BERLIN WALL BEFORE AND AFTER Part III

GLORIA LYON

Jewish survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp and other concentration camps. Born 1930 in Nagy Bereg (Beregi) near Beregszász (Beregovo) formerly Czechoslovakia and now Ukraine. Lecturer in Holocaust Studies. Lives in San Francisco, California, USA.

Kuwait's oil burning smokes reminded me Auschwitz.

Q: How did things change in your country in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and how did the Holocaust come to you suddenly or did you have any kind of information, Mrs. Lyon?

A: I remember a particular incident when I was child. It was in the summer of 1943 before the Nazis came to arrest us. A strange Jewish man from Poland came to my rural hometown. He was shot and injured in a massacre. He was carrying an important message for Jewish people. He came to inform us of something we'd never heard: "Nazi Germans are killing Jews in Poland and elsewhere in Europe under German occupation. I escaped from it.I'm telling you, it's going to happen here soon. Everybody must be aware." He went urgently from street to street, village to village, and town to town across the Carpathian mountains impatiently telling Jews his story. I remember him very well. He was in his early 30s, had huge eyes with bushy eyebrows, and was a little over weight. The people he talked to in my town thought he was a lunatic: he'd lost his mind, poor man! At that time, in my quiet town with a Jewish community of just hundred, nobody paid attention to him. Nobody took his words seriously. We were ignorant: not ready to accept such shocking news. During the war years, there were many rumors which drove us into confusion, but people didn't believe it until it really happened. Nagy Bereg, my hometown, 8km from Beregszász in eastern Czechoslovakia, was a beautiful scenic border town surrounded by Hungary, Romania, and Ukraine. As a result of the Munich Agreement in 1938, it became a part of Hungary, and we were suddenly coerced into speaking Hungarian. Since Hungary was allied with Nazi Germany, racial law were gradually enacted. My family, parents, three brothers one sister and I, was a traditional middle class Jewish family, who had lived in this town for many generations. My father was a wine maker and farmer. We lived in a big house with a grocery store in front and grape arbor in the sideyard: we had a relatively happy life until the Nazi Germans occupied our land.

Q: How did your school life change, and how were Jews affected during the Nazi German occupation of Hungary?

A: At the age of 8 I was in a Czechoslovakian elementary school, but after 1938 I was transferred to a Hungarian school.My class was mixed with Hungarian and Czechoslovakian pupils; Christians and Jews, but instruction was in Hungarian. In addition, I privately studied Hebrew culture, language and history.Anti-Semitism didn't start right in the beginning, but later on I heard anti-Semitic remarks from the teachers and peers. My parents occasionally talked about politics at home, but I'm certain that they were totally unaware of what was going on in Germany and German occupied countries. The news were censored by the Hungarians, and it was illegal to own radios.In rapid succession, the Nazi anti-Semitic laws were adopted by the Hungarian government, and eventually reached our community.We were isolated in schools and contact between Jews and gentiles became illegal. Anti-Semitic laws directly affected my father's business. In the fall of 1939, one of his Christian close friend-business partners was quit working with him: my father was deprived of farm equipment such as his wheat threshing machine. His main income to support our family of seven was cut off. Preparing for the worst, we preserved agricultural produce in our attic, basements, and wine cellar: corn, wheat, potatoes, etc. We also secretly hid a radio to keep up on up the censured news.

Q: Then, how were you and your family arrested and where were you taken?

A: The night before SS soldiers entered to our town, our Christian neighbor friend came to our home to inform us that the Jewish people will be rounded up the following morning, and we should be ready. We immediately notified many of our Jewish friends. Then my parents hid our family valuables; silver candelabrum, silver ware, diamond rings, gold watches, necklaces under one of the bedroom floors. My mother prepared smoked meats and matzos to take with us. At five o'clock next morning, in April, 1944, SS soldiers and the Hungarian police knocked on our front door. They ordered us to leave within a half hour.Each of us quickly packed our personal belongings. While my father quickly ran to the backyard to say goodbye to our horses, cows, and chickens, I cried for my kitty cat. When everybody in my family was out of the house, our neighbors and my schoolmates were watching us in the streets. One of them took my kitty cat and promised me to look after her until I returned. The SS man locked the front door of the house securely and sealed the lock with imprinted with a brown swastika. Our house was confiscated: it became Nazi property. As we watched, I saw tears on my father's cheeks.

