

## JAN GOLDBERGER'S STORY

My name is Jan Goldberger.

I was born in Bielsko-Biala in Lower Silesia, and I lived in Bielsko, the town being divided by a river.

My family consisted of two grandparents on my mother's side, my parents and four children. My eldest brother, Ernest was born in 1923; Bernard, the second child was born in 1925; I was born on 4th August 1927; and my sister, Ruta, in 1929.

We lived in the basement flat of a street called Ul. Mickiewicza - 41. The flat was small, and all four children shared one room, with my parents and grandparents having their own room.

Bielsko-Biala was an industrial town, producing what was reputed to be the best cloth in Poland. I don't remember how my father made his living, but I remember that he used to be away for most of the week, returning home on the weekends. For this reason I assume that he was a merchant of some type. My grandfather also used to go out to work, although, I similarly cannot remember what he used to do. My mother was a housewife, and looked after us with the help of my grandmother.

The town was predominantly German speaking. My parents spoke German at home, and this was therefore my first language. My grandfather only spoke Yiddish however, so I grew up speaking both. It was not until I first went to school that I learnt to speak Polish well.

My family was not particularly religious by Polish standards although we did go to synagogue on high holidays, and I was sent to a Jewish school.

I remember my home life being very happy. We were poor, but as I recollect, we had enough to eat and were always clothed.

My earliest memories apart from home life are of anti-semitism. I always encountered it, even in the streets of our neighbourhood. If there were any problems in a game, I was eventually blamed, and abused verbally, and at times physically.

We all went to a Jewish school until we were 14. There was much anti-semitism from the neighbouring school, whose children would call us derogatory names. Although it does not translate very well into English I shall name a couple: "Jew, a pig is following you" or more direct barbs like

"Disbelieving, scabby Jew". They would also throw stones at us. Whenever I came home and told my mother, she would tell me to avoid them and run away. As you can see, it was a way of life that had become accepted over the years.

There were fights virtually every day at school between the non-Jewish and Jewish children, as the two schools were across the road to each other. The school times were therefore arranged so that the two schools would come out at different times. Although the fights may not always have been because of religion, they were certainly mostly anti-semitically motivated.

As I have mentioned, one went to the Jewish school until age 14. My eldest brother therefore, went to the local school which was not Jewish. There, he encountered much anti-semitism. As he stood up for himself, he was not bothered so much, but he would defend other Jewish children, and would often come home with holes in his head and bleeding all over. I remember my mother asking him if there had been trouble, and he would answer, not for himself but for others.

My childhood was therefore fairly normal and uneventful until 1938. This was the first time that I found out what it was like to be in town during a pogrom. The reasons for the start of this incident could be anything, but as I remember it, there was a Jew who owned a tavern. A Pole owed him money, and was asked for it to be returned. The Pole was drunk, and in the ensuing altercation the Jew had a gun and shot him. As a result there was a pogrom in town. Jews were beaten up, as were the windows of Jewish houses and shops. Our block of flats was safe even though it was probably 90% Jewish because of the caretaker. We lived next door to the family, and used to often play with their children who were of similar ages to us. He was a nazi however - which I knew as they had shown us the swastikas under their lapels - and stood outside the building telling people that it was a safe house.

#### THE WAR

By 1939, we already knew about Hitler and his rantings, but people did not imagine that anything would come of it.

Bielsko is situated near the Czech-German border, and therefore on September 1st, when we knew that war was imminent, we packed our bags and went to the train station at about 2 o'clock in the morning. We caught the last train from Bielsko going towards Krakow.

Just before we reached Krakow the train was bombed, and we

all got out, and started walking East towards Russia.

We had very little money, and so were unable to buy food, but each time we reached a village, my father would come to some arrangement with the peasants there who would give us a chicken or some bread.

On the way we lost my grandfather who could not walk fast enough. Each day we would agree which village or town we would be heading towards, and arrange to wait for him there. But after a few days he did not arrive at the pre-arranged destination, and as there was obviously no going back, this was the last time that I saw him.

We mostly slept in barns, but as it was September and the weather was fine, we would sleep outside if necessary. Eventually as time went on, my father had to steal chickens to feed us. We kept going however, and at some point - I do not remember when - we lost my grandmother too, who could not carry on. We carried on walking for 2 to 3 weeks, until we reached Lublin.

On the route, German planes would fly over and strafe us with machine guns. We were walking through wooded areas, and every time an airplane flew over we had to run into the trees. People shouted "Nalot" - "Attack" - There were thousands of people walking; mostly Jews but also many Poles who were also fleeing for their lives. Therefore, as the German would fly overhead and see thousands of people walking they had easy targets.

Whenever we would reach a town or village my father would go in first to see what the situation was like there and to try to get some food for us. He did this at Lublin, but when he arrived the Germans were already there with their tanks. They asked if anybody could speak German, and as my father could, they asked him to translate for them. They told him to say: "You can all go home: you're all now free and there is nothing to be afraid of." So we turned back.

