, hundreds ended in Auschwitz while others were sent to Mauthausen, Flossenbug, Stutthof and Gross Rosen.

One evening, I made my way to where I was to meet my father. I searched among those milling about. He was not there. "A transport went out today," I was told. I never saw him again, even though I never gave up the thought that I would again find him.

### **AUSchwitz-Birkenau**

Now, my turn had come. Inconsolably alone, exhausted, starving and occupying one slim space squeezed against death, I also was pushed into an awaiting cattle car. Given no water, and one pot which we like animals used degradedly and publicly, we were crammed, crushed and shut up into a stifling, smothering blackness.

The ride to Auschwitz-Birkenau, although seemingly interminable, lasted only four to six hours. I carried with me all I owned: the clothing

on my body, a toothbrush, a lipstick, a picture of my mother and Ida's letter.

When the heavy door of the train car was opened, an ugly dusk had fallen. Through my incomprehension, weakness and hunger, I could make out the tall, silver, shadowed, cane-shaped high electrified barbed wire poles looming over me. Crisp, well-tailored officers pulled us out of the train cars, jabbed, prodded and shoved us into lines while others of them gazed at us with steely, cold hatred, indifferent to our humanness. The Nazi propaganda had worked. Those young officers were trained to see us as inhuman, infested vermin. We were almost living proof of a well instrumented self-fulfilling prophecy. Kapos in striped, filthy, prisoner uniforms herded us like undefined animals into a large room where we were separated, men from women, and told to undress. Shivering and cold with no respite from our sufferings, all that we possessed including our last remnants of dignity were taken from us.

We were not shaved, but naked, grey and sallow. We were inspected, turned around, looked up and down, classified and delineated. Who will live and who will die? By a flick of a clean manicured hand foppishly playing God, life was categorized to death.

To the right meant life. I was shoved left, selected to die by Mengele, "The Angle of Death." Like discarded rags, I fell into a heap onto the bare damp floor, apathetic to my surroundings, my mind minimally functioning, every movement a futile effort. Less than a step from death, hardly 55 pounds and without hope or caring, I stared with clouded eyes at the young girl next to me who had been separated from her mother. The girl's mother had been selected to live – for labor.

A window, possibly a foot from the floor, above me suddenly rattled, and as if in a twilight sleep, I heard a floating intense scream, the voice of the mother insisting that the girl beside me jump through the window. Clawing and straining the last amounts of energy left in me, I followed, climbed and stretched through that same window. Once outside, I found myself surrounded by women who clothed me and the girl from the rags they wore; they smuggled us to their barracks.

I had escaped backwards to the rubbing edge of death. I was tattooed which meant I would be used somewhere as slave labor. Some chance for survival existed, although I did not know it.

Everywhere I met shuffling, dragging feet, begging mouths, dysentery, resignation and fear mixed with one focus—where to get something to eat, garbage, a spot of soup on the floor, dirt, anything which would ease the pain of the gnawing, burning hunger. I licked the floor for a taste of dropped moisture.

One minute was woven to the next with hope. Underneath the hunger, lay loneliness and thoughts of my father. “He will be waiting for me.” “When this is all over, we will meet and go home.”

Search lights doomed us to a target if someone desired, as we stumbled through the mud and night in fear of losing our shoes on the way to the latrine. To be without shoes was to lose one’s life. Some put them under their hats or heads while sleeping. I had no underwear, a thin sweater and skirt, and no heat. Eight of us occupied one wooden planked bunk from which we were roused at 6:00 a.m. every morning to stand in the cold, rain, wind, or sun for interminable hours. Exhausted, some fell, then were beaten into the mud to death. We rubbed clay into our faces to create an appearance of health, yet our bodies swarmed with lice, rashes and running sores. Our only purpose: live.

I could not believe that here I would see anyone I knew. How I recognized Lilka or she me, I’ll never understand, but there she was. A thin layer of joy spread over my world until she told me about the gassings. With that, I fainted. She held on to me and quickly brought me to my senses. I only saw her one more time when she brought underwear, cabbage, and bits of food to me. I never saw her again until I returned to Krakow.

