

## Roman Halter

### The Kindness of Strangers

I was 12 years old in September 1939 when Hitler's troops entered Poland. I was the seventh child in our family and the youngest. My family and relations lived in the north-western part of Poland, in a town called Chodecz (Godetz in German). The area where I lived was made an integral part of greater Germany in 1939 and the 'clearing-out' – the murder – of the Jewish people began almost immediately. Before September 1939, Poles, Germans and 800 Jews lived in my town. Murder began as soon as the SS police took charge of the town, towards the end of September 1939.

First of all, the SS rounded up all the potential Jewish and Polish leaders in our town and shot them. And they did the same thing in the adjoining towns. Then they took all the able-bodied Jewish men and women to work, either building the Berlin-Pozen road and railway line, or on the construction of the first extermination camp in Chelmno (German Klumthof), built to murder the Jewish communities of north-western Poland.

For those of us who remained Chodecz, our properties were taken away and we were relocated in hovels on the outskirts of the town. We were made to wear armbands with the Star of David on them and to walk in the gutter. By the following year, autumn 1940, of the 800 Jews who originally lived in our town, 360 were left; and we were all sent to the ghetto in Lodz.

When we arrived there, the Lodz ghetto was overcrowded and could only accept 120 of us. My grandfather, father, mother, half-sister and two of her children, and I were amongst the 120 taken in, but the remainder were taken away and shot. The Lodz ghetto was an unjust and unequal society. Those who ran it under Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, along with their friends, relations and acquaintances, managed to eat adequately; the rest starved. Those of us who were outsiders starved from the first day.

My grandfather, to whom I was very close, died two months later, in October 1940. He told me that *when* I survived – not *if* I survived but *when* – I must tell the world that the German Nazis were murdering all the Jewish people. As early as October 1940, he had understood this, and his words helped me to live because I believed what he said to me.

The Lodz ghetto set up factories to produce things needed by the German forces. I succeeded in getting a job in the metal factory. In addition to the starvation rations, those who worked received soup, a watery soup, but soup nevertheless. Even with the extra soup I looked like a skeleton, and so did my father, mother, half-sister and her two children. My father died of starvation in spring 1941. My mother's legs were swollen from hunger and she moved with great difficulty.

In Spring 1942, my mother, my half-sister, her two children and I were all selected to be taken to Chelmno to be murdered there. My half-sister could have saved herself, but when they took her two children, she chose to go with them. My mother told me to escape and hide till the selection of our area of the ghetto was over. 'Run in a zigzag,' she told me, 'and don't stop when they shoot or shout "Halt!"' I did as she asked and escaped that selection, but my mother, half-sister and her children all perished there. I continued working in the metal factory till the Lodz ghetto was emptied in autumn 1944. When this happened, 500 men, women and young people, the most skilled from the metal factory, were selected to be transported as slave labour. I was amongst them, and we were going to make munitions somewhere in Germany.

First of all we were sent by cattle truck to Auschwitz-Birkenau. On the train there were 500 metal workers like me and 2,300 people from the Lodz ghetto, most of whom had been in hiding inside the ghetto. We were packed into the cattle trucks, 80 people per truck, 35 trucks. In the camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the 500 metal workers were put to one side as the others, the 2,300, were led to the gas chambers.

From Auschwitz we metal workers were then transported to Stutthof – a brutal and murderous concentration camp. There we found out that the munitions factory was supposed to be north of Pozen, but there was to be a change of plan because the Russians were advancing rapidly westwards. The machines were now to be packed and sent to a factory in Dresden. Thirty-two of us were dispatched to north of Pozen to clean, dismantle and pack the machines. It took us six weeks to do this. During that time, we lost about 120 people in Stutthof from our original group of 500. Auschwitz was then asked to select 120 'tough' new people to make up the figure of 500 workers in accordance with the orders of Albert Speer's Ministry of Armaments.

We arrived in Dresden on 24 November 1944. As we were marched by the SS from the railway station to the factory on 68 Schandauerstrasse, starved, thin and weak as I was, I was nevertheless overwhelmed by the beauty of the town. Chodecz was a *shtetl* or little town in Yiddish. The Lodz ghetto was squalid and ugly, but Dresden was a beautiful city. I looked to right and left as we were marched along and I promised myself that when I survived, I would become an architect.

On 13 February 1945 Dresden was bombed: it was not touched till then. The factory in which we worked as slave labourers under SS supervision was damaged and put out of action. The SS made us clean the machines and repair the damaged building, and we had to spend many days and nights doing it.

