

Joshua Whitman  
Bensalem, PA

## **Making Your Heart Stop**

We've heard it many times before; it's important to learn the lessons of the past so that we don't repeat our mistakes in the future. That was kind of a hard concept for a kid like me to grasp, until I got to experience it first hand. This theory is true for the grim realities of the Holocaust, especially for me, because I am the grandson of a Holocaust survivor. That's right, not the great-grandson, but the *grandson*.. .just two generations away from the worst genocide the world has ever seen, perpetrated on my people, on my family, on my dear Bubbie when she was just a little girl.

For me, studying the history, remembering the six million and learning the lessons of the Holocaust started at home, continued in Hebrew school, and culminated with a two week family trip to Europe that showed me just how important it is to pass the history and lessons of the Holocaust on to future generations, like my own. On a mission to find evidence of what happened to my family during the Holocaust, I tracked down my Bubbie's birthplace, trekked across three countries, nearly a dozen cities and towns and visited seven former Concentration Camps, including Bergen Belsen where my Bubbie and my great-grandmom were imprisoned, and the most notorious one of all, where my great-grandfather was murdered, Auschwitz.

Our journey began at the entrance. "ARBEIT MACHT FREI," read the infamous archway over the gateway to hell. Translation; work will make you free, the first lie they told. We walked past the barracks, each one holding museums of pictures, clothing, models, anything that was left; each with a history of its own. We went inside each one, staining them with our tears. We saw rows and rows of shoes, piles of suitcases,

hairbrushes, trinkets, everything the victims brought with them, things they thought they needed. It was all we could do to keep down our breakfast, to just maintain our cool and not have a breakdown. In one of the barracks was a cylinder of ashes. This could have contained the last remains of Manfred Joel, my great-grandfather. Most of the ashes were scattered by the Nazis in an attempt to get rid of evidence. They were dumped in rivers, and used as fertilizers in an effort to hide what they did to us. Some were saved by the liberators and placed in this memorial. We stopped dead when we saw this, took out some flowers, placed them next to the vessel and said Kaddish. After a couple of minutes hearing only the sounds of our tears hitting the ground, we moved on.

Then we came upon the despicable Blocks 10 and 11, and the shooting wall in between. Block 10 is where SS doctors did experiments on victims (mostly women and children, especially twins) without anesthesia. My great aunt, Rosa Tymberg, was in Theresienstadt (one of the camps in the Czech Republic) and eventually was transported to Auschwitz. It was here, in Block 10, that she was experimented on. They were "researching" to see how much heat a human's body could take. They burned her hand to a high degree and then grafted skin on top to cover it up. Fortunately, she survived the Holocaust, but her hand was permanently deformed and she could never really use it again.

Underneath Block 11 were the standing cells. If you did not follow orders quickly enough, fought back, or for any other random reason you could have been sent there. The sentence could last as long as 2 weeks (people usually survived up to 3 days) with up to 5 people standing in one cell. The cells were really tiny (there was a wall covering up the entrance, with the bottom cut out so you had to crawl in) and there were

heaters placed right next to the cells. If the poor victim didn't run out of oxygen and survived the night he/she went right back to work; hard physical labor, barely any food, and then back again to the same cell. We stood in this cell together (the wall had been partially removed to allow this) and with only 3 of us, it was tight. In between Blocks 10 and 11 there was a shooting wall. This is where they lined prisoners up against the wall and then opened fire. Also in this dreadful alley were poles with hooks on them that they used for torture. They tied people's wrists together on these hooks and had them hang from the poles.

After what felt like days of sorrow, we moved to Birkenau (otherwise known as Auschwitz II.). In Birkenau, many people worked, but most of them went to the gas chambers. They had five gas chambers between Auschwitz and Birkenau, and each one led to a crematorium. In short, what we thought was hell had just gotten a lot worse. Before we reached Birkenau, we stopped by a cattle car that was placed between the camps on the Judenramp. It wasn't that big and hundreds of people were shoved into cars like that. After getting over the shock that, even though this didn't seem humanly possible, it happened, we attempted the miles, or what felt like it, of walking to reach the gas chambers/crematorium. The Nazis destroyed the gas chambers before they evacuated the camps, with the exception of #4 which the Jews who were forced to work there, the Sonderkommando, managed to blow up in retaliation, so only the remains of #2 and #3 were left. We unwittingly drenched the pathway to them, certainly following in my great grandfather's last footsteps. We reached each one, stared down the steps into the death pit and just stood there in complete silence, watching the ghosts of the victims take their final steps down the path to everlasting punishment undeserved.

They say that it's always good to come home after a long trip, but we didn't come back alone. Each one of us had changed our perspectives on life, anti-Semitism, and the world around us. All because we took something with us; it was as if Holocaust had jumped into our pockets, each memento of the lost now strapped forever in our minds. And this is what we need to pass on. It's our responsibility. To constantly remind, remember, and teach to our children, and their children, and so on. It's vital that the lessons of the Holocaust must never be forgotten, so that the six million, including my great grandfather and other members of my family, did not die in vain. This lesson extends to our world today. Throughout our sad journey we saw evidence of instances where regular everyday people, could have intervened and done something to save innocent lives. But they failed to take action. Too many people stood by and did nothing to stop the Nazi atrocities. Whenever, wherever we see injustice, prejudice and violence in the world we must take a stand. We must not remain silent. We must raise awareness, raise money, rally our politicians and our government, and make sure that evil is stopped in its tracks and that something like the Holocaust can never, ever happen again.