Dazed and mute, lacking all energy to talk and wracked with dysentery, fast closing the gap which would categorize me as mussulman-camp slang for a prisoner crossing the line to death, – I pulled my clogs through the sucking, unrelenting mud, returning from the latrine to our barracks. As I approached, a bunkmate shouted to me to hurry. We were being transported to a labor camp.

Half dead, barely covered in rags, we 350 women were marched to cold black-mawed iron-sided trains in whose bellies we would be packed. As the doors slid shut with a loud shuddering sound, we began the long journey to Freudenthal, located in Moravia, a province of Czechoslovakia.

The word Freudenthal means a meadow of happiness; it was not. It was, if anything, an endurable labor camp, considering the alternatives; containing only women who every day marched through Licterverdun under the cold, vacant, by standing eyes of the townspeople. We marched to a textile factory located at the other end of town where all day we stood with our hands withering in frigid water, weaving cloth for the uniforms of German soldiers. We were kept in barracks on bare board bunks, wearing only what we wore from Auschwitz, without a stove, and with the snow finding its way through the cracks and slats.

Punishment here was standing all day and night exposed to the bitter night air, but no orders were given for shooting or killing by the men who guarded us.

I began to have severe pains in my stomach and was not able to eat. Anyone in this condition was of no use to the Germans. Fear and hunger traded places in my mind. In pain and so ill, I couldn’t stand; I was relegated to a make-shift infirmary. A baby, deliberately placed here to starve, was my lone companion. Its tiny voice cried and whimpered from pains of hunger until it slowly retreated into its appointed death. Friends of the child’s mother had placed it there in order to protect the mother. If any female was caught pregnant or with a child, she was automatically sent to the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Even now, hearing a weak cry of a child is an unnerving experience for me.

No medicine or aid of any type was available; however, Yanka Bowman visited me daily and managed to trade my bread ration for potatoes which seemed to soothe my stomach.

Although the winter months seemed dull and long, when spring came events seemed to happen fast. In April, a soft spoken German officer visited our barracks and asked questions about who we were and what we did in the camp. We saw him only once, but later learned he was an English spy scouting the area.

We noticed flowers blooming as we marched through Licterverdun. We also noticed photographs of Hitler with candles lighted in front of them as we peered at the windows of the houses we passed. When we arrived at the factory, we learned that Hitler was dead. With that message, we dared once again to hope.

## Liberation

Rumors were heard that the Russians were not far away. Fears and whispers were passed in the night. "We will be marched until we drop of exhaustion, and if not dead, we will be shot." The townspeople also heard the rumors and the plans for the march. These inhabitants, because they felt the Russians would go easy on them if the prisoners were not harmed, persuaded the guards not to carry out their strategies.

Awakening one day to the sounds of guns and bombing, we saw planes overhead. Knowing it would be the Russians who would come, several of the women jointly sewed a Russian flag and climbed to the roof of our barracks and attached it so that anyone flying over would not bomb this place where we were.

Not one guard was to be seen this morning. Not even one. Our eyes searching through the cracks and windows of our barracks fell upon truckloads of soldiers. I dragged what was left of my being to the door and stood numbed with disbelief. Fear, tears, shaking and trembling overtook my senses. I was free. "What does that mean?" With tears flooding my eyes, my mind raced through the possibilities of what would happen to me. "Who will I find waiting?" "Where will I go?" "What will I do?"

The Russians who liberated us treated us with compassion, broke down the doors to the camp warehouse and let us eat what we wanted. Because I continued to 'suffer from stomach pains, I ate very, very little which, no doubt, saved my life. Many of those who gorged themselves became more ill than they had been and died after they were liberated.

We were loaded into trucks by the Russian soldiers and taken to the homes of the Germans who so blandly watched our wretched, hungry march through their town. The soldiers told us to take anything we wanted. In one house, my eye focused on an apple. I had not had a piece of fruit in almost five years. I took that apple, a towel, and a few articles of clothes to put on. I wanted nothing more from the Germans or anyone else—but I longed to find my father.

