

Renee Salt

Through The Eyes of a Child

I was born Rywka Ruchla Berkowitz in Zdunska-Vola, Poland, in 1929 and lived with my parents and younger sister. My father was an accountant and my mother a housewife. We had a very comfortable lifestyle. Ours was a very large, well-known family, as my father was one of eight children and my mother one of four, so I had lots of aunts and uncles, many cousins, two sets of grandparents and a large extended family. My parents were elegant, cultured people, much respected by a wide circle of family and friends. We, the children, went to a Jewish school and generally we did the same things as children all over the world. After school we did our homework, played with friends, went to parties, the pictures; weekends were spent visiting families. When the weather was good, we visited a beautiful park with a lake where we had picnics and boat rides, and we thought that this was how it was always going to be.

Our grandparents lived in different towns from us, and holidays and Jewish festivals were spent with either one set or the other. We spent the summer vacation before the war with my mother's parents and everyone was talking about a war breaking out. Everyone was nervous, and of course it rubbed off on us children. We returned from holiday at the end of August 1939 and immediately my mother started buying in lots of groceries and coal, so that we would have enough for as long as the war might last. We had no idea, of course, that it would last for six years. Also, the same night we came home from holiday, a large lorry arrived with materials, because my grandfather had a factory and did not want to keep all the stock in one place. So he sent out lorries to different members of the family, which were unloaded during the night, so that no one should see. We could hardly get into our flat.

On 1 September war was declared and the German army marched into Poland. It only took them about two weeks to overrun the whole country. When they came to our town, the officers liked our flat, so we were thrown out and left standing in the street with just what we had on. They soon brought machines, installed them in the quadrangle of our block of flats, brought in Poles and from all the material available in our flat they worked for three days making blankets for the German army. We were told that all our clothes and valuables from the flat had been put on lorries and sent to Germany. Since we had nowhere to live, our family had to split up, with each member going to a different aunt or uncle. I was ten years old then, and was sent to my mother's parents in Kalisz. While I was away, my mother found a room and scrounged a few bits and pieces from family and friends, because at that time it was impossible to buy anything even if you had the money, and she set up a little home.

As soon as the Germans entered Poland, they began to persecute the Jews. Jews were not permitted to practise their professions, they were not allowed to keep their shops open or walk on the pavement. They soon made us wear a yellow Star of David, pinned on the front and back of our clothes; without it you were not allowed to go out. Jews were beaten up all the time. The queues for bread were miles long and when it came to your turn, they were usually sold out, so you had to queue again the next day. Right from the beginning, there was a great shortage of food.

After I had been only a short time in Kalisz with my grandparents, the Germans decided to make it Judenrein – free of Jews. Since Kalisz was a beautiful town near the German border, they didn't want any Jews there. One morning they called us all into a large market hall. We were only allowed to take a small parcel with us and leave everything else behind. From there they started sending people to different parts of Poland. When my mother heard what was going on in Kalisz, she somehow

managed to obtain a special pass and came and took me back home to Zdunska-Vola. My grandparents and my mother's two younger brothers were sent away, but they managed to get back to us in Zdunska-Vola, and we all lived together in one room.

At the end of 1939, the Germans decided to make a ghetto in Zdunska-Vola. All the Jews had to leave the better parts of town and move into the slum area, which was then cordoned off – no one was allowed in or out. My mother found a room in the ghetto – there were eight of us living in one room without sanitation. Every drop of water had to be fetched from a well at the back of the block, and the toilets were even further away, half a mile in fact. Needless to say, it was very difficult – the overcrowding, the cold, the starvation. From other small towns they sent the Jews into our ghetto, so we were even more overcrowded.

The Germans installed factories in the ghetto. Everyone who wanted a ration card had to work in the factories. We had to work very hard and were often beaten up going or coming from work. I worked in a factory making socks for the army. I didn't know anything about how to make socks. Someone had to teach me for two weeks, then I had to show someone else for two weeks, and then straight on to production – while the guards stood over us so that we didn't waste a minute. There was no medication at all; many died from starvation or illness. One day, the Germans brought in some Polish workers who erected ten gallows in a row in a square in the centre of the ghetto. They brought ten Jewish men and hanged them all together, having gathered hundreds of people to stand by and watch. Afterwards they left the poor bodies hanging for days on end, so everyone should see. These gallows were never dismantled, but every few months the procedure was repeated – and we actually thought this was bad, not knowing the terrible things that were yet to come.

