

### **The story of Abraham Gottesman z"l**

This story was kept in my drawer. This is the story of my father. It was written for my eldest daughter Inbal before her trip to Poland with a youth group. Then it was passed on to Oded and Omri before their trips.

My father was silent. He did not talk to me about this subject. It was a subject you don't talk about and you don't ask about. When my parents talked with friends over a cup of tea about the subject that you don't ask about, it was always in Polish. I knew that when my parents talked in Polish, it was about the subject you don't ask about.

Many times I looked at the large scar on my father's leg. When I asked about this scar and how did it happen, I knew that it is something you don't ask about.

The scar on his leg was not pleasant to look at. But I understood that my father overcame a much deeper scar. It was an unseen scar, a scar in his heart, a scar that you don't talk about. Until...he wrote about it to my children just before their departure for Poland.

I am posting here his story as it was written in his special style.

#### **The story of father-grandfather**

I was born in 1913 in Drohobycz in Eastern Galicia one year before the start of the First World War. I was a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy ruled by Emperor Franz Joseph. At the beginning of the war, the Russians occupied this territory and units of Cossacks controlled the city and caused great suffering for Jews. After the death of the Emperor and the end of the war, the Austro-Hungarian Empire disintegrated and the map of Europe changed completely. According to the Versailles Treaty which received international recognition, our area was annexed to Poland in 1918. At the age of 5, without changing my place of residence I became a citizen of Poland.

I remember well the period between the two World Wars, which lasted more than 20 years. Here I graduated from the Polish public school. Here I studied in the afternoons for my Bar Mitzvah Torah and Jewish studies in the famous "cheder ", here I joined Beitar, here I was educated and tried to educate others to fulfill the Zionist idea, and here I dreamed about a Jewish state. I felt the Anti-Semitism. When I got older, I decided that I should go to Israel. But how? On the one hand I was committed towards my parents and my sister and on the other hand the British ruled the country did not allow Jews to enter. So, I decided - we will do this without the approval of the English.

As it often happens, plans were delayed. It was not simple to convince my parents and my girl-friend. My plans had to wait.

The Second World War broke out in September of 1939. A few days later I found myself as a Soviet citizen under Stalin. It was my third citizenship without leaving my city and my home. Zionist activity was prohibited. Leaving Russia became impossible. How long would the war last, I wondered? How will it

end? Will I be able to fulfill the Zionist dream and go to Israel? However- I was young and optimistic, full of hope for a better future.

How wrong I was. In June 1941 Nazi divisions invaded Russia. My town Drohobycz was occupied a few days later. The first two days turned into a pogrom. Jews were injured, killed, exterminated. Many of them were my friends. I was in shock and dismay.

This reminded me of "On the Slaughter" by Chaim Nahman Bialik, but on a much-much larger scale. The Nazi program got immediately into a full execution phase. Jews were outlawed. Anyone could be harmed. Without reason, without mercy. I was born a citizen of Austro-Hungary, became a Polish citizen, continued as a Russian citizen and now I was in my hometown where I was born, with no citizenship at all, no rights, a hunted animal, less than a human being.

Killings, executions, deportations, Aktions, hundreds and thousands of murders. Not only Germans murdered. Don't make that mistake. Also Poles and Ukrainians. Yesterday they were my neighbors. Today they are murderers. They were not required to do so. They volunteered to murder. They did it willingly and enthusiastically. But, not only murders. Hunger, diseases and epidemics caused many deaths.

The closest people to me were among those that were murdered. My parents and my sister, the entire family of my girl-friend (whom I married after the war), her brother, sister, her nieces and the entire family of my only cousin Aryeh Millard with whom my path crossed later on in the camps.

For a fee, I hid with eight friends in the attic of Josephina, an acquaintance from the past. This hiding place became a trap as Josephina betrayed us and gave away our whereabouts to the Nazis. This betrayal was the beginning of a long road. First it was a closed ghetto in town. When the ghetto was liquidated, we were transferred to work camps in town. Then, we were loaded onto a train for an unknown destination.

In the train car - unbelievable crowding, pushing, inhumane conditions, hunger, thirst, difficulty breathing, all crunched together. A deafening silence. Horrendous suffering. And the thoughts. Is death near? And you think to yourself, maybe death is better. I have no one. No parents, no sister, no friends, so many of them were murdered. Maybe death is better. But the power of life and the will to live, maybe one more day, just one more day...

The train stopped after many hours. We were pushed brutally out. I could barely stand. Not only me, but all those around me, exhausted, powerless and weak. Is this the end? No. The Germans needed slave labor for their military industry, an industry whose purpose was to eliminate us.

Here started the concentration camp road. Płaszów, Wieliczka, Mauthausen, St. Valentin, and Ebensee. First was Płaszów where I met my cousin Aryeh Millard. He is alive. I am alive...

In spite of everything I tried to be optimistic. What did I think about? Unbelievably, I had no doubt that Germany will be eventually defeated. When will it happen? I did not know, and I was sure I will not live

to see its defeat, because even if they would be close to defeat, the Germans would not have mercy on us.

But the very nature of a human is the will to live. Many times I was on the verge breaking down. Enough. But the will to live, at least until tomorrow...

On May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the impossible happened. We did not go to work. The shack doors were locked. We did not understand what was happening. We tried to look through the slits. There was silence. Suddenly we could hear voices outside. The doors opened. We saw unfamiliar uniforms and heard a different language. The Americans occupied the Ebensee camp.

I was weak and confused. I weighed 38 kilograms (84 pounds). I was a human skeleton. I did not have even the strength to move. I was discharged in a very bad medical shape and was taken to a field hospital and after some time to another hospital. My condition improved slowly. I was able to stand upright on my feet.

I went back to my town of Drohobycz via Hungary and Czechoslovakia. I did not find anyone. My town was under Soviet rule. All those friends that stayed with me in the attic at Josephina's house, were murdered. I wanted to avenge Josephina, but was not able to. I moved to the Polish side. Unbelievably and to our great joy, I found my girl-friend and we were married.

Thus began the new chapter of our life together. We decided we wanted to realize the Zionist dream. We left Poland illegally and joined a Beitar displaced persons camp in Austria. At the beginning of 1947 we crossed the Alps and joined a Beitar Displaced Persons Camp in Italy. This was a year full of Zionist and organizational activity. Your father Dov, our only son, was born in this camp and was named after Dov Gruner, the Irgun fighter who was executed by the British.

We realized our Zionist dream and immigrated to Israel. I changed my citizenship again. I became a citizen of the state of Israel! I survived. We survived.

Never Again...

These were the words written by my father Abraham Gottesman, z"l. I would like to add a few words of my own.

Last night I listened attentively to my friend, Israel's President Rubi Rivlin. He described how Meir Dagan, recipient of the Israeli Medal of Valor carried around the photo of his grandfather taken just before he was murdered by the Nazis.

I thought a lot about the photos I do not have. A photo of my grandparents. A photo of an aunt and an uncle. We don't even have one photo of the family. How did they look? Everything was destroyed. My grandparents. No photo of them remained.