It was the day after Passover: an important Jewish holiday. The Nazis intentionally made specific plans for that day. We were taken together to brick factory and held there under guard together with other Jewish families from nearby regions. We were detained there for four weeks. Then, when all the Jews were rounded up about 15,000 people, we were loaded into cattle cars and transported West. We had no idea where we were heading: we were simply told that we were to be resettled in a better place. After four days of journey, the train stopped. It was Friday evening. My father looked out the cracks of the box car and said, "I don't like what I see: rows of long barracks surrounded by electric barbed wire fences,huge chimneys and watchtowers with searchlights." That was Auschwitz-Birkenau. After we were kept in the train overnight, on the following morning, we were unloaded with shouts of "Out, out, hurry up, hurry up." There were dozens of German SS soldiers with guns and dogs. Many children screamed in fear. They shouted at us to leave all our belongings on the train. It was Saturday: the day of rest for the Jewish people. The first day of my Holocaust experience began on Sabbath: May 19th of 1944.

Q: What did you see in Auschwitz when you arrived, and can you describe details of the selection process by Dr. Mengele?

A: At the ramp of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, there was a selection. I noticed a tall man in black SS uniform, black hat, black boots, and white gloves on his hands. He was standing and quickly pointing at everybody to "left or right". The man was Dr. Josef Mengele, the most-wanted war criminal and notorious Nazi doctor, I later learned. He was called "the Angel of Death" and was entirely in charge of the life and death of new arrivals, at least ten thousand people every day. First, he divided us: the men and the women. My father, 51, and my two brothers,Sandor,18, Viktor, 17, were sent with men, and my mother Helen,48, my sister Annuska, 12, and I 14, went in the other direction. Then, in the women's section, there was a further selection. Old ladies, all the children, young mothers with children, pregnant women, sick and weak girls, and disabled women were sent off to a different direction, so we naturally presumed young women were to be kept together to look after older people and sick people. That crowd was more than three times larger and longer than the other one. When our turn came, my little sister was separated from me and my mother:she was ordered to follow the larger crowd. She panicked and started crying, but an SS soldier was pushing her to follow them, so she did. At that moment, we didn't know that the larger groups was walking toward the gas chambers without knowing they were to be killed immediately.

A few minutes later, we saw a horse drawn wagon carrying bundles and luggages from the train passing by us, and there we saw my little sister riding on the back. When she saw us, she carefully looked around to make sure no SS men were watching, and then she swiftly jumped off and joined us. There was an uncountable mass of people; children crying, some screaming, hysterical, chaotic scenes, and SS men were everywhere.But fortunately nobody saw what she was doing. We were so happy to be united. We then conjectured that we had been chosen to work, perhaps at labor camp. We were taken to a place where we had to hand over all our clothes,except for our shoes and changed to gray cotton uniforms.Our heads were completely shaven bald and our arms tattooed: A-6372 for my mother, A-6373 for my sister, and A-6374 for me; it was unusual to get such sequential numbers for there were no longer families of three left.The luckiest thing was that we three were always together: we worked together and slept together. Our first assignment was to sort clothes and other belongings: we saw people leave their clothes on the lawn. They went into the building and we never saw them came out again. We had strong suspicions because of the putrid smell, the odor of burning human flesh in the air: the smell was unbearable. Another giveaway was the huge black smoke clouds constantly spewing out from the chimneys. To describe it how it was; the smoke clouds of the Kuwaiti oil fire after the recent Gulf War in fact reminded me of Auschwitz. Then, our worst fear became a reality. We realized that our working site was next to the gas chamber and crematorium NO. 4: the giant killing center. Several times we accidently saw a mass of people, men, women, children, and elderly all ages together undressing on the lawn by the so called 'shower' room. It was an absolutely shocking scene, the worst I had ever seen in my life: We were deeply disturbed, horrified and terrified. It was in the summer of 1944.We learned later that was the peak time for the murdering of the Hungarian Jews and for the gassing industrial operation: over ten thousand people were arriving in Auschwitz every day, and the gas chambers and crematoriums were over burned. They couldn't handle so many people quickly enough, and the gassing schedule was running behind. That was the reason we unintentionally saw the naked people on our way to work.

