

#132238

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I gave an unpleasant gaze at the rotted barracks where I had spent fifteen brutal weeks. My feet were cemented in the mud as I stared at the rusted electric fence that had held 1.3 million Jews, Poles, Romani, and Soviet prisoners of war.

The sky rumbled and hissed as the liberating Soviet army approached Auschwitz Concentration Camp, now approximately 200 years away. Rain slapped against my host white skin and saturated the blue and white stripes of my dingy uniform. I slowly trudged my way to the crowd of Jews, desperate and ready for realse. Each step shot pain into every join and muscle. My ribcage, cheeks, knees – all of my bones were now pronounces. My 14 year-old body had never looked or felt this frail.

There wre only a few thousand of us “outcasts” left and there was no food, no water, and no medical care. Many Jews, Poles, Romani, and Soviet prisoners forgot who we truly were physically and mentally. The evil ones just left us behind to die.

The Red Army had marched their way to the entrance of the complex and was greeted by the baffled prisoners. The first soldiers were dumbfounded when they witnessed our conditions.

“What is *that* over there?” questioned a Soviet, pointing north.

“Another concentration camp,” I declared.

“And beyond that?”

“Also a camp.”

“And what is behind it?”

“The crematoria. We don’t know what is past that point.”

The officer’s face turned perplexed.

The troop suspiciously wandered further into Auschwitz. The path they walked on was dotted with human remains and dusted with ashes. Body parts were scattered around crematoria pits after the SS demolished the cemetery. The Schutzstaffel thought they destroyed all the evidence, but shoes, dishes, suitcases, and human hair were discovered in storerooms.

As I proceeded to the main gate, I saw that field hospitals had already been established on site. Red Cross workers assisted in the recovery of captives that suffered from bedsores, frostbite, and typhus. The staff tried their best to give medical care and clothing to survivors. When I was just about to reach the exit, the scent of golden toast and orange juice pleasantly scented the air. I made my way to one of the tents where a group of teenage boys stood. A young

lady, probably in her early twenties, sat in a chair with medical supplies and food. Real, edible food.

“Hello! My name is Ms. Kimmy! Are you hurt? Do you need any assistance?”

“Just hungrier than ever,” I replied.

“What is your name and given number?”

“Joseph Geller, 132238.”

Ms. Kimmy had peroxide blonde hair whose locks dripped over her shoulder. Her cherry lips and ice blue eyes glistened in the storm above. She had a comforting smile that washed away my misery. The nurse handed me a crisp toast and juice. My taste buds danced with happiness.

“Let them be free!” boomed a Soviet officer.

Moments later, chants of “We are liberated! We are Free!” filled the air. The camp roared (at least as much as a group of very sick people could roar) with celebration. These were the words I had been dreaming to saying and hear since being captured almost four months ago.

Thoughts of my family immediately raced through my mind. Where were they? Were they sick? Had they been relocated? Would I ever speak to them again? And the worst thought of them all – had they been killed? I was drowning in anxiety.

An image of my mother, Martha, flashed in my head. She had thick, curly, taffy-brown hair with eyes the color of fresh chestnuts. The softness of her alabaster skin matched the gentleness of her soul. Then a picture of David, my father, with his hazel buzz cut and tawny-colored eyes, his skin bronzed from a life of working outdoors. Lastly, my sister, Ayda, almost a clone of my mother. Ayda, seventeen, was larger than life and beyond gregarious.

I, and a puny group of other Jews, trickled out of the camp on two legs. We all feared that the Germans would return and make their next murderous move. I spun around to study the last horrid sights of Auschwitz. The site looked like it came from a horror scene. The barracks were fully evacuated and examined by the Soviet Army. The network of camps stood half-destroyed as well with the gas chambers. Ahead of me was the metal arch that read; “Arbeit macht frei”. Work sets you free. Only the opposite was true.

“We have done it, men. We won the brutal battle,” announced a man beside me.”

“Next stop...Oświęcim train station,” declared another voice from the front of the pack. “I used to ride that train day to night with my Momma. It’s only a little less than two miles from here.”

Bit by bit we steadily made our way to Oświęcim. An intense mixture of feelings – elation, dread, sorrow – spread like wildfire from my heels to my torso. I shivered in my ragged shoes in the January rain while my stomach growled. There was suddenly an unpleasant thud on the gravel from behind. One of our fellow survivors had dropped. Dead. I couldn’t give up now. I fought for four months and the hope of reunion was still etched in my heart.

We approach the train station as lines of Jew, Poles, Romani, and Soviet prisoners filled the cars. We tagged along with them. The train ride was the first leg of a 700-mile journey from Auschwitz to my home of Amsterdam, a trek made up of not only train rides, but long miles on foot, and hitchhiking from the help of sympathetic citizens.

