Flowers in the Ghetto

Myra Herbst Genn

I was four years old. My mother woke me suddenly, in the middle of the night, from a deep sleep. It was another *aksia*, a systematic round-up and deportation of the ghetto Jews by the Nazis. I could see the urgency reflected in my mother's face and hear it in her voice as she told me we must run and hide. I knew there was no time for my usual "But why?" She helped me to dress quickly, and grabbed my hand to run--and I grabbed the flowers that lay in a bunch on the floor next to my bed.

I hardly remember those flowers nor how I got them that day in a ghetto bereft of beauty. They were probably wildflowers, probably more weeds than anything else. But they were mine in a world where nothing was mine, and I remember my determination to hold onto them. Everything was being taken away from me--my home, my father, my toys--but I would hold on to these flowers no matter what. They, at least, were mine, and I would not leave them. They wouldn't take up much space in the hiding place, a cellar underneath a neighboring house; they did not make any noise; they would not hurt anyone. I held my mother's hand, silently following her every cue and running with her out into the street, into the safer place, down the stairs--all the while clutching my flowers.

from Still We Were Children in Those Dark and Puzzling Days

Claire Schuschny

On a summer night in late July, our young partisans came again to listen to the BBC's "Personal Messages." They decoded a message informing them that the Underground had parachuted a supply of ammunition into the woods near our village. A couple of villagers later that night claimed to have witnessed that sight.

The next morning, a few men came to our house, happily bringing a huge nylon parachute as a gift to Helene, Marguerite, my sister, and me. It was precious to us because we could make beautiful blouses out of it. We all chatted for a while, and the men left, taking along their usual food supply.

We were already measuring the best patterns for cutting the parachute into four blouses when we heard, just minutes later, the distant but distinct roaring sound of the German motorcycles with sidecars. Intense fear and trembling came upon us. Here we were with a parachute in our hands, obvious and unmistakable evidence of collaboration with the Resistance, and the Germans were approaching. Would our end come because of the parachute, or because they would discover that my sister and I were Jewish?

Mr. Reitz promptly urged all of us to fold the parachute in as compact a square as possible. He took it from us and slid it under the table top in an empty space between the top and the table frame. As the noise of the approaching Germans became louder and louder, we busied ourselves with household chores. Mr. Reitz took out a shoe last and a hammer and began repairing a shoe. Madame Reitz hurried to the stove to resume her cooking. One of the girls grabbed a potato and began to peel it, another opened pea pods; we were all scared to death.

Suddenly the entrance door was knocked open. Half a dozen German soldiers faced us with their guns drawn and pointed. The soldiers walked to each one of us. They pulled at our hair and at our faces to make sure that none of us was really a partisan disguised as a French peasant. They looked around, poking in corners and under beds, and exited.

Our hearts were pounding. Little did these soldiers know that in front of their eyes were two Jewish children, and that under the table top nearby was a parachute from the French Underground.

This was the closest contact my sister and I had with the German occupiers of France. It left on all of us an indelible mark.

A Few Days after Liberation...

Alex Brook

A few days after liberation on May 5, 1945, I started writing a diary with pencil on the pages of a calendar which I found somewhere, where I don't remember. But it is characteristic that even if I had wanted to write earlier, there was nothing to write with, or onto, in our possession. I am now reading my notes after exactly 49 years, and I am reliving those happenings.

Most of the entries deal with actual events and our daily activities. Food is mentioned prominently, because this was one of the most essential topics of our captivity and, later, of our rehabilitation period. I never realized until now how much I knew about nutrition and recipes, and how much time was spent preparing and apportioning food once we were free. Instinctively we paid much attention to cautious rationing and we didn't overeat, as we saw others literally explode and die from indulging too fast and carelessly. I found some entries in my diary which mention that there was plenty of food in the American rehab center, but nobody felt like eating, except for a little soup or farina cooked in skim milk, because anything else would have caused trouble.

