

Jenny Sztanke

Wartime Experience: Concentration Camp Survivor

I was born in Berlin on August 4, 1925. My parents were Rosa Chmielnicka, née Schrayt, and

Israel Chmielnicka. I had one sister, Helene. My parents had a retail and wholesale business. I had a happy childhood and a good life until Hitler's coming to power in 1933 when our life was shaken. Business establishments of Jews were boycotted and articles and papers critical of the Jews could be found everywhere.

My father was of Polish descent and his whole family lived in Lodz, Poland. So, he left Germany for Poland in order to prepare for the arrival of the rest of our family. In November of 1938, after Kristallnacht (the Night of Broken Glass), a massive, coordinated attack on the Jews throughout Germany, we left Berlin to join our father. In 1939 the war broke out and two weeks later the German army occupied Poland. From that moment on we were obliged to wear a yellow star sewn on our clothes and to observe the curfew which required us to stay home after 5:00 P.M. each evening.

In March of 1940, the Germans created a ghetto in a very old and poor section of the city where all Jews were henceforth required to live. We lived far from this neighborhood. The Jewish Council was charged with assigning us a room for four people. One day I went to the ghetto with my parents to prepare to move into this single room. That night I stayed in the ghetto with relatives who had already moved there. The weather was bad and the ghetto was such a long distance from our home that my parents decided it would be better to leave me with relatives while they returned home alone. The next morning I was waiting for them, but my wait was in vain. I was beside myself with anguish when I heard that all Jews had been gathered up and sent elsewhere. I never saw either my parents or my sister again. So, on April 1, 1940, at age fourteen, I ended up all alone in a ghetto that was closed off and totally isolated from the exterior world.

In the ghetto, the Germans installed workshops for all trades where we were obliged to work. We were compensated with food stamps and soup while we were on the job. However, the food was inadequate, and many people died of hunger and typhoid. In 1942 all the children were deported. I worked in several shops, the last of which was a kitchen which saved me from starvation. As to shelter, I shared a room with other girls.

In March of 1944 I was arrested in the ghetto and sent via transport bus to a work camp. What they called "work camps" were usually gas chambers. Fortunately for me, however, my transport bus really did take us to a work camp, a munitions factory named "Hasag-Werke" at Chenstochau. Conditions there were better than in the ghetto. We alternated day work and night work on a weekly basis. We were warm, had showers and ate as much as we wanted. But in the beginning of 1945, the Russians came and liberated the camp; the same day the Germans transferred us directly from the work camp to the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen in box

cars. It was a true hell. It was snowing and the temperature was -20 degrees centigrade. We were sent to the showers, then dressed in a striped and numbered coat, and finally required to stand outside for roll call. Our wet hair froze. The dormitories were not heated and we slept on straw on the ground. I spent about six weeks in terrible conditions at Bergen-Belsen, then I left for Bavaria with another transport. I was happy to leave this camp even in the snow but I didn't know where I was going to land. I didn't really care. I was indifferent. They piled us in boxcars, and we headed out. We had to stop in Augsburg, Germany, because of the bombing of the railroad. We were there several days without food, and, worse still, without a single drop of water to drink. I was so thirsty that I licked the pipes of the boxcar to moisten my lips. After several days we left and arrived at a little camp called Turckheim, a branch of Dachau. It was there I caught typhoid fever. Every illness one could imagine was present in this camp. They put us on straw without any thought or care given to us. I wonder how I was able to survive it.

I am not able to describe everything but I do want to recount my liberation.

The Americans were approaching, and the Germans did not want to leave the slightest trace of their atrocities. One evening a German officer piled us into a wheelbarrow to take us away because we were no longer able to walk. At that moment, a young soldier about 16 years old, whispered something in the ear of that officer and we were immediately ordered to return to our barracks. The next morning a girl in our dorm went out and came back in shouting that she could no longer see any Germans. It was then that we all understood that the Germans had fled. Before leaving, the Germans had set fires and we got out however we were able and fled to the fields. There, after a 48 hour wait, we were liberated by the American Red Cross. There were corpses lying everywhere and many sick who were being transferred to hospitals. I weighed only 32 kilos (70.5 lbs.) but was well cared for and after a few months I regained my health. I then stayed in a convalescent home in a former convent where I spent some pleasant days free of worry because I was savoring my rediscovered liberty. To be fed and to find again my "joie de vivre" was a dream come true.

Since most liberated people were without any family, we quickly formed couples. This was what happened to me. I met my husband who was himself a former prisoner of war and in March of 1948 we were married. My husband had an older brother in Paris and so at the beginning of 1947 we left for Paris. Without money and without any knowledge of the French language, life in Paris was very difficult. This was a great disappointment. My husband started work in a trouser factory. In the beginning we had poor housing, but little by little we were able to "climb the mountain" and finally we were able to work from home. In 1948 our first child, Henri, was born. After twenty years working as a dressmaker, I decided to change jobs and began working for the Paris metro as a cashier. Now I am widowed and retired and have two grandchildren.

The preceding account is just a brief summary of my life. Never would I have believed that I would survive to the year 2000. I hope that future generations will never forget these events.

Des dossiers du Mémorial de la Shoah—Paris

Jenny SZTANKE née CHMIELNICKA

née CHMIELNICKA le 4/08/1925 à BERLIN (Allemagne) de Rosa CHMIELNICKA née SCHRAYT et de Israel CHMIELNICKI

Déportée depuis la POLOGNE au camp de BERGEN-BELSEN, rescapée

Enfance heureuse, parents dans le commerce de gros et de détail. Après l'arrivée d'HITLER au pouvoir en 1933 tout change. Mon père décide de nous installer à LODZ (POLOGNE) où réside sa famille. En 1939 les Allemands envahissent la POLOGNE. Mars 1940 création du ghetto de LODZ. Mes parents disparaissent après avoir été raflés. Je ne les ai jamais revus. Je travaille dans le ghetto pour survivre. Mars 1944 je suis arrêtée et conduite à CHENSTOCHAU pour travailler dans une usine de munitions « HASAG-WERKE ». Début 1945 les Russes entrent dans le camp. Aussitôt les Allemands nous transfèrent à BERGEN-BELSEN. Six semaines plus tard nous sommes transférés au camp souterrain de TURCKHEIM (annexe de DACHAU) où j'attrape le typhus. Les Américains arrivent et les Allemands se sauvent en nous abandonnant et en incendiant le camp pour ne pas laisser de traces. Nous sommes libérés par la Croix Rouge américaine. Je pèse 32 kg. Soignée à l'hôpital puis dans une maison de convalescence, je reprends goût à la vie. Je rencontre mon mari, lui-même ancien déporté, et en 1947 nous nous installons à PARIS.