Eventually the SS realised that it was a hopeless task and one day towards the middle of March 1945, they marched us in a southerly direction. It turned out to be a death march. Those who were weak and could not keep up with the pace of the march, were taken away and shot. We all realised that our usefulness as munitions workers had come to an end and now the SS would take us to some ravine where we would all be shot. It was this certainty that made a few people try to escape on the third night of our march. I was amongst them.

Our plan was to get to Dresden and hide in the ruins, but daylight overcame us when we were only eight kilometres from the city, and we had to take shelter. In a place called Oberpoyritz not far from Pilnitz Castle, three of us were taken in by a childless, German couple called Kurt and Hertha Fuchs. My two colleagues were called Abram Sztajer, who was 30, and Adam Szwajcer, who was 31; by then I was 17. Adam had been in Auschwitz-Birkenau from the beginning of the camp and his arm was tattooed with No 57.

Mr and Mrs Fuchs looked after us for weeks. I slept in the greenhouse/shed and worked all day in their vegetable garden at the back of their house. With the help of Mr Fuchs, my two friends found work with a nearby farmer, and came back each evening to the Fuchs' house.

Russian troops passed through the village of Oberpoyritz on 4 May 1945. That night my grandfather came into my dreams, telling me to go back to Chodecz. The dream was so vivid that I got up in the middle of the night and began dressing, and only then realised that I had been dreaming. The next morning, I told Mr and Mrs Fuchs and my two colleagues that I was leaving that day for Chodecz, my town in Poland, to meet up with members of my family. I explained that as I was the youngest of seven children, I had hopes that some of them might have survived... Or some of my cousins or uncles... The prospect of going home made me feel dizzy with longing.

When I told Mr and Mrs Fuchs and the others that I was preparing to go, that very day, they thought that I had gone mad, that I had lost my senses. They advised me to wait a week or two, or a bit longer, and then leave. I stayed just one more day – persuaded by the meal which Mrs Fuchs was preparing for that evening to celebrate the end of the war.

The following morning I left. I eventually reached my home town of Chodecz, some 460 kilometres as the crow flies from Dresden. I discovered that of the 800 Jewish people who lived there before 1939, only four had survived – myself and the three Pinczewski sisters who now live in Melbourne, Australia. All the Jewish people from the adjoining towns had also been murdered. Jews had been living in Poland for a thousand years, and now all the thriving communities had been wiped out. Finding nobody at home made me wonder about my own survival. What had kept me going during those black years? I knew that my grandfather's words helped me greatly because I believed him totally. Then there was my own will to live and my love of life, my innate optimism, the courage to take risks, and perhaps – not least – the fact that I had been so loved by my family when I was a child.

The Polish people of my town did not give me a friendly reception: in fact, I was in fear of my life. The whole area felt to me like one big graveyard. I left Poland and went to Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), and with the help of a kind Red Cross lady in Prague, I managed to get some foodstuffs which I decided to take back to Mr and Mrs Fuchs. With this modest parcel of edibles, I wanted to say thank you to them. The trains were running but they were infrequent, and those that came were overcrowded. I noticed people sitting on the roof of the train, so I too climbed up and travelled like that all the way to Dresden.

When I got to the village, Mrs Fuchs was dressed in black. Five days after I had left for my home in Poland, local men who had been in Hitler's SS during the war had learned that Mr and Mrs Fuchs had sheltered Jews. Although the war was now over, they had come and taken Mr Fuchs, Adam and Abram to a nearby field, where they shot and killed Mr Fuchs and Adam, and took Abram away with them. He survived and lived in Israel until he died in 2003. It took me many years to find him because he changed his name slightly. Mrs Hertha Fuchs was honoured for her brave actions and elected Righteous Among The Nations by Yad Vashem, Jerusalem.

In October 2002 I visited Dresden and went with a television crew to see Mrs Fuchs, who died aged 95 in December 2003. I asked her why she had taken in and sheltered the three of us. She paid for it so very dearly with the death of her husband, Kurt, and we had nothing to give her but our thanks. She answered that both she and her husband felt they had to do it. 'You see,' she said, 'although we are Germans, we were not Nazis; our minds were not poisoned by the 12 years of propaganda, and all the Nazi Screeching against the Jews. It was our impulse to do this, to take you in and save you. You would do the same, I think, Roman.'

I replied that after the wonderful example she and Kurt had shown, I would like to think that I would do the same. But I know that it is easier to say yes than to do it. I often ask myself if I would have the courage, the sense of what is right and what is wrong, the humanity, to take in strangers and save them, when such an act was punishable by death for all. I would like to believe that I would.

I dedicate this story to my lost family, to my children and grandchildren.

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