The next day, those of us from Krakow were helped into trucks and driven to that grand medieval city we once called home. The Russians who now occupied Krakow had set up refugee processing centers. At one of these buildings, we

were dropped off. Others who arrived before us placed their names on a refugee list. I searched those handwritten columns seeking my father's name but instead found Tanta Natalka's name and the number of the place where she was living.

The Poles had taken our homes, jewelry and other personal belongings. Before we were walled into the ghetto, some of us had trusted what we possessed to those we thought were our friends. We found out after we returned that we were not expected. We were resented before we left, and less than few welcomed our coming back because they had profited from our belongings and our absence. What we had once owned had become theirs.

As Constantine had forced Christianity on all of his subjects, so had King Yaghello in Poland after his conversion. However, Yaghello and those following during the eleventh and twelfth centuries were troubled by a breakdown of their economy as a result of constant conflicts with Tartars. Anxious to rebuild their country and restore their treasures, these rulers encouraged and invited Jewish traders, shopkeepers, and moneylenders to their country.

Casimir III whose name is acclaimed in Jewish sections of Polish cities by at least one street named after him was a king, who with candor, exposed the practical motive behind his benevolence by declaring, "We desire that the Jews whom we wish to protect in our own interest, as well as in the interest of the Royal Treasury, should feel comfortable in our beneficent reign."

Consequently, desperate Jews fleeing the bloody attacks of the Crusades, the Hussite Wars in Bohemia, and the Black Death found respite from their terrors and settled in Poland.

The Jews were protected by the King and by edict, but the Church and uneducated peasants, as well as jealous noblemen, waged for centuries a frightful war of anti-Semitism upon those Jews welcomed for their acumen. For over 800 years, 3,500,000 Jews lived in Poland. Eastern Jewish life for the majority was imbued with an intense religious quality, resisting influences from the outside.

For the most part, the economic condition of the Jews in most of Poland was painted with hardship and thrift. Jews were never allowed to own land. The strict adherence of the Christian to the law regarding usury forced Jews to carry



out transactions in money, thus keeping Christian hands clean. Forced to collect taxes and extricate owed money, as well as appearing different and a victim of the Church's derisive appellation, "Christ Killer," they easily became ugly, hated and unwanted in the eyes of the populace.

On Easter, fresh from Church and the rantings of a fanatic priest, Christian children in Poland would attack and mercilessly beat Jewish children.

When we were sent away by the Nazis, many of the Poles because of this indigenous prejudice applauded the event. When those few of us returned, we were looked upon as ghosts from the past without a right to claim what was ours.

The war being over, we thought the pogroms had ended, but many of us were beaten and harassed to the extent that I wore long sleeves deliberately covering my tattoo.

Several of my Christian friends, one especially who attended high school with me, tried to persuade me to become Christian to avoid further persecution. I questioned my right to bring Jewish children into the world to fall victim to its terror. Tempted to convert, I nevertheless did not succumb for I realized that I would have been traitorous to those who had perished, especially my family.

Aunt Nataalka, the only survivor of my mother's generation, returned to Kracow to find a Polish family occupying her home. Having some conscience, they allowed her a room in the attic and the use of the kitchen. It was here I found her, and here I stayed, going every day to the refugee center, searching the lists for my father's name.

I found a man who had been with Papa in Gross Rosen. He told me that Papa had been wounded in the foot by a German officer and when the Germans began losing the war, the S.S. drove the inmates from the camps to avoid any evidence of their crimes and victims. These remnants were marched to death. Some would die of exhaustion; others were shot because they could not keep going. My father was one of these.

No words I knew could wrap themselves around the feelings of loss I now bore. My whole existence, the thinnest attachment I had to life had for the past five years since the last time I saw my father clung to the knowledge that I, without question, would see him and be with him again. Without that hope, I would not have survived the

horror and degradation of the camps. Now with certain reality, I must go on without it. A vacuum within a vacuum. What threads now would warm me against despair? An orphan among millions. I struggled for sanity and reasons for being.