Periodically, additional selections were held by Dr. Mengele. He was in his late 30s,tall and a handsome, never smiled nor said a word. He was always impeccably dressed, his black leather boots were always shiny and spotless even in the filth of Auschwitz-Birkenau. His black uniform and SS cap were immaculately clean. He always wore white gloves on his hands during the selection. He stood in the middle of the barracks, and pointed left and right while he played God deciding our lives. He had remarkably soft eyes, and when one looked in his eyes, one couldn't imagine him to be a mass killer. In his cool glance, one would find not the slightest idea that this man could be the hideous murderer of millions.

It was most interesting to learn that, he was born into a prestigious family, well educated: had two doctor's degrees and studied philosophy at an elite university, and turned himself into the 'angel of death'. Why? He was particularly fascinated with genetic experiments on twins.He was obsessed with the quest to discover a foolproof method for every German woman to bear twins or even triples. When he found twins during his selections, he became gentle, gave them chocolates, and afterwards performed his horrifying experiments on them. He shot them whenever he failed, and burned their bodies in the crematorium. Several thousand twins became his victims and only a handful survived. I remember the twins very well,because next to our work place nicknamed "Kanada" were the twins and his twin experiment laboratory. We saw twin children always starving, so my mother used to throw some food over the barbed wire fence, which she had found among the clothes she sorted. Once, she was caught by an SS guard, taken to the camp commandant and narrowly escaped being beaten.

Q: You had been through a total of seven concentration camps: three death camps and four slave labor camps. How did this happen?

A: After working about several months sorting clothes in the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, one day about the end of December, 1945, I failed the selection. I was separated from my mother and my sister. Dr. Mengele ordered us to undress completely supposedly for medical check up. He picked me to die in the gas chamber along with 30 other women. I was the youngest among them. Those of us who worked in Kanada knew that this was our death sentence. We were taken to a dark barrack totally naked. A truck arrived to take us away. There were two SS guards. One of them ordered us into the truck, the other, a Hungarian SS, recognized me; my sister and I often saw him at the clothes sorting site. He murmured to me, "You, too?" Then, he said to all of us; "You're all going to the gas chamber.If anyone would like to jump off the truck on the way, can do so. But if you are found, you are not to give me away for I may be able to save other lives yet. But if you do give me away, both you and I will be killed." Then, he closed the curtain and started driving. The truck slowly moved towards another section of Auschwitz. It had to cross through two electrified wire gates before reaching a forested area, where the gas chambers were located. The gas chambers and chimneys were surrounded by tall birch trees,invisible from the outside. The gas chamber area was surrounded by beautiful green grass, and you wouldn't feel that you are in the death factory zone. I was familiar with the area, because I passed everyday to work. I also remembered a deep ditch by the cemented narrow road on the way. I said to myself,'If I jump off, I may save my life. If I don't, I'll be gassed and be cremated within hours.'

I suddenly broke my silence, "I'm going to jump, who would like to join me...?" Most of them were either totally exhausted after the ordeal, or too weak to attempt another ordeal, and were stripped of all hope. Nobody replied. I was determined to take the deadly risk. The truck was moving slowly. 'I must do it now..., alone..., fast...,' and I did. I slipped down into a deep ditch next to the road. It was a pitch black; I couldn't see anything. I crawled and touched a culvert with a little water running in the bottom. So I quickly squeezed myself in like a shrimp. About fifteen minutes later, I heard the sirens go on and soon the voices of SS above in the camp. My absence had been discovered. But after a while the commotion had died down.

Q: What a dramatic escape, it's absolutely incredible! So you hid in a culvert of Auschwitz-Birkenau, stark naked, in the middle of winter? You were only 14 years old. In normal circumstances, I can imagine, you would have frozen to death...

