

The testimony of Regina Franks, Auschwitz Survivor.

For more than 30 years, Regina Franks wore the number 34679 on her forearm. She vowed that it would be part of her always – a searing reminder of the two years she spent in Nazi concentration camps. Finally, she came to believe that it made her work as a medical social worker more difficult and had it removed by surgery.

In 1996, she took her own life, haunted by the ghosts of her past, by the death of her daughter and ill health.

Her story lives on as an undying testament to the courage of a young woman who found herself marked for death but somehow survived.

At this year's National Commemoration in Coventry, Regina's granddaughter's recounted her story.

(As told to journalist, Peter Walters)

Regina grew up in the town of Hrubieszow in eastern Poland, the eldest child of a Jewish town councillor who was taken as a hostage, marched into the forest and shot by the Nazi invaders soon after the war began.

A fluent German speaker, the legacy of an Austrian-born grandfather, Regina was put to work scrubbing barrack blocks for the occupying Germany Army, work that for a time shielded her family from the SS.

But one day she returned from work to find the entire family – her mother, brother, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins – missing. She never saw them again.

'I was told my mother had left me a note,' she once recalled, 'but I never found it. I've always felt that she was telling me I must survive and from that moment on I had a burning desire not to be beaten.'

Regina's gift for languages – she spoke Russian and Yiddish as well as German and Polish – was useful to the Nazis and she was sent to prison in Frankfurt to work as an interpreter.

After a failed escape bid, she spent eight terrifying months in jail as a 'terrorist suspect' before being moved to Auschwitz, where, the guards informed her, she would be ashes within two weeks.

Her first sight of the women's camp, with the bodies of those hanged that day still strung up at the gates, prompted feelings that were to become ever-present over the next two years.

'I thought quite calmly that this was the end,' she remembered, 'and was only glad that my mother was not there to see what had happened to me.'

Desperate not to die silent, she screamed defiance at the SS guards, but instead of being shot out of hand was put to work with thousands of others building the railway that would later bring victims of the Holocaust straight to the gas chambers.

It seems incredible that she survived, particularly as on many occasions she deliberately courted death as a way out of her misery. But each time events reprieved her. In the months before Auschwitz became the scene of mass gassings, typhus and typhoid were the biggest killers. Regina had been inoculated against both as a child.

Later she contracted malaria – a certain passport to death in the experimental laboratories – but was shielded by the Russian labour commando for whom she was working as an interpreter.

As a runner taking messages round the camp, she learned in advance which blocks were earmarked for death that night and avoided them.

As an interpreter too, she faced appalling dilemmas. At one point she was among a group of women sent to the neighbouring men's camp to translate confessions extracted under torture.

Having endured this ordeal for several days, the group decided to risk death by refusing, but were saved when one of the women contracted typhus and they were confined to their own camp.

Regina was working in the kitchens as the Soviet Army advanced on Auschwitz, and was in the last group marched out by the SS, on a journey that took them to Mauthausen concentration camp and finally on to Belsen.

It was a death march, conducted in the depths of winter, and by the time the British liberated Belsen in April 1945, Regina was the only one left alive of the 160 prisoners who had arrived in Auschwitz in her convoy two years before.