

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch – Inherit the Truth

I was born in the town of Breslau, which was German then and is Polish now. My father was a lawyer and my mother was a beautiful lady and a very fine violinist. We had a very happy home. We were three sisters and we all learnt to play an instrument. I played the cello. There was no particular emphasis on being Jewish. We were a typical completely assimilated Jewish Liberal family.

‘Culture’ was a very important part of our lives. We read the classics every Saturday afternoon, a great deal of chamber music was played in our home and we were brought up speaking French. In fact, there was a rule in our house that on Sundays French only had to be spoken. My father maintained that people have as many souls as they have languages. Life seemed normal and it was inconceivable that it should not continue to be so.

My first encounter with anti-semitism was at the school I attended. I was eight years old. I was about to wipe the blackboard and one of the children said, ‘Don’t give the Jew the sponge.’ This is a long time ago, but I have never forgotten it. Then suddenly some children spat at me in the street and called me a dirty Jew. I did not really understand what was going on. One just had to accept that one was different. One did not belong to the master race.

When I was 12 years old, it became impossible to continue my cello lessons because there were no Jewish cello teachers left in Breslau, and it had become too dangerous for an ‘Aryan’ cellist to teach a Jewish child. With some difficulties, my parents got permission for me to leave school and go to Berlin, where I had private tuition in school subjects and lessons with the only Jewish cello teacher still living there.

This came to an abrupt end on 9 November, *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass). Herr vom Rath, a minor official at the German Embassy in Paris was shot by a Jew, a young man by the name of Herschel Grynszpan. This incident ‘spontaneously enraged the German people,’ as the press put it at the time, and the first major pogrom of the Nazi era took place. It served as an excuse to unleash the worst instincts in brainwashed hooligans who were acting on behalf of the government at that time. Synagogues were burnt down, Jewish shops smashed up and looted, and private homes invaded and demolished. The majority of the male population was arrested and the expression ‘concentration camp’ became part of the vocabulary.

The *Kristallnacht* was a kind of dress rehearsal for things to come. A test. How far can we go...? The willingness of the mob to attack undefended targets was a green light for the Nazis. There were no limits to what could be done in the pursuit of torturing Jews, and it became patently clear that one could no longer remain in Germany. Frantic efforts at emigration were made, but as night follows day, it became more and more difficult to find a

safe haven. Frontiers closed and the difficulties one had to overcome to obtain entry into another country became well-nigh ludicrous. Enormous difficulties were also made by the Germans themselves – who were so keen to get rid of us. If you wanted to get away, you had to pay. Many people did not get away, and I assure you that it was not for lack of trying. My family was among those.

Public places displayed signs that Jews were not welcome. We were not allowed to own radios; bicycles had to be surrendered; we had to add the name Sara or Israel to our names; we had to wear the yellow star on our clothes and so on. The war broke out and we were finally trapped.

Life still had a semblance of normality although one's concept of normality was greatly distorted by then. After my return home from Berlin and realising that emigration was out of the question, I tried to go back to school. This time a Jewish one. Eventually Jewish schools closed and I was conscripted to work in a paper factory. We had to leave our home and move into a flat with my aunt, which was already hopelessly overcrowded. The deportation of Jews started in earnest.

On 20 January 1942 a conference took place in a suburb of Berlin, called Wannsee. At this 'Wannsee Conference' they discussed – and it took just one hour and a half – how to exterminate European Jewry: and we are talking here of a matter of 11 million people...

On 9 April 1942 my parents were deported and sent on a transport to the East, to a place called Isbiza near Lublin. Of course we wanted to stay together as a family. My sister Renate's and my name were not on the list, but if we had simply presented ourselves, we would hardly have been sent back. But our father did not want to hear of it. 'It is better that you remain. Where we are going, one gets there soon enough.' Needless to say that I never saw them again. I was 16 years old.

After the war I went to the Wiener Library (a documentation centre in London dealing with the persecution of Jews), and learnt that the method of murdering where my parents went was that the victims had to dig their own graves, undress and be shot into these graves. A very messy way of eliminating human beings. A more efficient way had to be found – gas chambers.

My aunt, uncle and grandmother had also been deported and now we were completely alone. We continued working in the paper factory. The workforce there were Jews, Poles and French prisoners of war. I could never accept that I should be killed for what I happened to be born as, and decided to give the Germans a better reason for killing me. I involved myself in clandestine activities – forged papers for French prisoners of war to escape with. Eventually, I tried to escape myself with forged papers.

