

THE STORY OF NATHAN BURZINSKI

Nathan was eleven years old when the Germans occupied his hometown of Lodz, Poland in September, 1939. It was a Friday evening, shortly after the invasion of Poland, that Nathan got his first glimpse of German soldiers. "First the motorcycles, then the officers in the jeeps, and then the soldiers came", recalls Nathan. "They came marching in from Alexandria Street, to the center of town, which was the marketplace, and it was shocking to see the people on the corner greeting the Germans with praise and the 'Heil Hitler' salute." He realizes now that many of the Poles were of German ancestry, and many of them spoke fluent German. Overnight, the Poles became German.

Nathan was born on March 20, 1928, in Lodz, Poland, which was, at that time, the second largest city in Poland. Lodz, which is 82 miles southwest of Warsaw, was one of the largest centers of the textile industry in Europe. Since there were many textile factories in Lodz, the Germans didn't bomb the city because the factories were useful in their war effort.

Nathan's father, Herschel Burzinski, was a tailor, and his shop was located in the same apartment that the Burzinskis lived in. The Burzinskis were a family of five; Nathan, his father, Herschel; mother, Adla; two sisters, and one brother (who died before the war ended.) The whole family helped out as much as they could, and Nathan recalls the many trips he took to the place where the buttonholes were made, and then to the wholesalers. Nathan and the Burzinskis enjoyed a happy, normal life.

When the Germans occupied Lodz, they confiscated all the textile merchandise and looted all the stores. During this time, Nathan spent a lot of time wandering about the city observing what was going on.

Since he had blonde hair and blue eyes, the Germans really didn't suspect him of being Jewish. It soon became a common sight for him to see people hanging in the marketplace; on their chests were the crimes they had committed. He realizes now that this was one of the many tools used by the Germans to scare the people.

Since the Germans confiscated everything in the textile business, naturally, his father's business was also confiscated. So, during the war, Nathan's father switched jobs. He bought trees from farmers and cut them and sold the wood for heating and cooking purposes. Soon after, the ghetto was started.

The Germans fenced up an area of town in which the Buzkinskis already lived. At the beginning, they had walking guards, but soon they built little booths where the guards could take shelter. The streetcars and wagons drove by the fenced-in ghetto, and when the guards weren't looking, the passersby would throw food and other supplies over the fence. Sometimes, in return, the Jews threw back money and other valuable articles. Soon, the Germans began to ration food and other supplies, and conditions gradually got worse. Deportation was also taking place at this time, and many young Jews were being sent away to labor camps and were never heard from again. Some returned, and told stories about the camp which were unbelievable, and no one believed them.

In the ghetto, Nathan's sisters worked in a shop, where they made beautiful knitted tablecloths which the Jewish people taught the Germans how to make. The products were later sent back to Germany. At the same time, Nathan worked in a metal factory. You could call him an apprentice, because he basically helped the workers. "If you didn't work, you didn't eat," Nathan stated, and as time went on, the rations got smaller and smaller. Gradually, people started committing suicide, and more women

*and men
starved to death.*

In 1941, Mrs. Burzinski had a son; and in 1942, the Germans came up with a general restriction to take away all the newborn children and old people. One day, the Germans, accompanied by the Jewish police, came to the ghetto. They had a list of all the newborn, and they called everyone down into the yard. His mother and father, in desperation, hid the child. The Germans couldn't find the baby, so they threatened to take away both of Nathan's sisters. At this time, the neighbors started yelling, "Give up the baby! Give up the baby!" So Nathan's father ran upstairs and brought the baby down. He went to an old lady who was in the wagon and gave the baby to her. From then on, conditions got even worse.

In August, 1944, the artillery could be heard from fighting between the Germans and the Russians, so the ghetto was liquidated. Nathan and his family were sent to Auschwitz, and by this time, half of Nathan's relatives were deported. They brought many belongings with them, thinking they were going to work in Germany. They went to the train station, which was located at the edge of the ghetto. After three days on the train, they ran out of water, so they all shared a bottle of vinegar and ^{sugar} ~~water~~ which his mother had brought.

