

Regina Oppenheimer

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born on April 30, 1922, in a small farming town called Krasnovce in Czechoslovakia. I had two older brothers, Adolph and Mendel. My mother died when I was two and a half years old, and my grandmother took me into her home which was also in that town. After a year, my father remarried and because he traveled a great deal buying and selling cattle, I was left with my stepmother who treated me and my brothers very cruelly.

I had relatives in the United States who came in 1929 to take me home with them but my father refused to let me go. In 1930 I left my relatives and all my friends and was sent to live in a children's home in Prague. When I was twelve, my father died and soon after, my brothers left for Palestine. I was alone again. I used to get away where nobody could see me and cry very hard. When I got older, I was sent to a school where I learned sewing and cutting patterns, and I was proud that I could get a job, but I still had to stay in the children's home until I was twenty.

The Germans marched into Prague in March 1939, and I saw German soldiers everywhere. I was sent with a group to a ghetto in Theresienstadt, where I lived in a room with forty-two other women and worked in the fields outside the ghetto. I was there for two years.

The worst was when they sent away a group. Nobody knew where. One day I had to go too. If we had known what was going to happen to us, I am sure many would have tried to escape. They put us on a train for horses, not people. We had no seats, no room to turn around in, and no toilet. Finally, the train pulled into a big railroad station. We saw many people in striped clothing like you see in jail. The Nazis divided old people from young ones. Many girls did not want to leave their mothers, but they beat us. We saw men there we knew from Theresienstadt, but they now looked to me like hungry dogs wanting to bite a piece of bread. We were in Auschwitz.

It was rough there. It did not matter that we lived like dogs, dirty and full of fleas. We heard from friends what had happened to the ones before us, and we knew it would happen to us too. I did not care any more. I knew we would all die. The smell of burning hair and bones was everywhere.

I stayed in Auschwitz six months. One day, it was said that the young people would go to work in Germany. We did not believe it because we had heard that many times; instead of going to work, the Jews went to the crematorium. We had to go into a building, take off our clothes, and march naked before five German soldiers. We had to pass a table where a man sat and recorded the numbers on our left arm. The ones who passed on the right side could go to work; the ones who passed on the left could not.

Those of us who went to the right were marched to another camp that was different from Auschwitz. The people had been there for five years, and they hated us because we had just

come. What was worse was what the Germans did to us. Thank God we stayed there only a week before we were sent to a place called Dristienstadt, near Berlin. It seemed like heaven after the places we had been in. Everyone worked in a bomb factory.

Before long, we had to leave the camp and go on a big walk. We marched for six long weeks in the snow to Bergen Belsen, our last station. Those who made the trip never forgot it. We were weak, hungry, and waiting to hear what would happen to us. I never saw so many dead people as I saw at Bergen-Belsen. I wondered how long it would take until I was the next to die. I was very weak and I contracted typhus.

I remember the fourteenth of April, 1945. We could not sleep. There was bombing all the time. Next morning we got up as usual and went to stand in formation. We stood for hours and could not understand why we did not see any Germans. We were free. In the evening we got milk. It was the first milk I had had in four years. To me it seemed as if God had given us each a drop so that we could be stronger.

I never think of what I went through. During the day it is out of my mind, but at night it comes back to me in dreams. I see everything and I say to myself in these dreams "This time I am smarter. This time I will not go through it. This time I will hide."

After liberation, I was sent to recover in a hospital in Sweden. People were being sent back to their home country, but I did not want to return to Czechoslovakia. My relatives in the United States sponsored me, and I arrived in New York in May 1946. I moved to San Francisco after writing to a man there who wanted to get married. But his family did not approve of me or the marriage.

I met Albert Oppenheimer at a dance in San Francisco. He had been in a camp and had lost his mother and father and we were married in 1948. We had a daughter, Helen, and a son, Jerry. With money lent to us by relatives we bought a chicken farm in Petaluma.