

Testimony of Esther Mannheim



Ester at Belcez concentration camp visiting with a german friend

Over six million Jews perished in the Holocaust. For those belonging to a generation disconnected from those horrific events, a visit to the Holocaust Memorial Yad Vashem in Israel quickly tells the extent of the brutality. Meeting holocaust survivors and hearing their stories is equally moving. Ester Manheim is a holocaust survivor now living in Tel Aviv, Israel. Paul Calvert spent some time with her to find out her story. Helping us to never forget what happened.

I am from Poland. I was born in the beautiful city of Krakow. If I was a painter I would take a rose colour to paint my childhood. I lived in a very beautiful house; my parents were comfortable as far as money was concerned, my father owned a paper factory; I was a student in a Hebrew private school so I didn't feel any Anti Semitism. Everything was good; my room was nice with my only sister, it was a lovely warm house full of love. Everything was really good until the first of September 1939.

Two days before I came back from a scout's camp we felt the Anti Semitism.

"The Jews are guilty"; "the Jews are responsible that Hitler came"; everything that is bad is because of the Jews. It was very sad. We opened the radio and it told of the war. My mother turned to us and said "very heavy clouds are coming, I hope we will survive it".

That Friday evening I remember the taste, what we ate, how good it was. A few days later I escaped with my father from Krakow.

As a young girl of 15 I went to my Aunts farm. My father left me there. Later we went back to Krakow and many refugees were coming into the city. My Grandmother and Grandfather came to stay with us and my Aunt and Uncle with two kids. My room wasn't my room any more.

I remember in those days I was sleeping on 2 chairs because I had no bed. My bed was for Grandma or an Aunt not for a young girl.

At this point began all the troubles.

I went back to school and one day came the janitor and said something to the teacher. The teacher looked down and told us "children today is the last day of school, Jewish children are not allowed to learn, go home".

It was a private Hebrew school. That was the last day of my childhood. I was happy at school. We got together as a group and the teacher would help us privately but from time to time the teacher didn't come, why, because he was taken on the streets to work because he was a Jew.

They made us clean the streets of Krakow for one week because we were Jews. I was a spoilt girl and now I am cleaning the streets but that was nothing compared to what was coming.

On one day all Jews must go and receive a yellow star. We were not allowed to go in a tramway, I was not allowed to go in a store where I bought my cakes, coffee houses; for dogs and Jews it was forbidden. When I was five years old I went to the store and ate cake, today I am a dog.

What had I done, I had only been born in a Jewish house that's all!

Then came the ghetto, the ghetto in Krakow.

There was a wall and I needed permission to go to the house where I live,

but I was young and as youth we would meet together and sing songs of hope and love. We really wanted another world. We hoped as after every winter comes May, but for us the May didn't come.

In the ghetto they were awful times. They were very hard times, but we were together, Mother, Father, Grandmother, Grandfather, my sister and me. Then the Germans came and took my father to prison. Why? Because he gave a donation to an orphan house. The Germans ask where did you get money? You should not have money. So they took him to prison.



Esther Mannheim

After that came the first evacuation. We should have a stamp on our ID card. My Mother got it for her and for my sister and when I come they look and they put it down. My school friend was sitting there, I told her they took my ID card, she said to be quiet and took my card and gave it to me and so she saved my life. A few days later there was an evacuation and people who had the stamp were sent to Belgitz.

We saw through the window of our house how the Germans took our neighbours. The small children with their small baggage. They looked around and they didn't know that that was the last time they would be here. They were leaving for good.

They came to my house but because my family were in prison they left.

Again there was a new action. They came and took my cousin. She was like my sister being four months older than me. She was living with us at the time. They took her to Belgitz. I saw her leaving alone. We were brought up like twins.

Three days before my Grandmother died, on that night my Grandfather died. My mother came to me and said that we are like a mouse that has eaten poison; the poison is in and we are running from place to place but there is nowhere to escape.

I went to work and I waited for my mother to come and pick me up but she didn't come. I began to cry. They asked me why did you cry? I replied I'm anxious about my mother. They said what, you have a father and a sister, you're only anxious about your mother? I thought, I don't know why, I kept thinking what has happened to my mother? When I came back from work my sister ran to me and told me "they have taken mummy". We both cried. The whole street cried. We were sitting when my father came from work and we ran to him. They took mammy we said. He is a strong man. He sat on the floor and said "no, no, it's impossible". He ran to bring her back but the train had gone away. It was too late. I never said goodbye to my mother and I never saw her again. You know it's a wound that you feel in your body even till today.

She was alone on her last way. A mother and wife and such a good person. There was no-one to support her.

The whole time I thought, how did she die? How did she feel on her last way alone?

I was in Belgitz a few years ago with my friend and I took from there a little bit of earth and I put it on the grave of my father to bring them together after so many years.