We walked for a further 2 weeks back on the route that we had arrived on. We eventually reached a little village between Skalbierz and Kazimierz Wlk. called Topola. To this day I do not know why we turned back and came back the way we had come. We saw the decimation of the Polish army, that had tried to fight airplanes with their inadequate cavalry. Dead horses - their bodies huge and bloated - and many dead bodies lay by the roadside.

In the village there were 2 Jewish families, one of which gave us shelter. They gave us one room to stay in. My father often went into Kazimierz Wlk. to get little cottons and such things to sell in the village and thus feed us.

This journey was dangerous as we would hear of Jews who had been caught outside their villages or towns where they were resident. Poles would give them away to the Germans and they would be shot. My father was taking a risk every time. I therefore only went with him once, which proved to be the most frightening experience of my life, including the years spent in concentration camps. On this occasion my father had to stay in the town overnight and so asked one of the villagers to give me a lift back to Topola. There were many men on the cart from the village and I was therefore not scared. I had not experienced anti-Semitism in the village and so did not perceive any danger. On the way however, they got hold of me, and proceeded to try and take my trousers down, saying that they hadn't cut enough off and were going to cut more off. In the end I was safe, but as I have said, I was never so frightened in all my life.

The people in the village were very poor. Some had only 1 cow or 1 goat. I would sometimes take a cow to graze on a verge by the roadside, as many had no field, only a cow and nowhere to feed it. For this, I would go to their house to be fed. They were very poor and the houses had no wooden floors, only dirt. The whole family would sit around a big wooden bowl and we would all eat from the same bowl. As I have mentioned they were very nice to me, and I did not encounter anti-Semitism.

We stayed in the village for 2 winters - the seasons is the only way I can remember the passing of the years - the winters of 1939-40 and 1940-41. The time was very hard, but we had enough food to eat.

At the end of 1941, all Jews in the surrounding villages had to go to Skalbierz, which was a small town nearby. We all went there, and were put into the synagogue with all the other Jews who arrived. The synagogue was divided into small areas by curtains and blankets, each small area for a family; we were 6 people and had an area of maybe 10" by 8", and this was how we stayed for a while. I don't know how long for, but at the beginning of 1942, we heard that there was to be, what is called in Polish, a "Wysiedlenie" - "compulsory transfer" or evacuation - We had heard stories by this point, and therefore thought that all Jews would be taken to concentration camps. So my parents decided that the 3 boys should go to the next town of Kazimierz Wlk. where my father knew somebody who was Jewish, and where the Jews were not being deported yet. So, the 3 of us left despite the danger of being caught and shot. This was to be the last time that I would see my mother and younger sister.

We went through corn fields, and dodged German convoys hiding under bridges until we reached the town and my

father's friends. After 1 week, we decided that it was safe to return to Skalbierz. When we arrived my father, mother and sister were gone. Many other Jews also drifted back to town. Periodically the Germans would round up some Jews and send them to concentration camps. One day my father reappeared. He had been in Plaszow concentration camp when he heard from new deportees that his children were back in Skalbierz, and ran away from a working party and made his way back to be reunited with us. The Germans were still rounding Jews up, so he decided that my 2 brothers should go into hiding outside the town. I do not know what happened to them afterwards, but I can't help thinking in retrospect that they may have been better remaining with us. Some days later my father and I were together in the synagogue, and as we slept together in bed, a Polish policeman appeared at the bed and asked me to go with him. My father pleaded with him to let him go instead. The policeman asked the German SS man at the door but he would not agree, and I was taken to Dzialoszyce and put in prison, from where I was taken with many others on a truck to Plaszow concentration camp. This was early 1942.

On the way the German guards kept asking us if we had any valuables, and strip-searched some of us. When we arrived in Plaszow, we were all allocated to barracks and our bunk-beds.

Each morning we were taken by truck to work on the building of new railway lines. We were given a slice of bread and a bowl of watery soup a day. That was the very first time I was completely alone. Until this point I had always been with one or other member of my family. After I came home from work, tired, I felt very lonely and for a long time I used to cry myself to sleep every night.

After some months they transported us to a concentration camp closer to the railway, where we actually worked on the railways. It was a smaller camp and guarded by Ukrainian guards. There was an incident where 2 prisoners escaped; they were eventually caught. The guards got the whole camp out to watch how the 2 were hung. They used to put the smallest people at the front, which included me. This was the first hanging that I witnessed.

At the end of 1942 or the beginning of 1943, we were taken back to Plaszow and then to Plaszow Jerosolimaska where Goet was the Obersturmfuhrer. After 2 days we were taken to Skarzysko Kamienna concentration camp where they were producing ammunition for rifles and cannons. I was working on the building site of a new factory for cannonballs. The work was very hard with very little food. The barracks where I was sleeping was next to a hospital where I constantly saw dead bodies being taken out. There was an epidemic of

typhoid at the time. I think I contracted typhoid as I was very ill and couldn't eat, but I would not report to the hospital as I saw what was happening there. I eventually recovered.