A: Now I was alone terrified. I kept saying to myself at the thought of my mother and Annuska mourning for me. They think I'm dead already. 'I must save my life to see them again. I don't recall feeling cold or having any sensation, except the great feeling of triumph: I felt that I had defeated the entire German army. I don't recall much after that. But I certainly remember that I didn't move from the culvert all night and the next day. During those long hours without food or drink, without clothing, hiding in the icy culvert, I must have been hungry, thirsty, tired, scared to death, cold, sick and God knows what else, but I just didn't remember. I wanted to see my mother and sister Annuska again, to let them know that I was alive. They should not grieve for me.

Much later, I was stunned and surprised by what I did. That experience, in retrospect, taught me a lot of things. Human beings can endure much more, if one has someone to live for and has a strong will power. One wouldn't know until tested under certain circumstances in a 'life and death' situation.

Approximately 24 hours later, I climbed back up to the road. In a total darkness, I saw a tiny light like a star in the distance. I followed slowly. The camp field was under complete blackout and totally silent. No one I could see was around. Then I lost my sense of direction: I had no idea where I was heading. As I got closer to the light, I said to myself, 'I'm taking a deadly chance, I may end up straight in the SS headquarters, and I'll be savagely beaten or sent to the gas chamber after all.' I took the risk, anyway. I entered the building. Everybody was asleep and quiet. Luckily, it was a women's barrack. I climbed up to the 3rd tier of a bunk.

A woman inmate screamed seeing me naked in the dark, but she quickly understood my situation, gave me her overcoat and allowed me to sleep there. The next morning there was a roll call. Since inmates were dying like flies of starvation and epidemic diseases everyday and every barrack, the SS didn't even notice as one extra, I melted into this group. Because the Russians were approaching Auschwitz the SS were evacuating the barracks and transporting a group of several hundred women by cattle car to Germany: I happened to be in that group. That was how I got out of Auschwitz 'alive'.

It took three days to reach the Bergen-Belsen camp near Braunschweig and Hanover. We were assigned to move dirt and stones for four weeks. There were no gas chambers there, but I saw a crematorium. The camp was terribly overcrowded. Because of diseases carried in by evacuees from various camps, plagues spread rapidly. Hundreds and thousands of people quickly died from disease and starvation. We saw more and more dead bodies piled up everywhere. At the liberation of the Nazi camps at the war's end, familiar photos depict British soldiers bulldozing a mass of emaciated corpses into a pit: that was the Bergen-Belsen death camp, where my 15 th birthday passed unobserved.

We were relocated to a subcamp in Braunschweig,an industrial city east of Hanover to help clear the streets which were damages by Allied bombing, so that German artilleries and vehicles could pass through. Then I was transferred to a labor camp in Hanover to work on an assembly line making gasmasks at a factory named Continental Gummi Werke (Rubber Factory). Toward the end of the war Hitler had feared Allied poison gas attacks in response to Germany's V-1 and V-2 rockets. The poison gas attacks never materialized. The prisoners at Continental Gummi Werke were of different nationalities: Germany civilians (assigned us for training), political and Jewish prisoners, Poles, resistance fighters from various occupied countries. There, for first time I saw a sort of humanity: whenever emaciated prisoners were beaten, some German civilians protested to the SS guards. There were selections,too. SS men were still shooting slave workers who became too weak to keep up working 12 hours each day. Rations of food were very meager: it was starvation diet. At age of 15 while I was still supposed to be growing, I was instead suffering from malnutrition and vitamin deficiency, and serious weight loss: I was constantly in fear of being selected.

As protection for the Nazi armament industries from extensive Allied bombardment, Hitler relocated the major war related industries to underground tunnel locations. After a brief period in a Hamburg camp, I was shipped out to the Beendorf camp, near Magdeburg, central Germany.

We were assigned to work in an abandoned salt mine, 1,200 feet underground, in a factory which manufactured parts for the secret V-1 and V-2 rockets: That was a top secret place. Huge elevators went down into the mine shaft. Then we walked through a tunnel into the factory, the interior of which consisted entirely of white salt. There were 3,000 men and 1,500 women who performed slave labor inside. We made instrument parts for rocket production. When there were air raids above the ground, the Nazi officers, scientists, and engineers ran to their bomb shelters, but we had to keep working there. In fact, I learned many years later that my father and my brother Sándor were coincidently working in in the same area where I was, some 40 km away. They were in the Dora / Nordhausen camp in the Harz Mountains, the main underground factory for the Nazi rocket production, to which my factory was linked. They were dynamiting silos and tunnels. According to them, they were imprisoned there along with thousands of other slave workers. It was very dangerous and extremely hard labor, especially in the sites where dynamite blasts were unbearable and thousands died by falling debris, buried alive: no gas chamber or crematorium were needed for them.