When they got to Auschwitz, they emptied out of the boxcars and were formed into lines. They were told to unload their baggage and put it in a pile. Then they were lined up, and some were told to go to the right, and some to the left. At the top of the line, with other officers, was Dr. Mengele, who was directing people which way to go. Nathan was small for his age, and when he and his father came to Mengele, Mengele said, "To the right, please". When his ~~mother~~ ^{sisters} came to him, he said, "To the left, please", but when his mother came, he said, "To the right, please"; but his mother would not leave her daughters, so she was allowed to go with them. When they were split apart and being marched off, Nathan was able to say to his mother, "I'll see you later!"

But this was not to be.

Nathan, his father, and other workers were sent to a big shower room, where they took off their clothes, piled them into a pile, and were given the striped uniform. Here they went through another selection. Then they got their heads and body parts shaved, and Nathan remembers the terrible burning sensation when some type of disinfectant cream was rubbed on. Then the guards took Nathan's good leather boots and gave him wooden shoes, which were too big and very unfomfortable; so he walked bar#footed. But in Auschwitz, the paths were covered with burning coals.

After this, they were assigned to a barracks. Nathan and his father were assigned to Block 12. In the barracks, they slept on the dirt floor, completely naked, and huddled together lying one beside the other for warmth.

Nathan always stuck by his father; they were inseparable. Two weeks later, they stood for selection, and when it came to Nathan and his father, they already had enough men. Soon there was another selection, and this time, Nathan and his father were up. Again, there was Mengele with officers, and when Nathan had been told to go to the right, and his father was up next, Nathan almost pleaded with Mengele, "This is my father! This is my father!" Mengele looked at Nathan and grinned and waved his father to the right.

Nathan and his father were sent to a camp where their job was to lay railroad tracks. In the process, there were a lot of beatings. There was hardly any food, and many prisoners took their chances by running into the fields to get raw potatoes--if they saw you, they shot you. Through all this time, it is very amazing to realize that Nathan never caught a cold. "I always had a will to live," he said. He was never really religious, and after these experiences he wondered how a God could let such a thing happen. Above all, Nathan's will to survive

was strong--some people gave up.

Nathan was hoping that he could see his mother and sisters again, and even after the other men told them what had happened, he didn't believe. He realized after the war that his mother and sisters had been gassed. He remembers a fellow prisoner saying, "See there"; pointing to the smoke, "that's your mother and sisters." But he didn't believe it then.

The Russians were getting closer to Germany and closer to the camp, so the Germans had to liquidate the camp. The Germans marched them, and other camps marched with them. As they marched along the way, they saw dead prisoners who didn't make it; who had been shot or beaten to death. More died along the way and some went crazy and ran off into the woods. Wherever they went, the Russians were close behind. At night, they stopped at camps, but they were not allowed to rest. Finally, after a few days of marching, they wound up at Bleckhamer, which was located on the outskirts of Breslau, Poland.

That night, after reaching Bleckhamer, the Germans decided to kill everyone in the camp. They started rounding the prisoners up; searching all the barracks. In the barracks that Nathan and his father were in, was a huge pile of potatoes. Nathan, his father, and many other prisoners hid behind this pile, and the Germans never bothered to look behind it. The next morning, they ran out through a hole in the wall where an artillery shell had fallen, and they ran into the woods surrounding the camp.

Night fell, and they came across two soldiers; luckily for them, they were Russian. The soldiers told them to go to the left and keep going, because, obviously, the Germans held the right side of the forest. As they walked, they passed both Russian and German soldiers, who didn't

fire because they didn't want to give their position away. Finally, they made it out of the woods, and came across a small town. The town was in a shambles; dead people were lying in the streets. Everything they passed was either destroyed or close to being destroyed.

Later, they came to the town of Chantstahova. From there, they caught a train to Lodz. It was January, 1945; the war was still on. On the way to Lodz, they stopped at a station. They had to stay there all night because the trains carrying war supplies and soldiers had first priority. By this time, it was Nathan, his father, and another prisoner who was also from Lodz.