To do my share, I found a job in a small factory, pouring shoe wax into containers. I had no skills and my education which was typical for girls in Poland was meagre and interrupted. The pains in my stomach continued, and I continued to live day to day.

One evening, Willie Springurt, a young man from Luxembourg and whom I had known in the ghetto, came to my aunt's door. Willie's parents were Polish. When Hitler took over in Germany, they, and he, were forced to immigrate from Frankfurt to Poland. All of his family were exterminated during the years we were in the ghetto.

Before the last days of the Krakow ghetto, Willie and I became acquainted after having been introduced by a friend. He visited with me frequently, enjoying many conversations. Papa for some reason did not like him. Perhaps he was jealous. We went together for about seven months, although I considered him a friend more than a potential mate. Shortly before I was sent to Plaszow, we broke off seeing each other.

After Willie's first visit to find me at Aunt Nataalka's, he came often and brought white bread for my stomach which he said would be much better for me than the black bread I had been eating. The white bread helped.

Willie had a plan to escape Poland. Part of his plan included my marriage to him. I told him I didn't love him, but he insisted that that wasn't important. He loved me and if we married, things would work out. I felt I had nothing to lose. Poland certainly held nothing for me, especially after the news of my father's death.

Willie and I proceeded with his plans and were married in a civil ceremony. In the meantime, both Blanche, my cousin, Nataalka's daughter, and my sister Lilka returned to Kracow. Blanche, of course, stayed with her mother and me. Lilka was allowed to sleep in the kitchen.

Getting up every morning at 4:00 a.m. to deliver them, Lilka sold bread rolls from door to door helping me to stay alive by sharing what she earned with me. Lilka, in addition to her incarceration at Plaszow and Auschwitz, as also

a prisoner at Radom and Poinke. Ultimately, she ended her camp life at Krazow, Czechoslovakia, then found her way to Krakow.

Blanche obtained "Aryan" papers, masqueraded as a Pole, and worked for a German family. She had been sent to a labor camp for Poles before the war was over and it was from that camp she made her way home to Krakow.

Willie had a friend, Zigmund Zwern, who planned to go with us, and Aunt Nataalka persuaded us to take Blanche along. Willie, Blanche and Ziggy all spoke fluent German and I was instructed by Willie not to say one word, because I would give us all away. We four, carrying fake German passports, made our way by train to Frankfurt, leaving behind Lilka and Aunt Nataalka.

## **TO AMERICA**

All of Europe was in turmoil, people of all sorts milling in every direction. We made our way to a refugee camp set up by the United Nations Rehabilitation Services. There I had my first experience with American cereal. I opened a box of Rice Crispies, but I didn't know what to do with it or how to eat it, so I ate dry cereal from the box and was glad to have it.

In Frankfurt, Germany, because Willie and Ziggy both spoke English as well as German, they were able to get jobs with the American Occupation Forces, taking care of a housing compound. I had my first glimpse of an American M.P., thinking they were giants for in comparison to the smaller statured Poles and people I knew they surely stood at least a head taller.

For almost, a year, we waited for arrangements to be made for us by H.I.A.S. so that we could be allowed visas to travel to the United States. Was it possible that I would reach America? When I was a youngster in Poland, we really believed the streets in America were made of gold. It was hard for me to visualize or even anticipate making a trip to such a place to live.

In the spring of 1946, the ship, Marina Fletcher, was commissioned to bring the first group of refugees from Europe to the shores of the United States. Willie and I embarked on that ship and were among those masses thrust from Europe's travail to be allowed under the first lowering of the immigration quotas to enter.

Nearing New York Harbor, I saw with my own eyes what I had only heard about. There she stood, that green painted giantess, the Statue of Liberty, holding her torch to the sky and giving me the grandest welcome anyone had ever received. My heart rose in my chest and pounded louder and louder as tears swelled in my eyes. Feelings of joy and guilt surged through me. "The others who perished should be here to share my happiness." "Why was I chosen for life?"