While traveling, all I could ponder was one thing...Vondelpark. My family and I spent our last days of freedom there enjoying the roses that were lined along the vast green blanket of grass and the ducks that swam gracefully in the ponds. This park was the most visited park in Amsterdam and I'd been going there ever since I could walk. Musicians would perform magical songs while Adya and I smothered our taste buds with ice cream. The day before we were apprehended, my father called us all together at our favorite bench in the park.

"Martha, Ayda, Joseph...I know it is beyond devastating to think about, but there may be a time in life where we all get split. It could be today, tomorrow, or weeks from now, but I strongly think that we need to keep an infinite promise to each other. If we happen to return, every Sunday at 7:00 p.m., attempt to meet at Vondelpark. Specifically, meet right here where we are now at the "Geller" bench where we usually attend family picnics. I know this is hard for you to hear, but it is what we have to do to keep us united. Kids, Martha, never let go of hopes and stay committed."

Chickens clucked and cackled in the royal blue crates that I rested on. My callused feet dangled off the side of the teal, rusted truck, my final ride to Amsterdam, courtesy of a kind poultry farmer. Amsterdam had never looked so awe-striking with the sky painted peach. I only had a few miles left to go. Out of the many days, weeks, and months of my journey, my mental and physical health increased, and seeing my home gave me another boost.

At last, my feet hit the city ground and a welcoming, familiar sweet aroma of baked bread wafted through the air. The houses that lined the canal looked like colorful dominos stacked one beside another. The lights, a galaxy of stars, led me into central Amsterdam. It was about 6:00 p.m. and the city was still wide awake. Hope clung to me more than ever as I passed memory lane. My eyes filled with tears and my heart was torn with bittersweet memories. It felt like it was just yesterday when I was holding my mother's hand, stopping at the local bakery to grab a free, warm, chocolate cookie.

Once again, Red Cross workers were stationed at the main part of the city. They provided shelter to survivors that were homeless. Including myself. Dozens of tents were erected and filled with wool blankets and cots. Various food items were offered as our nourishments. A mob of Jews gathered around several papers tacked to a post. Heartbroken expressions framed their faces as they examined the death list. I joined them, scanning the list, holding my breath with my fingers crossed. My eyes fearfully checked the names, searching for the initial of our last name, G. I stopped. My finger dragged through Gallegher, Gambell, Gearing, Gelbard, Geller. *Martha Geller, David Geller.* No Ayda.

My knees gave way and I dropped to the ground. A deep depression rushed over my whole body. It felt like my heart was ripped out of my chest. I clenched my fists as I pounded the stone streets. The first tear broke out; the rest followed in an unbroken stream.

Ayda. I needed to find Ayda. Vondelpark. I needed to go to Vondelpark. It was a quarter past 6, and even better, it was a Sunday. High hopes once again skyrocketed. I knew my parents were gone but my sister may still be alive. She *must* be alive.

As I hustled to Vodel, familiar faces of citizens blurred passed me. The wind howled and elm trees swayed in the sunset. My feet slapped the pavement below faster than ever as I attempted to reach the landmark before the appointed time. Finally, I could hear the romantic tunes from the open-air theatre. I then crossed the obsidian gate with the giant golden letters that read *Vondelpark*. My second home. The gust of air carried the sweet smell of flowers into my direction while I set out to the Geller bench, the bench where we spend our days enjoying picnics was still carved with each member of our family's initials. My throbbing legs at long last relaxed. I rested. Now I just had to wait.

Time eventually swallowed ten minutes, twenty-five, fifty, then sixty. My soul plummeted. I let out a bitter disappointed sigh as the sky filled with darkness. An hour and a half went by and the crowds of visitors disappeared. Two hours. 9:00 pm...the park closing time. I know I had to go back to the refugee area, but I will not give up my goal of finding Ayda.

I came back the next week. No Ayda. And the following week, no. The week after that, the weeks after that, still no Ayda. Months turned into years and years turned into decades and still every Sunday I would make the trip to our favorite family bench, through the years working for the grocer, and the year I owned my own butcher shop, and through my wonderful years of marriage with my wife, Christy. Every Sunday afternoon I would enter the park with home, and every evening I would return with disappointment.

Now sixty year have passed and I still make the trip every Sunday at 7:00 pm to Vondelpark, now trudging alone with a cane. My hair used to be a penny brown; now it's solid silver. Each visit I have made added another strand of gray, it seems. I long for the feeling of my sister's hand placed on my shoulder and turning to see her with a smile from ear to ear. I wish to hear her soothing voice say softly, "We did it Joseph! Together we survived!"

I can still hope.