In retrospect, I realized that a number of food-related coincidences actually saved my life several times during my ordeal. One was discovering the bunch of dried apricots which my friend abandoned early on when he walked away from the Hungarian labor camp. I stuffed them in my pocket and somehow had the discipline to chew on no more than one piece a day, when the going got rough. Apparently they provided enough vitamins to sustain me, as long as they lasted.

Another began with a wristwatch, which I had managed to hide on my ankle through numerous body searches for valuables by the murderous guards. But once we entered the Mauthausen KZ (concentration camp), I gave the watch to an inmate who promised me bread in exchange for it. I believed him, and only later found out he had tricked me; he had no intention of fulfilling his promise, and he dropped out of sight. But on the last day before the evacuation of the camp, he suddenly reappeared and I threatened to strangle him if he did not return my watch or give me the bread he had promised. Life was cheap at the time and we were desperate; maybe I really would have done it. He tore off a fistful of bread from his reserve and gave it to me. It was a half-rotten, moldy black clump, what the Germans call *Kommiss Brot*. You could see the sawdust mixed into the dough on the surface, but who cared--we were all walking skeletons, so starved that we could hardly stand up any more.

But this clump of bread-like substance I might have killed for, I did not eat. Instead, I gave it to another inmate even worse off than I was. He was dying for a bite and offered me his clogs in exchange. I needed something to put on my feet for the next long march, since my original "footwear," the cheap hiking boots which I had been wearing from the beginning, were already in shreds.

As it turned out, these newly-acquired clogs actually saved me from being shot during the forced march from the camp of Mauthausen to the camp of Gunskirchen. Tragically, many of my best friends perished on this 60 kilometer stretch of road, precisely because they could not keep up for lack of shoes on their feet. Some of the people wore only burlap wound around their ankles with string. When the burlap became loose and they bent down to adjust it, the SS men put a bullet through their head.

A wristwatch bartered for a piece of moldy bread, the bread exchanged for wooden clogs, the clogs that would ultimately save my life: such were the twists and turns of fate that haunt me to this day.

The Ring

Alex Brook

After my father's funeral in Budapest, on the day I saw my mother and my sister for the last time before we were all taken away to separate death camps, Mother handed me my father's wedding ring as a symbol of family heritage. I promised myself to safeguard it as if my life depended on it.

For a while I wore it on my finger. Then, in labor camp, on the day the guards strip-searched us for valuables and threatened to kill us if we withheld anything, I decided to hide the ring in the straw of the open lean-to where we had been sleeping for several months. That was a wise decision; several people were shot during the search as the guards discovered items they had hidden on their bodies.

When we returned from the ordeal of the search, shaken and upset, I went straight to the straw pile to recover my ring. Sure enough, I could not find it.

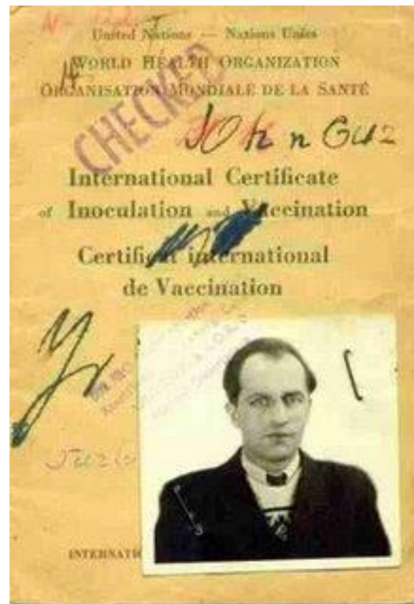
My whole group of friends helped me turn the place upside down. As the straw flew and the dust choked the air, we discovered that one of our comrades had used the thick layers of straw under himself for these months as his private bathroom. This was the reason he never had to get up during the snowy nights and make the trip to the outhouse like everybody else did. This was also the reason the whole place had begun to smell like dung within so short a time after we arrived. But I paid the mess very little attention, for out of the dirt and the dust and the straw rolled the ring...