These papers were leave passes for French civilian workers, who – unlike French prisoners of war – were allowed to go on leave from time to time. It was of course strictly forbidden to talk to the prisoners. We chose to ignore this and developed an extremely ingenious way of communicating with them. There were segregated toilets in the factory. In the toilet for Jews, the bracket holding the chain for flushing had become loose and you could pull it

straight out of the wall, leaving a hole in the wall. On the other side of this wall was the refectory of the French prisoners. We developed a sort of sign-language, whereby a prisoner and I would go to our respective locations, and communicate through this hole by whispering almost inaudibly into each other's ear or putting messages through it. My main occupation was to produce civilian clothes and forge the writing on the papers which were given to me. I was able to write the German script and I still had a typewriter.

One day, I found that the hole had been blocked up. We had obviously been observed. That was when we decided to make a run for it. The idea was to get somehow into the unoccupied zone of France. It was not exactly the most thought-out escape plan, but one didn't think too far ahead in those days. There was only one overpowering thought in one's mind: to get out of Germany.

We did not get very far – to be exact, no further than the railway station. I had obviously been watched by the Gestapo for some time. I was arrested and sent to prison. I had committed a criminal offence. Forgery, Helping the Enemy and Attempted Escape were my indictments when I eventually appeared in court to be sentenced. The absurdity of my situation was that having committed a criminal offence on top of being a Jew – which was bad enough – actually helped me rather than hindered me. It permitted me to stay in prison for over a year, postponing my arrival at a concentration camp. When I was eventually sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, I did not have to go through the usual selection on arrival at the notorious ramp, where the SS chose who should live and who should die in the gas chamber. I had a criminal record – I was a *Karteihäftling*, a prisoner with a file, and they did not get gassed automatically. In other words, it was preferable to arrive in Auschwitz as a convicted criminal rather than an innocent citizen...

That I survived nearly one year in Auschwitz is without any doubt due to the fact that I became a member of the camp orchestra. As long as the Germans wanted an orchestra, it would have been counter-productive to kill us. Our task consisted of playing every morning and every evening at the gate of the camp so that the outgoing and incoming work commandos would march neatly in step to the marches we played. We also had to be available at all times to play to individual SS staff who would come into our Block and wanted to hear some music after sending thousands of people to their death.

Although we were somewhat privileged, we had no illusions that we would end up in the gas chamber eventually; we were all of us under sentence of death. It did not seem remotely possible that anyone would come out of Auschwitz alive. But a miracle happened. The Russians advanced, and we were shunted westwards to Bergen-Belsen. No one had ever heard of it.

Bergen-Belsen was very different from Auschwitz. In Auschwitz, people were murdered in the most sophisticated manner; in Belsen, they simply perished. There was no orchestra there. We sat about and waited and watched each other deteriorate. Belsen was totally ill-equipped to deal with the thousands upon thousands of miserable skeletons who arrived there because of the ever-advancing Allied troops. The last weeks in Belsen saw the arrival of the death marches from all over Germany. Half-dead people dragged themselves into the

compound. They had been marching for days on end and what arrived at the camp were just the remnants. The rest had died on the way.

There are no words to describe this inferno. The dead bodies started piling up; there was no food, no water – nothing. It was clear that we had come to the end of the line. It was very hot that April and the effect of the temperature on the mountains of bodies was horrendous. Feeble attempts were being made to move the corpses. Those of us who could still walk were given some string. We were to tie the arms of the dead together and drag them along the road to a big ditch. But this operation was soon abandoned as futile. We were too weak, and the bodies remained in the camp. The state that square mile was in, in early 1945, beggars the imagination. However, corpses were so much part of the landscape that we – the inmates who had been living like this for weeks and months – no longer noticed them as anything unusual.

We had neither food nor water, and clearly it was only a matter of time. We heard a lot of shooting and rumbling noises in the distance and it was suggested that this was the noise of tanks. But whose tanks? After so many years, my memory of details is somewhat blurred, but I do remember distinctly that I was furious most of the time when someone suggested that these tanks might be British. I did not want to hear it. I felt more 'at home' so to speak with the thought of impending death than the thought of being liberated by the British army.

It was about 5pm on 15 April 1945 when the miracle actually happened: the first British tank rolled into the camp. We were liberated! No one who was in Belsen will ever forget that day. We did not greet our liberators with shouts of joy. We were silent. Silent with incredulity and maybe just a little suspicion that we might be dreaming. In March 1946 – eleven months after the Liberation – I finally managed to come to England. I became a professional musician. I married the pianist Peter Wallfisch in 1952 and have a son and a daughter. My son and two grandsons are also musicians and my daughter is a psychotherapist.

The story of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch is told in her book, *Inherit the Truth, 1939-1945* (dln, London, 1996)

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