

ZIGI SHIPPER BEM



HOLOCAUST
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Zigi Shipper is a survivor of the Holocaust. As a child, he experienced the Łódź Ghetto and several camps including Auschwitz-Birkenau. He was liberated after surviving a death march and came to England. Today, Zigi speaks to thousands of students in schools across the UK, and is committed to sharing his story and teaching the dangers of hatred.



'There is nothing we can do about the past, but we can do a lot about the present and the future.'

Zigi (Zygmunt) Shipper was born in 1930 in Łódź, Poland. He grew up with his father and grandparents after his parents divorced when he was very young. He had a happy and comfortable childhood, attending a Jewish school and spending time with his cousins and friends.

In 1939, Zigi's father escaped to Russia, believing that young Jewish men were in danger of persecution by the Nazis. Zigi was 10 years old and living with his grandparents when the Germans came to his town. They became scared to leave the house and Zigi's school was closed down. Between November 1939 and April 1940, 150,000 Jews (the entire Jewish population of Łódź) were moved into a ghetto. This is when Zigi recalls that the hardship really started. His grandfather soon died due to malnutrition, which became commonplace as food became more and more scarce.

All Jews in the ghetto were forced to find work, so Zigi began working in a metal factory. As more Jews were transported into the ghetto from other areas, the Germans periodically chose thousands of inhabitants to be sent to concentration camps. On one occasion, Zigi was selected and put on a lorry to be taken away, but at the last minute, he jumped off and ran as fast as he could to a hiding place.

Zigi continued to work and live in cramped and squalid conditions until 1944, when the ghetto was liquidated. All inhabitants were loaded onto cattle trucks with no knowledge of their destination. It was overcrowded and many people became dehydrated. Fearing for his life, Zigi remembers that he began to hope that others would die so there would be space to sit down. By the end of the journey, there was.

Eventually, the doors were opened and Zigi, his grandmother, aunts, uncles and cousins had arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. He remembers seeing thick, black smoke in the distance. Zigi was separated from his grandmother at the selection ramp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Now alone, he was taken to showers where he was shaved and forced to give up any possessions, before being given striped clothes with an individual number printed on them. Speaking at the UK Ceremony for HMD 2016, Zigi spoke of how he will never be able to forget this number.

Zigi was sent to a number of camps, with little food and clothing. At a labour camp in Pomerania, Zigi was confronted with horrors that have stayed with him to this day. He vividly remembers five men who were hanged in front of the entire camp for stealing cigarettes; each of them jumped off the stools so as not to give the guards the satisfaction of pulling them away. In March 1945, Zigi was sent on a forced march and contracted typhus. He believes he would not have survived were it not for his friends. He said: 'I was very ill at the time and either you walked or you died, you had two choices.'

On 3 May 1945, they were liberated by the British Army. However, over the following days and weeks many people continued to die of illness or overeating after such a long period of malnutrition. Zigi spent three months after liberation recovering in hospital. He did not know where his father was, and he later found out his grandmother had died the day after liberation at Theresienstadt.

Zigi developed a close bond with his friends and fellow survivors who became his new family. Before long, he received a letter from his mother in England asking him to come and live with her. Zigi was unsure as he had not seen his mother in so long. However, his friends encouraged him saying, 'look around you, look at your friends, they've got nobody and you've found a mother and you don't want to go?' While his friends left for Palestine, Zigi agreed to go to England.

Saying goodbye to the people who had become his family was one of the saddest moments of Zigi's life. Eventually, he arrived in England and met his mother and stepfather, both strangers to him. He says 'the first six months were hell for me. I missed my family [of fellow survivors]. My mother and stepfather were brilliant but they didn't know what to do with me. I couldn't cope. There was nobody to talk to.' A turning point for Zigi came when he found out about the Primrose Club, where a group of young survivors known as 'the boys' met. Despite only knowing some of the people from his time in the ghetto and the camps, they all shared a common experience. When he arrived at the club, the first sentence he uttered was 'at last I've found my family again'.

Today, Zigi speaks to thousands of young people in schools, traveling across the country to share his story and the lessons it teaches. When asked why he speaks so often, he says, 'I really get so much out of speaking to schools, I want young people to know, especially young people, what happened because of racism and most importantly, hatred.'

'Like I say to young people, there is nothing we can do about the past, but we can do a lot about the present and the future, and it's up to young people, the most important people in the world.'

Find out more...

The Holocaust: hmd.org.uk/holocaust

Learn more about Zigi and his experiences: hmd.org.uk/zigi

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Learning lessons from the past to create a safer, better future