I never let it out of my sight after that, except when I had to hide it several times in my mouth or wherever I could to prevent its discovery by the ferocious guards. It was with me on May 5, 1945, the day of liberation. It was with me throughout my stay in the DP camp. It is the ring my wife put on my finger during our wedding ceremony more than 40 years ago. It is this ring, my father’s wedding ring, that is on my finger to this day.

I was born in a refugee camp in Germany after World War II, and came with my Polish Catholic parents, Jan and Tekla, and my sister, Donna, to the United States as Displaced Persons in 1951. My parents had been slave laborers in Nazi Germany.

----- John Guzlowski

Wooden Trunk from Buchenwald



When my parents, my sister, and I finally left the refugee camp in Germany after the war, we were allowed to bring very little, only what would fit into a steamer trunk. The problem was that we couldn't afford to buy one. Not many of the families living in the camps could. You can imagine why that was, so my father did what other people did. He and a friend got together and built a trunk.

Someplace, somehow, they found a hammer and a saw and nails and some metal stripping, and they set to work. Getting the wood wasn't a problem. They got the wood from the walls of the barracks they were living in. It was one of the old German concentration camps barracks that had been converted to living space for the refugees, the Displaced Persons, and this place didn't have finished walls of plaster, or anything like that. If you wanted a board, you could just pull it off of the wall, and that's what my father did.

I don't think he felt guilty about busting up those walls. He had spent enough time staring at them, so that he probably felt he could do anything he wanted to them, and it would be okay. I think if a man spends enough time staring at a thing, finally it becomes his by a kind of default. I don't know if that's what my dad thought. He didn't say a lot about building that wooden trunk, and he probably didn't give it much thought.

The trunk my father and his friend built out of those old boards wasn't big. It was maybe four feet wide and three feet tall and three feet deep. The walls of the trunk were about 3/4 of an inch thick. But wood is always heavy, so that even though it wasn't that big, that trunk generally needed two people to lift it. My father, of course, could lift it by himself. He was a small man, a little more than five feet tall, but he had survived four years in Buchenwald as a slave laborer. That work taught him to do just about any work a man could ask him to do. My father could dig for beets in frozen mud and drag fallen trees without bread or hope.

My parents couldn't get much into the trunk, but they put into what they thought they would need in America and what they didn't want to leave in Germany: some letters from Poland, four pillows made of goose feathers, a black skillet, some photographs of their time in Germany, a wooden cross, some clothing, of course, and wool sweaters that my mother knitted for us in case it was cold in America. Somewhere, I've got a picture of me wearing one of those sweaters. It looks pretty good. My mother knitted it before her eyes went bad, and she was able to put little reindeer and stars all over that sweater.

When we finally got to America, my parents didn't trash that wooden trunk or break it up, even though there were times when breaking it up and using the wood for a fire would have been a good idea, kept us warm. Instead, they kept it handy for every move they made in the next forty years. They carried it with them when we had to go to the migrant farmers' camp in upstate New York where we worked off the cost of our passage to America. And my parents carried it to Chicago too when they heard from their friend Wenglaz that Chicago was a good place for DPs, for refugees. And they carried that trunk to all the rooming houses and apartment buildings and houses that we lived in in Chicago. I remember in those early days in Chicago that there were times when the only things we owned were the things my mother and father brought with us in that trunk, and the only furniture we had was that trunk. Sometimes it was a table, and sometimes it was a bench, and sometimes it was even a bed for my sister and me.

When we were kids growing up, my sister Donna and I played with the trunk. It had large blocky letters printed on it, the names of the town we came from in Germany, the port we sailed from, and the port we sailed to in America. We would trace the letters with our fingers even before we could read what they said. We imagined that trunk was the boat that brought us to America, and we imagined that it was an airplane and a house. We even imagined that it was a swimming pool, although this got harder to imagine as we got older and bigger.