In another few months we were hungry, but in a room with a little canary bird that we took with us the whole time. On 13th of March it was the liquidation of the ghetto. The day before my aunt with her two daughters wanted to escape from the ghetto but a Polish soldier found them, so a few days later they sent them to Auschwitz. My cousin survived, her mother and sister didn't.

In the room where there was 12 now there was only four. I opened the door for the bird and said to him, "you will be free but what will become of me"? I didn't know.

We left Krakow. On the gates of the ghetto was Mr Gets. What I have seen there and what's been done there only his book can describe.

Two girls were going for a wash but they were found and they were killed.

There was a man and on his back was something moving; the Commandeer saw it, he took his gun, a revolver and shot. It was a child hidden there, he killed the child.

He took a child, a very small child, maybe one year old and smashed his head against the wall. He killed that child. The crying it was something awful. It was something you cannot describe. Death was working through us. We didn't know if we would live or die.

On an evening we came to Plashov, staying in barracks. In the night we hear "they are coming, they are coming, the children are coming". All the mothers that have children ran to see their children, but only a few children came. To see the look on the mother's face when their children didn't come. As they looked at the children and mothers that were reunited and thinking about their children. I could feel for them with empathy, I could feel their sorrow and their pain.



Esther with her german friend Christa

The children weren't allowed inside the barracks but they were hidden there from the German soldiers. One day they hung a young boy because he was singing a song. That Commandeer Get thought it was a Russian song so he must be a communist. The Boy was 14 years old.

On another day they kill a group and in this group were a few of my good friends. They were killed because they found that one of them had some white bread, "where did you get white bread"? They asked.

Every day was something new, something awful. The commandeer had two dogs, Rolf and Ralf and the girl who worked for him had to call the dogs Heir Rolf and Heir Ralf, Mr Rolf and Mr Ralf. These two dogs killed children. He would send them to kill pupils; people on the street; perhaps if someone wasn't in his barrack working, maybe they were on the way to the toilet; he would send the dogs after him, kill him. It was a sport.

The worst thing was the nights. You couldn't sleep. You were very tired but you could hear the whole night the name of the child, "where are you, where are you"? One person wept and then another person wept; but we tried to dream of a better time and we sang songs. We wanted to live and hoped that it would be better.

They took all the children from the kindergarten, all the Jewish kids. Parents wept and the policeman said there was nothing you could do they are on the train to Auschwitz.

One day a good friend came to me and she said they have taken my mother, I couldn't tell her anything, what could I say? What did people say to me when they took my mother? Then a woman was weeping, "my two boys my two sweet boys, they have taken them". There was a woman, she turned to me and said "you know I can feel her pain, it's a year ago that they took my boys".

There was a famous doctor with us, he took two shoes, shoes of his children and he spoke to those shoes; he spoke to them and smelled them, he was speaking to them as though it was his girl, his daughter.

On another time there was a selection and they took my father, my uncle and my boyfriend. Three of them went to Mathausen, only my father survived, the other two died in awful conditions.

Then they took us to Aushervitz. The journey should be one hour, but it took one day. We were closed in a wagon without food, we couldn't go out. In the morning they opened the wagon. We didn't know where we were or what it was.

They took us to a sauna and we waited, we didn't know what would come, whether it would be water or gas. They took all our clothes, it was cold; October in Poland is cold. It was cold and we were hungry. They put us 12 people in a barrack.

They gave us a number; I have a number on my arm. After a few days they put us on a death train.

At the beginning we had no place to sit. After a few days there were a lot of places to sit because a lot of the people died from cold and from hunger. One night we stayed in a forest, we thought that this was the last moment. Everyone started to pray in all languages; praying in Russian, French and Dutch all in the same wagon. Everyone prayed in their own language.

A German came and asked if there were any sick people and we said no. They took all the sick people on the wagon and killed them on the way.

We arrived in Ravensbruck. There they sent us to another camp and they wanted us to die from hunger. They gave us a piece of bread, one bread for 10 people. I was the happy one with the knife. We had a little piece of bread, so I measured it; how it is high and how it is long to give to everyone. To see the look on their faces when I done it, a little bit fell down and they took it. We were thirsty, we were hungry.

On April 26th, Hitler's birthday, they bombed Berlin and we who were in danger were happy to hear the bombing. On the 2nd May at night the Germans escaped. Some people came to us and said "You are free". "Free, that's impossible". We should have been happy, but on this night everyone understood what had happened to his family on this day. Until

this day he was in danger but now you would hear only weeping and crying and why did I stay alive and not my child and not my mother and not my family?

When we came back to Krakow we found nobody.

I came to Israel after one year; on the 2nd May I was in the Negev.

You know I am one of the survivors. My voice is the voice of thousands of people who've suffered as I have suffered.