Life under the Nazis.

by Mayer Bomsztyk.

I was born in Staszow (near Cracow) in Poland. I was the baby of the family. I had an elder brother Jonathan and sister Hela. We all lived at home with my parents. At the out break of the war in 1939 I was eleven years old.

The Germans declared part of the town a ghetto. All the Jewish people of the town were forced to live there, and we could not leave. Children were not allowed to go to school, and our parents were not allowed to work. There were no shops in the ghetto, and we were not allowed to shop outside, so we could never buy anything new. All we could do was barter whatever we had for what we could. However, sometimes we could bribe Poles living outside the ghetto and they would smuggle things into the ghetto. Otherwise there was nothing to be had. There was no wood or coal to burn for heating in the bitter Polish winter. In theory we were supposed to receive a ration of food each day. It was never enough, and many times the ration did not arrive, so we were always very hungry and cold. It was a miserable existence.

We never knew what to do for the best. Some people thought if they volunteered to work for the Germans they had best chance of surviving, so in 1941 my elder brother Jonathan volunteered to work in a munitions factory in Skarzisko. That was the last time we saw him.

In November 1942 the whole town was evacuated. My family had feared something might happen, and we had a prepared a hiding place in the cellar of our home where we hid. A week later we were found by the Polish police, and they took us all to prison. That particular week the Germans needed slave labourers, and we were taken to work in the Hassag ammunition factory in Kielce. The conditions in the factory were terrible, and my parents did not survive. We never saw any of the people who were evacuated from Staszow again.

In 1944 as the Russian army advanced into Poland, we were evacuated from Kielce and taken to work in the Chestochowvianka ammunition factory in Czestochova. My sister was sent to Bergen-Belsen.

In January 1945 the Russians again advanced and the Germans put us an cattle trains and sent us to Buchenwald. The journey took two days, there was no water food, toilets or heating, and it was absolutely freezing cold. The journey was so unbearable that I was only too happy to rest on a wooden bunk.

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After two weeks in Buchenwald we were transported to Reimsdorf. We had been sent to work in another factory as replacements for 6,000 others. They had all perished because of the terrible conditions, starvation, cold, disease, and unremitting hard labour.

We were woken every morning at 5.00 am. We were marched for two hours in the freezing morning air to the factory, where we had to work a twelve hour shift with only one short break when we were given soup. At the end of the day we had a two hour march back to our concentration camp. The non-Jews who worked in the factory worked only an 8 hour shift and lived in proper barracks, so they were in much better health than we were.

In February 1945 the American and British air forces began to bomb the ammunition factory quite often. I was given the job of digging up the unexploded bombs which fell in the fields outside the factory. In this way I was lucky enough to be able to eat any potatoes or carrots that I chanced upon.

As the Americans forces advanced, we were evacuated on a cattle train en route to Theriesenstadt. Our train was bombed and we had to abandon it. We were then force-marched for two weeks until we arrived at Theriesenstadt. Of the 4-5000 who left Reimsdorf only 80 of us survived.

About three weeks later, on the 8th May 1945 we were liberated by the Russians. We were all suffering from typhus. The Russians took over a local hospital where we were treated and recovered. I was completely bald, and it was not until the August that my hair started to grow again.

We were evacuated by the Russians to Prague, and then in August 1945 400 of us were flown to Windermere in the Lake District. We travelled sitting on the floor of 20 Royal Air Force Lancaster bombers.

Photographs of survivors from the camps were taken and published all over the world, so that people could trace their families. An uncle who lived in Buenos Aires recognised my name, and he wrote to me in Windermere to tell me that my sister Hela Prus who lives in America and who I visit ~~her~~ every year, had survived and been liberated from Bergen-Belsen.