Early one morning, in the summer of 1942, we were woken up with screams of "Alle Juden 'raus!" – all Jews out! We had already heard rumours by then – but they were only rumours because we had no communication with the outside world – no letters, newspapers, radios, nothing – yet rumours were circulating that children and old people were being exterminated up and down the country. We hid my grandparents and my four young old cousin in the attic, fully expecting to return soon to our room in the ghetto. In fact it was the last time we saw them and we later learnt that they had all been shot.

The rest of us, having dressed in a hurry, went out into the street, which was by then crammed with people, and like sheep we followed one another until we came to a large field, which was surrounded with Gestapo and SS men, all armed and with large guard dogs. It took a long time for everyone to gather there and then the Gestapo and SS started giving orders over the loudspeakers. First they ordered us all to sit down so that they could watch us better. Then they ordered parents to hand over all children up to 18 years of age. The cries of the children and the mothers' screams of "Almighty God help us, where are you?" still ring in my ears today. You could soon see the children running towards the officers – little ones, bigger ones, some of the bigger ones carrying their younger siblings. They were all placed in enclosed lorries. It was indescribable.

During all this my mother was trying to hide me on one side of her and my sister, who was ten years old, on the other, covering us over with a coat. Of course it was not long before they found my sister and my mother received a beating. It was sheer luck that they did not find me as well. The little girl turned round to the SS man and said, "Please don't hurt her, this is not my mother." Before they took her away, she asked my mother, "Mummy, are they going to kill us?" and my mother replied, "No darling, they are going to take you to your grandma in the Lodz ghetto." My sister ran away with tears running down her face, and we never saw her again.

When all the children had been rounded up, we were lined up and taken to the Jewish cemetery outside town. At the entrance I witnessed the first of the many 'selections' that I endured. With their usual 'one to the right', 'one to the left', they took all the old people, invalids, pregnant women, people who were not fit to work, all were directed to one side; the rest to the other. But when it grew dark, there was no more selection; everyone else was directed to the unlucky side. We sat on the gravestones for two days and two nights, and throughout that time they continued selecting

people from our side to move to the unlucky side. They installed electric lights all round the cemetery so no one should escape.

A young woman sitting near us was rambling on about how happy she was and how lucky she was, because her little boy had died a few weeks earlier. No one, she said, could take him away because he was buried there. Some people tried to make me look older, someone found a lipstick, someone else found a powder compact; they made up my face, put a scarf on my head. One woman even swapped her high-heeled shoes for mine. Even so, just before we left the cemetery, I was spotted by an SS man who came running over and, pointing at me, said, "You, stand up, how old are you?" I was paralysed with fright and could not answer. My father, who was sitting nearby, answered, "She's 18 years old, I know her." In fact I was twelve years old and looked eight! The SS man could see clearly that I was not 18; he looked hard at me for what seemed an eternity, and then said, "She may sit down!" Everyone around me was so relieved – I still believe that God was protecting me and would not let them take me away. Soon after, we were taken out of the cemetery. There were only 1,200 people left, including only three children, of whom I was one. In the ghetto there had originally been 28,000 people.

We were taken to the railway sidings where guards carrying sacks were collecting our money and valuables. We gave everything away, but my father wore a ring which was so deeply embedded that he could not take it off, so he left it on, hoping for the best. Then they called out the president of the ghetto, shot him in front of us and kicked his body into a corner. We were packed into the waiting cattle trucks without food or water. We had had nothing to eat or drink since we left our homes. They closed the big doors of the trucks, bolted them and off we went to what we later learned was the Lodz ghetto, a journey of 45 kilometres which normally took one hour, but which lasted 24 hours. The stench in the trucks was overpowering as people had to relieve themselves wherever they stood – over a hundred people suffocated on that journey as the trucks had no windows.

When we arrived in Lodz, my father's mother, who lived in the ghetto there, took us in, but after two weeks another 'selection' took place in our block. We had to go down to the quadrangle where the Gestapo and SS came with their closed-in lorries and once again took invalids, old people, children, pregnant women, people who looked too ill to work – and put them all on the lorries. Once again, I slipped through the net, but this time they took my grandmother away. One of the SS guards noticed the ring on my father's finger and said, "Hand over the ring." My father explained that he couldn't get it off, so the SS man tried and couldn't move it, and he said to the guards, "Fetch an axe and chop the finger off." Like a miracle, after he said these words, the ring slipped off onto the ground and the SS man took it. My father received a few kicks and that was the end of the ring. We were then allowed to go back to our room.