They were all very tired and they were still wearing their prison uniforms. That night, a few Poles tried to lynch Nathan. They knew he was a camp survivor and Nathan still doesn't know to this day why they did it. One of the Poles accused Nathan of stealing something from him. They were about to beat him up, when, in all fairness, another Pole stood up and said, "What do you want with him? He's half dead! Leave him alone!" Meanwhile, Nathan's father and the other prisoner watched this happen; too exhausted to do anything. Finally, another train came and they were off for Lodz.

The first place Nathan stopped when back in Lodz was his house. He found a picture of his mother, who had been a very beautiful woman. That night, he stayed in a hotel, and someone stole the picture. It was a color picture, taken in a nice feminine pose. There was no one left in Lodz, or in his family. Everyone was looking for survivors, but there was no one left. Only Nathan, his father, and his father's cousin survived.

The war ended soon after, and Nathan and his father stayed in Europe another six years. In 1951, Nathan and his father went to New

Orleans. From there, they were sent to Dallas by the Jewish Federation. The elder Mr. Burzinski soon got a job as a tailor. Nathan started working, too, but he couldn't take the climate in Texas. "I missed the four seasons," he said. So Nathan contacted friends who had moved from Dallas to Chicago, and moved in with them. Six months later, while living in Chicago, Nathan was drafted by Selective Service, but since he couldn't read or write English very well, they delayed his induction into the Army. He later went to work for Admiral Television, but he couldn't take the hustle and bustle of Chicago, so he moved to Cleveland. Soon his father came from Dallas and moved in with him. The Army soon called him again, and he served two years in the 5th Infantry. One year of his tour was spent in Germany.

When he was discharged, he came straight back to Cleveland, where he met his wife-to-be, who went by the name of Gene Lansky. Gene has a father, three sisters, and one brother. ~~His brother~~ ~~and~~ ~~her~~ both passed away. Nathan and Gene soon had two daughters; Amy and Debra. Amy is now in the process of graduating from Cleveland State, and Debra is studying in Israel.

Nathan was employed selling insurance for an industrial insurance company until 1979, when he was hurt and had to quit. Before he worked for the insurance company, Nathan owned his own business, which was located right across the street from Heights High. It was called "Nathan's Delicatessen and Restaurant", and his father helped him; but things didn't go too well, and he sold out.

The Burzinskis still keep up with the Jewish religious traditions, such as the Sabbath, and the family belongs to Temple Sinai Synagogue. "My children are more religious than me," he states, "and that is good. It is important for me to know where I came from and to be proud of my Jewish identity."

Nathan doesn't like to recall the past, especially the specific things that happened to him, so when I first asked him if I could interview him, he had second thoughts. Nathan remembers waking up at night hearing his father crying out in his sleep. He would go and wake him and ask him, "What's wrong?", and his father would say, "Go back to sleep, son, it was only a bad dream." When Nathan was in Israel, he stayed with his father's cousin, and she would also cry out at night. When he woke her up, she, too, would say, "It was just a dream, go to bed." Now Nathan suffers from these nightmares. In real life, Nathan went through some of the worst experiences imaginable and he was never scared, but now he, too, is awakened at night by his wife. Some dreams he remembers, and some he doesn't. In trying to force out these terrible memories and forget those experiences, in the process he forgot the names of his grandparents, and some aunts, uncles and cousins. But certain people he will never forget, like the faces of certain SS officers, camp guards, and Dr. Mengele.

Nathan feels that Holocaust studies serve a good purpose. "It helps to tell what happened, and to disprove anyone who denies it," he said, "to show people how one great civilized nation could turn on a race of people and come close to wiping that race out." It is a lesson that needs to be reminded to future generations, so that nothing like this will ever happen again."

Nathan will always remember the Holocaust until he dies. The memories will never leave.

CONCLUSION

After the Interview, I walked home in the rain with many thoughts running through my head. I wondered, here is a man who went through many painful experiences, but maybe the worst part of his survival was trying to deal with what had happened; maybe that was his biggest struggle. I feel that not only luck, but divine choosing played a big part in his survival, including his strong will to live. I wondered how people could do things like that to other human beings, and then I thought, could this possibly happen to me?