

From Darkness to Freedom

Have you ever wondered to yourself if you had lived during the time of the Holocaust and survived, what kind of person would you be afterwards? Angry at the world for not stepping forward and helping? Angry at G-d? Tibor Bolgar was angry at both the world and G-d when he was liberated from the camps. It didn't take him long however to realize something very profound: his survival was a gift from G-d and as such there were two tasks in front of him. They were to get married and have children and to tell his story to as many people as would listen. It is obvious that G-d agreed with him as he is a grandfather and great-grandfather and will be going on the March of the Living this April for the 13th time--his Bar Mitzvah trip. He is active at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre and speaks to school groups on a regular basis.

Tibor just turned ninety, looks like he's seventy (and that's pushing it) and is as spry as a forty-year old. He was born in the town of Sarospatak in Hungary which is about ten kilometers from the Czech border. His small city had a population of 13,000 of which about 1150 were Jews. Tibor lived with his mother, father and younger sister. In 1944 the Germans rounded up all the Jews in his town including his family and they were taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau. His mother and sister were murdered in the gas chambers soon after arrival. Tibor and his father were selected to work.

Tibor's father remained in Auschwitz where he worked in the camp infirmary, but Tibor left after a few days, taken to a concentration camp established after the Warsaw ghetto uprising to clear the rubble after the uprising. Tibor showed me pictures of what the ghetto looked like – literally a massive pile of rubble. He became part of the slave labor brigade sent to clean it up, an impossible task.

He did not remain there for long because the Russians were closing in and his camp was evacuated. He recalls that when the camp was emptied, he was in the first death march. He wound up in Dachau but again did not stay long as that camp was a distribution center for slave labor. He eventually ended up in Muhlendorf, another concentration camp in Germany, close to Dachau.

Muhlendorf was a new camp established for the purpose of building a factory – seven stories high and the size of four football fields--to make rockets for the Germans. This was 1944 and Tibor remained there until he was liberated in the spring of 1945 by the US army.

Tibor mercifully did not share with this author many 'hardcore' details of his time in the camps. He did however, give me an overall description of his life there.

There was no water for washing or bathing and the latrines were outside. He wore the same clothes day and night for over a year and everyone was infested with lice. Many died of typhus. They slept seven or eight to a bunk and were each given one bowl and a spoon. That, he said, was an improvement over his first camp where six or seven people shared one bowl of soup with no spoon. He told me that the Germans told the prisoners they were 'dogs' and would be treated as such. Tibor smiled wryly telling me that he often wished that he would be as well-treated as the Germans' dogs.

While you the reader may be reading this on Passover, in the camps there was no such thing as time except for day and night. Days of the week, months, holidays did not exist. The prisoners awoke at 4:15 a.m., worked like slaves for twelve hours and went back to their freezing bunks after roll call which sometimes lasted for many hours. Their diet consisted of a half-litre of watery soup for lunch and slightly more of the same soup for supper along with a piece of bread.

Tibor was liberated at the end of April 1945 and sent to a DP camp called Feldefing near Munich. He remained there until September 1945 when he found out that his father had survived the entire time in Auschwitz. They went back to their town in Hungary to find out that of the 1150 Jews only 154 survived, his father being the oldest at the age of fifty-four.

Tibor stayed in Hungary until his father remarried and then, at the age of 21 years old, went back to the DP camp in order to try to get out of Europe. It took two years until he received a

visa to come to Canada. He traveled by ship to Halifax and then was sent to Montreal where he eventually married a fellow Hungarian survivor and had two children, a son and daughter.

Epilogue

Tibor is a remarkable, humble human being. His memory is as sharp as a razor and he seems to understand that listening to his story is not easy. He told me many extraordinary things, but two stand out.

The first is when he told me that the Holocaust made him the Jew that he is today. He was not born into a particularly observant family, yet he emerged from that hell on earth more of a believer than when he went in. Of course he still has his doubts. He questions where G-d was during that time but he does not allow those feelings to hold him back from living and enjoying his life.

The second thing was when he recounted seeing a memorial plaque in the old Jewish ghetto of Venice listing the names of the city's Holocaust victims. Under the list of names was the inscription: We have to remember because our memories are their only graves.

Tibor is getting ready to go along as a survivor on his thirteenth annual March of the Living. Those few days in Poland are overwhelming for everyone. What does he tell the young people when he is reliving his hell? Never forget that they are Jews. Tibor certainly doesn't.