We all found work in the ghetto factories where the conditions of overcrowding, sickness and starvation were appalling. There was no medication and so many people were dying, even of simple illnesses, and from starvation. One day after I came home from work with a high fever and the doctor diagnosed typhus – which was rife in the ghetto – I was taken straight into the hospital. On the first night, I was told afterwards, I nearly died, but somehow they found an injection for me, which was a very rare commodity, most probably because I was a child. On the second night I heard a great commotion, a lot of screaming and shouting. I learned the next morning that the Gestapo and SS had come with their lorries and emptied the whole hospital, but once again I was saved because they kept away from the contagious ward I was in. My parents took me out of the hospital, and I lay alone locked in our room when my parents had to go to work, terribly frightened. Every time I heard a knock or someone walking, I thought the SS had come to take me away. As soon as I was able to, I went back to work rather than stay on my own.

This is how we lived until the summer of 1944, when the Germans began evacuating all the ghettos. The SS would come to our workplaces, assemble everyone in the quadrangles, and make soothing speeches – they told us that the ghetto was going to be closed down and we would be sent away to working camps, where we would get good food and excellent conditions, with good medical care; they promised us everything. The only thing they asked of us was that we should go to the railway stations voluntarily. At first, people didn't want to leave the ghetto, but gradually conditions

worsened to such an extent that we were driven to leave, and people started going to the stations. However, when the cattle trucks returned empty to take a new batch of people, station cleaners found little notes left in the trucks, saying that the people had been taken to concentration camps where mass killings were taking place. We didn't and couldn't believe it, although of course we should have done! And so people continued to leave voluntarily.

One day, when there seemed no option, my parents and I arrived at the station. We were packed tightly onto the cattle trucks, the doors were slammed shut and bolted and we were left without any food, water or air. The journey took some 24 hours. Again the stench was overpowering. Dawn was just breaking when the train stopped. Immediately you could hear dogs barking. They opened the doors and there was a screaming and bellowing – “Everybody off the train, get a move on, be quick.”

We looked out and it seemed that an army of Gestapo and SS men were waiting, all heavily armed and with large guard dogs. We were dazed, unable to get our bearings. My father jumped first and after I jumped, I never saw him again. Without a kiss of goodbye, he disappeared. Men went to one side, women to the other. All around us was illuminated electrified fencing and above stood a rank of high watchtowers. Guards moved in, shoving us into columns, some whispering, “You are in Auschwitz-Birkenau, this is the place where people are being taken straight to the gas chambers.” We had heard nothing about this bewildering place. We were still there when they came with lorries to take away our luggage for sorting. We were pushed into a queue and at the head a ‘selection’ was being made by the infamous Dr Mengele – the “butcher of Auschwitz” – as we later learned.

Again they sent all the old people, invalids, children and pregnant women to the right. Only the movement of Dr Mengele's hand determined whether you lived or died. Once again I slipped through the net and went to the left, together with my mother, which was a great relief. All those who went to the right were taken straight to what I later learnt were the gas chambers. Those of us on the left side were also lined up in rows of five, and taken through the camp to a large hall. On the way, we heard a most beautiful orchestra which you could hear all over the camp; after all, they had the best musicians from all over Europe.

We were told to strip and leave our clothes on the benches. Then everyone had their heads shaved. Mine wasn't touched because I only had short curls growing back from when my head had been shaved in the hospital. Guards were walking up and down collecting whatever valuables anybody had, and while all this was going on, the young officers were walking up and down, laughing and joking, having the time of their lives. Then we were pushed through some heavy doors to what looked like a shower room without windows. We were all saying prayers, hugging and kissing one another as we thought this was our last hour. However, instead of gas, water came through. We were the lucky ones – they still needed us for hard labour. After that we were pushed through another set of doors to another room where we were given clothing. They gave me a large skirt that would not stay up and a man's pyjama jacket, and that was all. Then we were registered and given a number on a white piece of oblong linen with black lettering, which we had to pin onto whatever we wore. When we walked out of there, we could not recognise one another; we looked as though we had just come out of a lunatic asylum. We were taken to a small open space and left sitting there overnight without food or water, and the cold that night nearly killed me.