Willie had relatives in New York who, at first, welcomed us. The two of us were again married in their home and both Willie and I went to work for them in their factory. Shortly after we began working steadily, Willie became ill and was hospitalized. During that time, I stayed in the Nagel's home. Willie was diagnosed as having pericarditis, an inflammation of the lining of the heart. The Nagels took care of Willie's hospital expenses this time but after his recovery, we both sensed a coolness in their attitudes toward us.

We quit our jobs with the Nagels and found other jobs in the same business but nowhere could we find a place to live which was within our ability to pay. Finally, on Long Island, we found what we could afford, although it meant getting up at 5:00 a.m. to take the ferry to get to the city before work.

Willie again became ill and ultimately hospitalized, so we moved back to the city. This time we found a fourth floor apartment in an old run-down tenement on Delancey Street, on the lower east side. We were forced to add another member to our family- a cat, to keep out the rats.

Because no money was available to spend on cab fare, I spent countless nights walking by myself through Harlem to get to the Jewish Hospital to be with Willie. During the day, I worked in a factory manufacturing children's clothes. My salary was less than \$20.00 a week. Not enough to pay for rent and food, let alone the extra burden of hospital bills. I spoke very little English, which before hadn't mattered since Willie took care of all the interactions that were necessary. Now I was compelled to use the phone for myself and also compelled to listen to the insulting remarks such as "Damn Refugee!" made by those too impatient to listen.

Sitting in the semi-darkness, watching the watery light reflect on the oxygen tent covering Willie, I realized he was struggling and thrashing to get air. As a nurse came through the door, she spoke: "He is frustrated." By the time the words were

uttered, Willie was gone. Not knowing any other explanation, I associated the word “frustrated” for years with death.

Shock overcame me. I remembered nothing until the cab driver of the cab in which Willie’s cousin, Lil, and I were riding shouted at me to get out as I vomited all over myself. The man assumed I was drunk. Stumbling out of the cab, I fell to the curb; water, grit, and vomit stung my face as the cabbie accelerated his pent-up anger. I had no feelings left with which to care.

The Nagels paid the funeral expenses the next day, and Lil stayed with me for a while in my apartment. After I returned to work, a big, rough man from a collection agency informed me that if I didn’t pay the hospital, I would be turned in for deportation. I had no means to pay for a lawyer, or wit to confront the issue on my own. I hadn’t come this far not to go farther. I saved the money I would have spent for one meal each day and paid the debt.

### **IN The FACE of Sorrow**

I had no idea what to do with my life. I did know that I resented entering and leaving the back door of an uncooled clothing factory where sweat poured down my face as I worked over a steam machine. The thought occurred to me that my life must have more meaning.

Julius, a young man I dated for a time, encouraged me to attend school. Taking his advice, I went to high school in the evenings and completed a general education degree so that I would be accepted at New York City College. Going to school changed my life. I knew at school a chair waited for me; someone would call my name and I would answer. A simple routine, but one which would save my sanity and sense of being. I struggled with learning, at the same time wrestling with who I was and what really mattered, nurturing in myself some semblance of purpose for this transitory life. The sight of families together in the park or walking down the street would pluck a tender memory from my own past and send tears streaming from my eyes. Feelings of worthlessness and fear of rejection underlay the small steps I took toward patching together the broken pieces of my world.

I continued to work at Mode-Kitty, the children’s clothing factory where soon I met another refugee, a person who to this day remains my most cherished friend, Martha. She and I made an agreement to share an apartment together, and

until Martha met married Zoli, we lived not far from Mt. Sinai Hospital on 105th and Broadway. After Martha left, Helenka, another survivor of Plaszow, although I did not know her when we were both there, moved into the apartment and it was she who arranged the blind date which led to my present marriage. Not an uncomplicated transition but one whose history is worth repeating.

### **HARRY**

A furrier by trade, Harry Adler when I met him was working with his father, brother and mother in his father’s business. As time went on, we became fond of each other and Harry took me home to meet his mother. Up until now, I had not told Harry that I had been married previously. When I did tell him, he in turn told his mother. All the Jewish-mother manipulations possible went into effect. In fact, Harry broke off seeing me and was coerced to Frankfurt, Germany, on a business trip.

