

From a Name to a Number: A Holocaust Survivor's Autobiography

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PREFACE

I had lived in Forest Hills, New York for 40 years and I had never been asked to share my life story, with students or adults. Like many other Holocaust survivors, I was focused on adjusting to a new life in a new country. I had a full time job until the age of 73, and then I left New York for Oregon.

I have never been able to bring down an iron curtain on my past. For me, the horrific memories from the Holocaust are still fresh. The ashes I rose from are still smoldering. I am tormented by memories even as I try to carry on with my life. I am crying in silence, I am still in pain, I am draped in sadness. While grieving I am also somewhat healed. Most members, of my extended family, had passed away but their love will stay and our relationship will never end, because love is not mortal. They are all dead but alive in my heart. The warmth that permeated our family is the anchor that I hang on to. The Holocaust is a ghastly and repulsive historical nightmare. Not all physical and mental scars can be completely healed with passing years; some extend through time. However, I can not let grief immobilize me.

I realize that it is beyond the understanding of most people to fathom the horror and dread that I have witnessed and endured. The Holocaust is indeed beyond comprehension. My tribulations during the Holocaust are so removed from people's daily lives that those horrors sound unbelievable to them.

In April 2000, I moved to Hillsboro Oregon. I met a Holocaust survivor who urged me to join the Oregon Holocaust Resource Center (OHRC). I did, and became a member of the OHRC “Speakers Bureau.” The Speakers share their Holocaust experiences with young students and adults, in the State of Oregon and Washington.

I have always been self conscious of my limited vocabulary, my foreign accent and my flawed diction. Had I been well versed in the English language I would still feel uncomfortable to address audiences. However, I was coaxed by the coordinator of OHRC to give a try, and I made my first presentation, in December 2000, at Century High School, Hillsboro.

Since then, I have shared my life story with about 300 audiences. Most of my listeners have been quite respectful, sympathetic, as reflected in their faces, sometimes with outrage and often with tears. They are captivated, in their rapt attentiveness, spellbound at times. The appreciation for my implicit and explicit messages is reflected in their verbal and written responses. I am very

pleased when told by teachers that my presentation had inspired even the most fidgety students. I was also pleased when a trauma counselor told me that sharing my true life story might be a healing catharsis for me.

I was not aware that my voice could have a positive impact on life audiences. I pray and hope that my harrowing story, which continues to be so difficult and painful to tell, will also propel the readers of "From a Name to a Number" to combat racism and prejudice whenever it appears and whomever it threatens. As students and adults respond appreciatively to my presentations, the more I sense an obligation to continue to share my life story. As the Holocaust moves from living memory into the archival past, and as the ranks of survivors are rapidly dwindling, it becomes imperative to perpetuate the Holocaust legacy. The Holocaust was indeed a Jewish tragedy, but also a tragedy for the entire civilized world to let it happen, an indelible human shame.

When I was liberated, in May 1945, every ounce of me dreamed of a world without hatred, without prejudice, without persecution, an irenic environment. I still hold tightly to that dream. By defeating the Nazis, the Allies flicked the light switch for a free and enlightened world. I presumed then the Holocaust to be an aberration of history and I anticipated an encrusted postwar order of peace. Regretfully, it seems that the world is now moving towards darkness. It has not learned from the tragic lessons of WWII. The world is being put to a test, today, and falls into an abyss rather than rising to the height of human dignity. Arrogance is being fueled by oil and hubris by possessors of destructive weaponry. .

In today's paradoxical world there are boundless opportunities for a better future. However, political and racial conflicts, religious fundamentalists and fanatical ideologists may lead to a global crematorium. It will be much more destructive than the one in Auschwitz. We are living in a time when a perilous situation may turn catastrophic and engulf all of us. The 27,000 nuclear warheads in various hands around the world have the potential of destroying entire continents. CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons) capabilities are being sought by terrorists. A single terrorist can carry out an act that may cause the death of millions. I have seen that man's capacity for evil has no limit just as man's genius is not limited to reach new heights in every human endeavor. The Holocaust legacy has an intrinsic value as a warning for the future.

Hitler's wars of conquest and the Holocaust left an indelible legacy which has been inherited, and will continue to be inherited, by every succeeding German generation. Today, many Germans would like to be exonerated for the most heinous crimes committed by their forebears. They would like to get beyond a brutal past, an unpalatable one. Holding future generations accountable for the atrocities of their ancestors is obviously not justified. However, the dark pages of Germany's past can not be ripped from history books.

Many people turn away from the subject of the Holocaust; they don't want to hear anymore about it. My children and most of my grandchildren show no desire to listen to and learn from my Holocaust experience. They do not enable me to share my pain with them. In my view, it is very important to expose the causes of the Nazi crimes and ensure that such causes are readily recognizable. In that fashion, if the seeds of genocide ever begin to appear, they can be identified and eradicated before they ripen. Only then can we feel secure that genocide will never happen again. Hitler's ideology and evil will have no future.

Our sages said thousands of years ago: “A smart man is the one who learns from his experience, but still the smartest is the one who learns from somebody else’s experience.” The Greeks have an adage: “We suffer on our way to wisdom.” Albert Einstein said, “In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity.” It would be rewarding to me if my life story will elucidate the readers, of this book, what intolerance may lead to and how prejudice reprehensible is.