The following day we were allocated to an empty hut, and we had to sit against the wall, five in a column, squashed between each other's legs. In this position we had to sit day and night. Roll-calls were taking place twice a day, early morning and late afternoon. Meals were served once a day – just a saucepan of soup which had to be shared between the five people in each column, without a spoon.

Although we did not expect to leave Auschwitz alive, my mother and I were sent to Hamburg for demolition work caused by Allied bombing, and then to a small camp, Poppenbittel, also in the Hamburg area. We suffered terribly from cold and starvation, and the work was very hard and dangerous. On one occasion, we were working near a slaughterhouse in Hamburg Altona when a bull escaped and wounded my mother very seriously, cutting her face open. From that day on she could never work again.

We somehow carried on until sometime in March 1945 when all the small camps were closed down and we were sent to Bergen-Belsen. My mother was taken on a stretcher and was in a different cattle truck from me. Soon after arrival at Belsen, we found ourselves covered from head to foot with lice. The camp was completely infested. No food was coming into the camp and the water supply had been cut off. Like leaves that fall from a tree, people were falling down and dying. There was sheer chaos in the camp. After a few days of frantic searching, I finally found my mother in one of the huts, still alive – but only just.

By then we realised that the war was coming to an end, as the SS men and women were walking around with white armbands, to show that they were surrendering, hoping to save themselves. However, we also knew that we couldn't last much longer and had given up all hope of surviving. The British 2nd army liberated Belsen on 15 April 1945. As soon as possible, we were transferred to the tank-training school six kilometres away for delousing and then to makeshift hospitals, where German doctors and nurses were made to look after us. I was unconscious for ten days after we were liberated. Two days after I regained consciousness, on 27 April, my mother died aged 42 and was buried in a mass grave, together with the thousands of others who died from starvation and disease after the liberation.

I remained in hospital for several weeks until I was fit to come out, when I was given some clothes and allocated a room with several other survivors – refugees from every country in Europe. We picked up a little of each other's languages and, by mixing in a little German, managed to communicate. But we were not really interested in each other or in the fact that the war was over. Everyone had two preoccupations – staying alive and being reunited with any surviving relatives. After a few weeks, my aunt Miriam, who was in a nearby camp at Braunschweig, came to Belsen to look up the register of survivors, and found my name on it. I was so grateful that someone from my family had found me, and she took me back with her to Braunschweig.

After a few months, we made our way back to Lodz in Poland and I realised that I had lost my home, my possessions, my entire family, my health and my education. The journey was very difficult since we had no money and the trains did not run properly, so it took three weeks to get back to Lodz. We walked part of the way, hitched lifts and travelled on the roofs of trains. We lived on potatoes or whatever scraps we could scrounge from local farmers. One day, we were sitting in a goods train on the Polish border. I was holding a parcel containing my shoes – on my feet was a pair of new shoes, two sizes too small, which my aunt had obtained for her son, whom she hoped to find alive. The idea was that if we were robbed, the new shoes would not be taken. Of course we were robbed – by Russian soldiers who swept through the train and left us with nothing. So I had a lovely pair of tight shoes to start a new life with!

In Lodz I found one of my mother's sisters, Gitl, who had also come back from one of the camps. She took me in and shared what little she had with me. I was very ill with a festering skin disease. Because we had no money to buy ointment, I was told to rub salt into the itchy, open wounds. The skin disease eventually cleared up – but I don't recommend the salt treatment! At the end of 1945, Gitl remarried and together we made our way back to Germany, via Czechoslovakia and Austria, since Poland was very anti-Semitic. From Germany, we made our way to Paris. In the beginning, life in Paris was very difficult for us – we had no official papers, no money, and we could not speak French.

In 1949 I met my husband, Charles, in Paris. He is British and, coincidentally, was one of the Military Police who were among the first to enter Belsen. He arrested the woman commandant, Irma Grese, who was later hanged. He brought me back to London and we were married the same year. We have a son and a daughter and five grandchildren.

This testimony is dedicated to my darling grandchildren, Rebecca, Daniela and Susanna, Adrian and Benjamin, and to the memory of my family who perished in the Holocaust.

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