Protective of her second son, Harry’s mother did not like the fact that I had been married. She thought that possibly I had a child hidden somewhere. And to give her argument traditional credence, she insisted that since Paul, Harry’s older brother, had not married, it would not be appropriate for Harry to marry before him. Harry left and I continued my routine of school and work, disappointed and hurt by someone I sincerely cared for and hoped to marry.

Helenka, returning home one evening from a date with Joe, informed me that Harry had returned. So, after laying aside my ego and hurt feelings, Helenka and I conceived a strategy so that I could see Harry again. We had a party to which Harry was invited. Once again seeing each other, we both realized we truly cared for one another and began dating again.

Harry’s mother wasn’t any happier this time than she was the last, but Harry announced our engagement in December of 1951 at the Sabra Cafe in New York City to the melodies of Shoshana Damari.

Off on a business trip again, Harry left his parents in charge of making plans for a wedding in April. This they found difficult because of the restrictions surrounding Lag B’Omer, a period of time in which no celebrations of joy are to take place with the exception of one day. It seemed that every Jewish family in New York had wedding arrangements made on that day. No place was to be found.

Not willing to put off the wedding any longer, I flew, wrapped in a seal coat which would be sold to pay for my air ticket, to see Harry. Harry met me at the airport and gathering a shamus, and ten virtually from the streets to make a minyan, we were married and a photograph was sent back to mother to verify the event.

Because Harry had business to attend to in Brussels, we took an apartment where among my many culinary attempts, I made donuts which turned out to be stone with jelly inside.

During this time, we traveled to Paris where we visited Lilka, who had smuggled out of Poland shortly after I left Krakow in 1945. I had not seen her since that time. Lilka had met and married Chilek. When Harry and I saw them in Paris in 1952, they had two children, Fannie and JoJo, ages 5 and 3. Living in a flat among other poor Jewish refugee families with no toilet or hot water, Chilek struggled to make a small living by tailoring, borrowing a neighbor's sewing machine when it wasn't in use. Seeing the conditions in which they were living, made it difficult for me to enjoy the remainder of my honeymoon without feeling guilty.

Harry and I had no money to help them, but we contacted Aunt Pitzelle's son who lived in Chicago and he was able to send enough money to Chilek so that he could buy his own machine. From then on, although Lilka continued to suffer bouts of depression, they were able to make a good living and raise two children: one a fashion designer, living in Tel Aviv, and one who became a dentist, now living in Paris.

After visiting Paris, Harry and I returned to Brussels. From there, I sailed back to New York to my job from which I had taken a leave of absence. When Harry returned from Brussels, we were married again in a civil ceremony.

My life was taken up with working at Mode-Kitty during the day, going to school at night, working on becoming a citizen and trying to become pregnant. Under conditions of stress, a woman discontinues her menstrual cycle. I had not menstruated since my incarceration in Plaszow, and I feared that I would not be able to bear children.

## CHILDREN

I desperately wanted a child, especially in view of the fact that so many members of my family had been slain. I felt it my personal responsibility to have a baby. Who would know of my family and pass on the memory of them if I did not have a child? Finally, after checking my temperature morning and night for what seemed an interminable amount of time, I became pregnant. In my eighth month, I quit work and school. I wanted a baby girl. I never had a brother, and I felt I didn't know anything about raising boys.

My mother-in-law promised that if I gave her a granddaughter, she would buy a strawberry shortcake for me to eat all by myself. At 2:30 a.m. on November 14, 1955, after a car ride in a torrential rainstorm and a breakdown on the Long Island Expressway, I barely arrived at the hospital before giving birth. I was too sick from the anesthetic after Diane was born so I gave the most beautiful strawberry shortcake I had ever seen to the nurses on the maternity ward.