Q: What a hairraising experience you had! Now the final chapter of your story. How did liberation come to you?

A: In the last part of the war, there was a manpower shortage in Germany and we, the slave workers, were continuously relocated from one place to another. We were totally cut off from news: we had no idea what was going on outside the world. After a few weeks of working in the rocket parts factory, we were shipped to Ravensbruck, a women's experimental camp, and from there again transported to an unknown destination. There were thousands of slaves in the train. After three days in the sealed cattle cars without food or drink, half the prisoners were dead. We had to drag out the corpses from the wagons; leave the sick people behind in the cattle cars. While doing that, we heard the Nazis discussing our fate: "Let's shoot those left, let's kill all of them." We were ordered to line up in a huge meadow. So I knew I was going to be shot. The line was very long. Then, from the end of the line instead of shooting us, someone was giving out a handful of raw macaroni and sugar to each prisoner, one by one. I had no idea what that meant. Anyway, when my turn came, I had no pocket in my garment to receive my ration: I held up my dress to receive it, but I wasn't aware of the holes in my garment and the food fell on the grass instead. So I bent down to pick it up. Because of this, I was beaten up wildly by an SS man with his wooden club until I fell unconscious: I completely lost my memory of what happened after that.

Hours later when I woke up, I was riding in a regular passenger train surrounded by some women. I was told that I was dragged and carried back into the train while I was unconcious. "We're free. We're heading north to Copenhagen, Denmark". I absolutely couldn't believe them. I thought the news were rumors again. Because during my incarceration period, there were so many false rumors and mistrust by the inmates and lies all around me, and by that time I learned not to believe everything I heard. I simply couldn't trust the information. But we, indeed, arrived at the Copenhagen station. We were overwhelmed by the warm reception of the Danish people welcoming us by waving Danish flags in their hands. I was given a brown bag with chocolates and potatoes: boiled, peeled cut up and ready to eat ~~in~~ it, and everybody was smiling at us. I was quite confused because no one had smiled at me for a long time: since the day I was arrested together with my family. Then, I finally believed that the war was coming to an end. I was very feeble. When a man came to me and gave me his hands to help me. I rejected his assistance, because psychologically I still couldn't trust him fearing that he could be a collaborator and any sign of weakness on my part would land me in the gas chambers again. It took me some time to adjust to a normal way of thinking. It was May 3rd, 1945: five days before the surrender of Nazi Germany when we're shipped by ferry boat to Sweden. I never saw the Allied armies. In retrospect,the Swedish people were impressively brave. The thousands of women prisoners from Ravensbrück were carrying all kinds of dreadful contagious diseases, such as typhus, tuberculosis, and pneumonia. But they took all of us in and nurtured us back to health. Still many died en route to freedom or during the months of liberation.

Since I had no memory of what had happened to me after I collapsed unconscious in the open field, I later researched the background of our rescue. During the German occupation of Denmark and Norway,Sweden maintained diplomatic relations with Nazi GErmany. For humanitarian reasons Sweden provided a haven for many Jews. Among these was the entire Danish Jewish community numbering about eight thousands. The Danes, under the courageous leadership of King Christian, saved their many fellow citizens from arrest by the Nazis: for example,every Danish wore the Jewish yellow Star of David in order to confuse the SS, so that they couldn't tell who was a Jew.They rescued Jews and secretly ferried them to Sweden. The Swedes gave shelter for the duration of the war. In the spring of 1945, Count Folke Bernadotte, a vice president of the Swedish Red Cross, negotiated with SS Chief Himmler for the release of Skandinavian concentration camp prisoners. Himmler hoping to use Bernadotte as a gobetween to negotiate a separate peace, agreed toward the end of April to release all prisoners from Ravensbrück. This rescue mission caught up with our train and liberated us.