In August 1944 we were taken to Sulejow, near Piotrkow where we had to dig ditches to stop the advancing Russian tanks. The ditches were so deep that when I reached the bottom I couldn't throw the earth to the bank. As it was summer, the crops were ripe and that was how we fed ourselves. By the end of August we were taken to Czestochowa and from there to Buchenwald, where I stayed for 3 to 4 weeks. As we arrived in Buchenwald, the gates opened and we walked through and lined up. As we stood, a young man next to me pointed out the chimney below, several hundred feet away and said that he had been to an extermination camp and that they would walk us down into shower rooms; we would have to undress; they would tell us that we would be having a shower, and then they would actually take us into the crematorium. We walked towards the buildings where the tall chimney was. I was completely prepared for this to be my last journey. As we arrived at the buildings, sure enough, it was exactly as he had said: We undressed; we were shaven everywhere - our heads, armpits, groins - we had a shower. There was a man standing with a brush which he dipped in strong disinfectant and then smeared it all over us. When we were shaved, it was obviously not done with any care and therefore when the disinfectant was smeared on me, I was in great pain. The pain was so terrible that I actually felt that I wanted to die.

I didn't stay in the main camp, but in the Zeltlager, a temporary overflow, where we had to stay in tents. We were taken to the stone quarries, and each had to pick up a stone, walk back to the camp and deposit it there. To this day I can't work out the reason.

After this we were taken to Schlieben concentration camp which was a factory for producing Panzerfaust - an anti-tank gun. At first I worked on the night shift, but it was getting me down. As we were going to work on the night shift we had to learn to sing songs, and as we went to work through the villages we had to sing and sound happy. I noticed that sometimes people would report sick on the Appleplatz. I realised that this camp wasn't so strict and therefore one day decided to go and report to the Appleplatz. When I was approached and asked if I was sick I said no, but that the night shift was too hard for me. The SS man in charge called a Kapo, and told him to put me on a day shift. This was much easier for me. Some weeks later, as I was sleeping at night I was thrown out of my bunk-bed. The whole camp was up; nobody knew what had happened at first.

There had been an explosion in the factory. Had I not have changed my shift, I might have been killed. After telling us this, they made us go into the factory to clear up the debris, with some explosions still going on.

In about April 1945, the Germans decided to evacuate Schlieben factory. Some of the wagons that we were supposed to go in were full of ammunition so they made us unload the ammunition and get us away before the Russians came. It seems that it was more important for the Germans to get Jews to a crematorium than the ammunition for the war effort. We were loaded onto the wagons. I happened to be with Koppel Kandelzucker (Kendall) and Simcha Liebermann. As we were the three smallest boys we kept together for protection. On our journey we stopped at Dresden. We were high up and could therefore see the smouldering city after the bombing. There were hardly any buildings left standing, only chimneys. We kept stopping and sometimes some of us were allowed to get off the train and stretch our legs. Once we stopped at Kamnitz, the guards locked us in and then we realised the reason for this. The town was being bombed, and the Germans had run into the woods. After the attack the German guards came back.

After two to three weeks travelling we arrived in Theresenstadt; about the beginning of May. When we arrived at Theresenstadt there appeared to have been an epidemic of typhoid, so again we were kept outside the main part of the town. One evening, we went to sleep and when we woke up in the morning all the German guards were gone. As we walked further on we saw the Russian tanks moving towards us. We knew that we were free of the Germans.

After several weeks in Theresenstadt they gathered all the young people together, and we were put into a kindersheim - children's home. When we were registered none of us could be older than 16 so they made all of us younger, to enable them to bring us to England. At about the end of July or the beginning of August 1945, we were taken to Prague where we stayed for a short while, and then to the airport, on to empty Lancaster bombers. We were flown to Carlisle and from there to Windermere and into an empty R.A.F. camp.

We were given plenty of food. After a few months we were all distributed all over Great Britain. I was taken to Bedford where I stayed in a hostel in Goldingtonbury. Shortly afterwards I went to Loughton hostel.

We were taught English there. Some of us went to O.R.T. school in South Kensington. Some of us also went to a school in East Ham to learn English. I went there. Within 6 months we were speaking English to each other. We then came to Belsize Park hostel for a short time. After that we paired

up and went to live in bed-sits. Belsize Park hostel became the Primrose Jewish Youth Club with Mr Yogi Myer as leader. All of us went to learn some trade or profession. I got a job in tailoring in the East End of London where I worked for several years.

In the early 1950's we were successful in claiming compensation from the Germans. We all got a small pension which helped with our various endeavours and progress.

In 1967 I met my future wife Sara. We got married in Frankfurt, Germany, where her parents lived. This was the first time that most of the "boys" had trodden on German soil since 1945.

We returned to live in England, and had 3 children: Danny, 1969; Cilla, 1970; and Rutti, 1973. Cilla now lives in Israel and got married in August 1995.