The sole purpose of my book is to share with the readers my bitter experience hoping that by doing so I am helping them to understand the scope of what had happened during the Holocaust. I strive to encourage my readers to think and to take actions that another Holocaust should not happen again. Also, how imperative it becomes not to lose hope, to be appreciative of life despite adversities one has to face. My desire is to leave this world a better place than the one I inherited and experienced.

Every Holocaust survivor has a story to share. I have a deep sense of having a mission to share my life story. Many life stories will never be told and many talents will never serve mankind, because so many talented individuals were murdered.

I am convinced that without a systematic approach to educate the young regarding the Holocaust, its meaning and lesson will fade. California and a few other states in the U.S. have passed laws that public schools must include the Holocaust legacy in their curriculum. I feel that it should become a mandatory subject to teach in all schools. This unfathomable reality is a part of history not to be forgotten.

I am pleased that the United Nation’s declaration of setting January 27th (anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz death camp) as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The November 1, 2005 resolution commends countries to establish programs of remembrance and education pertaining to the Holocaust. Secretary General Kofi Annan has pointed out the fact that the United Nations was founded on the ashes of the Holocaust. The adopted resolution states “the U.N. bears a special responsibility to ensure that the Holocaust and its lessons are never forgotten and that this tragedy will forever serve as a warning to all people of the dangers of hatred, bigotry, racism and prejudice.” Stressing the duty to remember and the duty to educate, the resolution rejects any denial of the Holocaust, condemns discrimination and violence based on religion or ethnicity. It calls for U.N. establishment of outreach programs that encourage public engagement in Holocaust remembrance activities.

I saw a film depicting a cellist gone mad because the Nazis, upon learning his profession, crushed his fingers. In February 1943, a guard, with an impish smile, a little square mustache like Hitler, noticed that I had talked to another prisoner at work. For that infraction (actually, no reason or excuse needed) he summoned me to his post. While growling he applied a lighted cigarette to my palm and punched me in the mouth grumbling: “*Ferfluchte Jude, du wilst niemals wieder sprechen.*” (Cursed Jew, you will never be able to talk again) He knocked out several of my teeth and caused other teeth to slant back. I was left to bleed and wheezing. Nobody heard my cry of agony. All I could hear was my own heart pounding wildly. He probably would have killed me but while hitting me he somehow hurt his arm(s) and sought medical help. He knew how to inflict pain, but could not stand his pain. I was dragged face downward, by other inmates, to the camp. In spite of that Nazi’s thrusting blow, his portended purpose had not materialized. I am not stifled, I do talk, and sometimes I do speak out. In the U.S., I enjoy the freedom to speak whenever and whomever I wish to.

I am an ordinary person with an extraordinary past; my lecture presentations are based on an empirical foundation. I realize that sharing my story, although it does not alleviate my pain, propels a number of people to be more compassionate. Recounting my personal experiences often plays a positive role like a teacher that can make in a child's education. Many of my listeners become introspective and appreciative of the freedom they enjoy, in this blessed U.S.A., where many ethnic, religious and cultural groups live in a relatively harmonious environment.

Simon Dubnow, the renowned Jewish historian from Latvia was killed by the Nazis in December 1941. His last words, in Yiddish were: "*shreibt unt farshreibt*" (Write and record!) He felt that those who witnessed the horrific events of the Holocaust have a sacred duty to tell what they had experienced. I am one of the survivors who can still speak. If I do not write now, my life story will not be told.

After my presentation in a Church, a WWII veteran said to me, in front of congregants" Promise me, Mr. Wiener that your life story will be in print, for my children and grandchildren" I promised him and I am keeping my promise.

In the death chambers, once the doors were locked, the victims had only a few minutes to live, but some had the physical and moral strength to scratch, into the walls, "*Gedenkt unz*", "*Zychru otanu*", "*pamietaj nas*", "*Ne felejes el bennunket*"- remember us, remember the Nazi's cruelty.." It is gratifying to know that in the future the past will be visual: my life story as well as other Holocaust survivors' stories had been taped to which historians and others will have access to.

There are only a few documents and pictures illustrated in this book, because I only have a few. On arrival in Waldenburg concentration camp, in September 1944, we were stripped of everything personal, including meaningful photos to us and meaningless to the Germans. I do not have a birth certificate, like any person, in the modern world, has. At the age of 80, I am not able to recount many family events and many episodes escaped my memory. Older relatives of mine who were better familiar with the woven strands of our family's history could have contributed to this book, but they are all dead.

To be monetarily rewarded for sharing my tragic experience just does not feel right. Therefore I do not ask to be paid for my speaking engagements. The same principle applies to this book. I do not seek publicity, no fame and no money. The income of this book, if any, will be donated to worthy causes. I write out of duty. I am gratified that my spoken words had a positive impact on people's mind and actions and I anticipate the same from my written words. Some words are nothing but tears about my perennial pain.

This is not a story from history records etched on stone with a chisel, written with a quill on parchment or papyrus, with a pencil or pen on paper. The accuracy of history records is often questioned. Print has been in existence for only six hundred years. I am only in a position to aver that everything written in this non-fiction memoir is unvarnished. It is accurate (besides possible misspellings of German terms and imprecise dates) to the best of my ability and memory, which is not infallible. Many memories vanished into oblivion and other memories are hard to bring out from dark cages. This is a chronological biography. It is my journey from childhood with a glimpse into the "old country." It is about my tribulations during the Holocaust, and its ensuing odyssey. This book is too small to hold everything that happened to me. On the other hand, I would be unconscionable to put my experiences in the attic once and for all.