When my parents retired in 1990 and moved from Chicago to Sun City, Arizona, they carried that trunk with them. That surprised me because they didn't take much with them when they went to Arizona. They sold or gave away almost everything that they

owned, almost everything that they had accumulated in thirty-eight years of living in America. They got rid of bedroom suites and dining room suites, refrigerators and washing machines, ladders and lawnmowers. My parents were never sentimental, and they didn't put much stock in stuff. They figured it would be easier to buy new tables and couches when they got to Sun City. But they kept that trunk and the things they could put in it.
And a TV set.

After my father died in 1997, my mother stayed on in Arizona. She still had the trunk when she died. She kept it in a small, 8 foot x 8 foot utility room off the carport. My parents had tried to pretty it up at some point during their time in Arizona. The original trunk was bare, unpainted wood, and was covered with those big, blocky, white letters I mentioned. But for some reason, my parents had painted the wooden trunk, painted it a sort of dark brown, almost a maroon color; and they had papered the bare wood on the inside of the trunk with wallpaper, a light beige color with little blue flowers.

When my mom died, I was with her. Her dying was long and hard. She had had a stroke and couldn't talk or understand what was said. She couldn't move at all either. When she finally died, I had to make sense of her things. I contacted a real estate agent, and he told me how I could get in touch with a company that would sell off all of my mother's things in an estate sale.

I thought about taking the wooden trunk back home with me to Valdosta, Georgia. I thought about all it meant to my parents and to me, how long it had been with them. How they had carried it with them from the DP camps in Germany to Sun City, Arizona, this desert place so different from anything they had ever known overseas. I knew my sister Donna didn't want the trunk. I called her up, and we talked about the things my mother left behind and the estate sale and the trunk. Donna has spent a lifetime trying to forget the time in the DP camps and what the years in the slave labor camps during the war had cost my parents. But did I want it?

I contacted UPS about shipping it, what it would cost, how I would have to prepare the trunk. They told me it would cost about $150 to ship. But did I want it?

I finally decided to leave it there and to let it get sold off at the estate sale. That wooden trunk had been painted over, and the person buying it wouldn't know anything about what it was and how it got there. It would just be an anonymous, rough-made trunk, painted a dark brown, almost maroon color with some goofy wallpaper inside.

Thinking back on all of this now, I'm not sure I know why I left that trunk there. When I'm doing a poetry reading about my parents and tell people the story of the trunk and read one of my poems about it, people ask me why I left it. It doesn't make any kind of sense to them. And I'm not sure now that it makes any kind of sense to me either. Why did I leave it?

I was pretty much used up by my mom's dying. It had been hard. My mother went into the hospital for a gall bladder operation and had had that stroke, and the stroke left her paralyzed, confused, and weak. She couldn't talk or move, and the doctor told me that my mother couldn't even understand what was being said to her.

Her condition got worse, and I put her in a hospice in Sun City. I sat with her there for three weeks, watched her breathing get more and more still. Sometimes, her eyes would open, and she would look around. I would talk to her about things I remembered, her life and my father's life, my life and my sister's life. I don't know if she understood anything. She couldn't blink or nod, or make sounds with her mouth. I just talked to her about what I remembered, any stupid thing, the bus rides we took, the TV shows she always watched, the oleanders she and my dad liked to grow and plant in the backyard. I didn't think that there was much else I could do for her.

When she died, I didn't want to do anything except get back home to my wife, Linda, in Georgia. Maybe the extra burden of figuring out how to carry that trunk back to Georgia was more than I could deal with. Or maybe I thought that trunk wasn't the same trunk that my parents had brought from the concentration camp in Germany. It had been painted, changed. Or maybe I just wanted that trunk to slip away into memory the way my mother had slipped away, become a part of my memory, always there but not there.

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http://open.salon.com//blog/john_guzlowski/2012/06/30/wooden_trunk_from_buchenwald

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