Why did I specifically want strawberry shortcake? Harry and I would visit his mother's house and mother would often have strawberry shortcake for dessert. However, there were always so many people around that I could never have more than one slice, and I longed for a shortcake all to myself.

I had my baby. How can I express what that meant to me? A future, during the blackest hours of my worst pain and desperation, was unthinkable but here in my arms lay the most awesome expression of the word miracle. Nothing is impossible. I held the real, breathing wonder of that next to my heart.

Harry's father died in August of 1954 of a heart attack, not living long enough to see his first grandchild. Up until that time, Harry had worked with his father and eventually they turned a furrier trade into a mail-order stamp business. After his father's death, he began working for Schoco Toy Company, and then found a job as a travel agent.

We lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Elmhurst, where we slept on a hide-a-bed in the living room giving up the bedroom to the baby. Diane Ida, the second name after my sister, was a colicky child who refused to grow hair and insisted on being carried. She also inherited a crooked little finger, taking after her father's mother. Other than that, she was a beautiful healthy baby who kept us up most nights.

When Diane became a year and a half old, we gathered up enough nerve to let her cry until she fell asleep by herself. We managed to do this feat by holding on to each other so that neither of us would get up and go to her. Soon afterwards, life smoothed out. In retrospect, I attribute Diane's colic to my nervousness and lack of experience and if the poor child suffered as a baby, I blame myself more than anyone.

Four years later on August 31, 1959, I gave birth to a son, born with a full head of hair, who loved to eat and hummed when he did. I believe experience did make a difference.

"My daddy's going away for a hundred days!" Diane would tell our friends before Harry decided to go into the import-export business in Switzerland. What a scramble this time was for us. Harry went to Switzerland the day after the night of his brother Paul's wedding. Three months later, Diane, Allan and I joined Harry in Geneva. The flashing, sparkles of light, and banging sounds of fireworks emerging from the sky on that Fourth of July night jarred my thoughts to the present time, but the questions I ask remain unanswered.

### **PERSEVERANCE AND HOPE**

Now, as I retell all this, the year is 1986. I completed eleven years of education, received both a Bachelor's and Master's degree and served as Director of Social Services at Mesa Lutheran Hospital for eleven years.

I live in Phoenix, Arizona, with my husband, Harry. Diane graduated from Northern Arizona State University, married in 1982, and lives in Israel with her husband, Desmond, and daughter, Naomi. Allan graduated from Harvard University in 1984 and now works in Los Angeles, California. Allan married Susie Cooper in November of 1980. All my dreams are fulfilled.

Forty years have passed since I was liberated. Neither the terror filled memories, nor the agony connected to them, nor the tattoo have faded. Although other survivors have had their tattoos removed, I chose, as a reminder to myself and as a symbol to others, to keep mine. Of itself, it is a memorial.

In the same light, I write to those of my family so that you will not forget, so that you know I bore witness to the most heinous crime ever committed, so that you will be inspired to overcome what at the time might seem to you impossible.

I am often called upon to speak to school children and to others about what my life's experiences have been. Frequently, I use a quote from Shakespeare which reads, "Sweet are the uses of adversity which like an ugly toad wears yet a precious jewel in its head." I explain the quote to these audiences: "Life may give you horrible conditions with which you must struggle; however, from the struggle, you will learn to create beauty from the lessons you have learned."

Out of my experiences came the need to prove that I deserve to live when so many others died. These feelings compelled me to learn English, return to school, continue with college, complete a master's degree, and maintain a position as a director of medical social work. During the many years I spent attaining these achievements, I wanted to quit. Primarily, because I had trouble with both written and spoken English, I spent many hours in excess of what was normally required to complete an education. (I might add here that without Harry's support, patience, encouragement, in addition to his ability to type and edit my papers, I would never have made it.) My determination to succeed, nonetheless, was my most powerful motivator.

I hope that my experiences and accomplishments will be an inspiration to you. Images and thoughts you may turn to when you feel life has dealt more to you than you can handle at the time. A guide to your own successes.

Look for one more way... never forget... never give up hope, the keystone for survival... you can turn bad into good.