I was given a home by a Swedish family in Landskrona, Sweden, and they helped me search for my own family.I went to a high school there and was happy with them, but my fear never ended: I was so afraid I might be the only survivor of my family. Eventually, I found my aunt and uncle in St. Louis, and Kansas City, Missouri, and I emigrated to America. Gradually, I learned more of the horrors of the Holocaust, its huge scale and intensity. One third of all the Jews in the world perished: six million innocent men, women and children. What a loss to the whole world! How I survived this was no small miracle.

Q: Did you find your own family in the end? How have you lived since you came to America?

A: Soon after that I was selected to die by Dr. Mengele, the Russian Army entered Auschwitz, and my mother and my sister were liberated and sent home.My father and my brother Sandor were liberated by the American Army in Dora/ Nordhausen V-1 and V-2 rocket factory, and returned home after the war, except Viktor: my another brother who was killed in the camp. But they ended up in another part of the world: the territory of the Communist Soviet Union. And I landed in America.Months after the Holocaust, when I finally reached my mother and my sister by letters written in Sweden, they almost fainted: they never imagined that I was alive. Unfortunately, my mother died three years after liberation and I never saw her again, but 17 years later in 1962, I did reunite with the rest of my family. Most people who went to Auschwitz never came out alive, and after all, we were unusually lucky! But for 50 years after the Holocaust, we survivors have been living with horrifying memory and we all bear psychological scars, and for some it's too hard. Indeed some of the Jewish commando survivors who worked in Auschwitz-Birkenau pulling out corpses from the gas chambers and extracted gold teeth from their mouths and then passed them for the crematoriums, committed suicide. They suffered from tremendous psychological guilt, and couldn't adjust themselves to a normal life. Six million Jews were murdered simply because they were born into the Jewish faith. Why did I survive? I'm no different from those who died: many were brighter, more intelligent, and made important contributions to our civilization. I often question myself, "Why me...?" I don't find satisfactory answers.

Since Jews have a long history, we have many anniversaries. For instance, the day of the Wannsee Conference 50 years ago was my birthday. January 20, 1942,the day the Final Solution was launched was my 12th birthday. The day German SS came to our house to arrest us was the day after Passover: our freedom holiday. I try to brush away my memories of the Holocaust every year, but it still hurts: it's really mental torture, especially for survivors who went through it as adolescents like myself: because some of the memories remain very clear.

There are many survivors who had much worse experiences than I, who ~~they~~ lost all of their families and had to brave life alone. For many yaers after the war, we survivors never talked about it to each other: it was too painful... When my two sons were children, they used to quesion me about my tattoo numbers on my arm. The children of survivors also used to ask their parents why they didn't have uncles, aunts and grandmas and grandpas or where are their cemeteries. It took years for our youngsters to learn the facts and gradually adjust to them. None of us can ever understand it.

Q: When and why did you decide to speak publicly about the Holocaust?

A: That I can answer specifically. In the mid 1970s when I was working as a research analyst for a financial institution, one day in a pile of documents, I found a brochure with a huge swastika on it saying, "Hoax: The Holocaust Never Happened." I was shocked: I couldn't believe it. That was the first I learned that someone is denying the Holocaust: someone has created Holocaust propaganda and denies that it never happened. I was outraged and told myself, "My God, I'm still alive, an eyewitness and they dare claim this! I must do something about this." Normally, I'm too shy to speak out about my experiences in front of people, but I thought someone must come out and talk about it. That propaganda stirred me ~~and~~ sufficiently to do that. With encouragement from my husband and the rabbi of my congregation, I eventually broke out of my long silence. Since then, I have spoken on my eyewitness account for students: universities, high schools, middle schools, and churches audiences, and news media such as radio and TV etc. The Holocaust which annihilated the European Jewry took place in this century in its most horrible and tragic form: it was the climax of many centuries of prejudice, racism, hatred, and persecution against the people which have contributed so much to our human civilization. The Holocaust cannot be simplified and never be dismissed because a dry page in a history book, which is easy to skip and forget; or because of the "Holocaust Hoax Campaign". For this reason, I have been writing my own autobiography to leave my words for future generations. I have also made a ducumentary film tracing footages of my experiences of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp: where and how I escaped, and am currently awaiting for a fund through foundation grants for further process. ***