

Darkness

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Never in my life shall I forget that night. That dark, heartless, barbaric night. The night that stole my innocence and my own humanly desire to live. Alone in complete utter darkness. Being stripped away from everyone and everything you love, and brought to a place you knew nothing of, working your life away until it was your time to pass. There was a time my life was good. I remember. Life is laborious here, I won't lie. But I have to persevere. If I can stay hopeful, I might survive just long enough to get out of this camp. Looking back on the happy memories I've lived through does give me hope.

I was born as Ingrid Nowak into a Jewish family, living in Warsaw. Ever since Hitler became Germany's head of state in 1934, he brought new laws which discriminated against Jews. Back to 1937 after my 13th birthday, everything was fine— until everyone started talking about some war.

I had no idea what was happening, but I had heard from my parents that there were daily bombings in Germany and Stalingrad. They didn't tell me why or much other than that.

Months, years passed. It had seemed like nothing had changed. Children played games on the street, shops were running as usual, and parents were busy running errands. It was only after that one year seven month period that things had changed.

The German troops had entered the Polish border at about 4:45 in the morning. We only heard the news at about 10 A.M, so we didn't know how long it would be until they reached our neighborhood. I figured we would have at best a day to figure out what we would do.

Once that news was out, my once ordinary teenage life had turned to turmoil. As if the apocalypse was about to occur, all the adults rushed around burying their valuables and safe keeping, while the young children stood still—paralyzed, scared, and unaware of the menacing threat coming their way.

My father walked toward me uneasily. "There are suspicions that we are going to be taken somewhere to work in brick factories," he said with his voice breaking.

"We can only bring a few personal items, a backpack, some food, clothing, but nothing more than that," he informed me.

"What? No... Why?" I frantically asked.

“Just start packing Ingrid. We don’t have much time anyway,” he bluntly replied as he started to walk away.

At that moment, the childish innocence that once was held within me was consumed by darkness. *Why is this happening? Why me?* For I had not known the answers to these questions, but quickly started to run home to start packing my things.

As I approached the front gate of my house, I saw my mother had stumbled on the stairs and tripped. I quickly came to her assistance asking “Are you okay? Do you need help?”

Instead of getting a reassuring response, she had gotten up and ran out the door without saying a word. My once loving and calm mother had looked and acted like she had been possessed by fear.

Once I had made it into my room, I began to pack. First, I packed a pair of faux diamond earrings that I had received for my fourteenth birthday. I loved how they shined and glistened in the sun. *What exceptional beauty in such a small item.* I also packed about a week's worth of clothes and food in a small robin blue backpack I had found in my dresser.

Women all around the neighborhood were cooking eggs and meat, sewing clothes, and patching up backpacks. Once I took a look outside, I saw my backyard had patches of soil in mounds, covering our precious keepsakes hidden below the surface. All the windows and doors were open in each and every house. It had seemed like all the houses belonged to everyone since, in a few hours, it would no longer belong to anyone.

There was no time to sit and rest, no time to satiate our hunger by eating, and no time to take a breath and calm down.

Everyone was anxiously moving about as if they were on steroids. When night fell, I had what seemed like, “The Last Supper” with my mother and father. We all sat silently, meticulously spooning chicken soup into our dry, speechless mouths. There was nothing to say— or at least nothing unique or funny anyone could say to break the painful, awkward silence. It felt like I was eating dinner with two strangers, but I had known them for my entire life. As worn out and exhausted as I was that night, I still couldn’t sleep. Knowing I would be taken away from my home and possibly be taken away from my family made me feel so dejected and anxious. As the night progressed, my mind started to fill with thoughts. Before I could thoroughly process all of the thoughts in my head, I actually started to feel sleepy. The next thing I knew, my mind became clear as I fell into a deep, dark sleep.

“Ingrid! Ingrid get up! They could be here any minute!” my mother yelled, violently startling me into consciousness.

I immediately jolted myself out of bed in fear. I brushed my teeth, got dressed and hurried outside in the scorching sun to join my parents. As soon as I found them and stood next to them, I heard the Hungarian police yelling through the streets.

“Get outside now! Jews, all of them! Get outside!” they violently yelled.

At that point, hot, soul-piercing fear was the only thing running through my veins.

“Form a line! Women on one side, men on the other side!” shouted the Hungarian police.

I swiftly moved next to my mother on one side of the street and stood beside her—petrified in trepidation. *I did not want to look at her. I did not want to break into tears.* That day, we stood outside for 3 hours in the blazing sun without water, without food, without talking, all just waiting for every Jew in the neighborhood to line up outside. Every single second that passed in those three hours, ripped out a sliver of my remaining hope and happiness.

After what had seemed like years of standing in hell, everyone had finally made it outside. The police started to go through the two lines writing down everyone’s names and ages.

“Name? Age? Name? Age?” is all I heard for hours.

Quickly, reality hit me. *I would be forced on a train to be taken somewhere I didn’t know and separated from my parents after this step in our deportation.* After about an hour or so, it was my turn. The tall, cold-hearted officer approached me. As I made eye contact with his merciless, unforgiving eyes, I began to break out in a cold sweat.

“Name? Age?” he impatiently asked. Even though that was the only thing I had heard for hours, it was like I couldn’t understand what he was saying. I tried to reply quickly to get it over with, but my throat was dry, and my own words were choking me—paralyzing me.

I replied, “Uh. In-Ingrid Nowak, fourteen,” I coarsely stuttered.

“Ah, fourteen. Not sure what they’ll do with you,” he commented.

I did not reply but did feel uneasy. It took about six more hours for everyone’s name and age to be written down. By the time everything was done, night had already fallen. The officers that had been with us the entire day, switched out with other officers which searched through our homes. We slept on the street that night. The cold stone brick we laid upon was rough, bitter and unwelcoming. I thought about just getting up and running away. I did. But I couldn’t do it. Even though I was bound to be separated from my parents, I didn’t want to leave them just yet. *Why rush for my certain fate?* That was a difficult night—surrounded in the darkness.

The next morning, we were all awoken by the coercive yelling of the Hungarian officers, “Jews! Get up now! Get up!”

I woke up dizzy from dehydration. I reached for my canteen full of water and took a small sip. I wanted to conserve my water for my trip on the train. Like the day before, we got into our lines and the Hungarian Police led us to the trains. I still didn't know where we were going. The uncertainty made me anxious. As I walked farther and farther away from my home, hot, desolate tears rolled down my cheeks. *Why here? Why now? Why me? Why had my god forsaken me? Was I just born to die?* Children were crying in distress, and their parents were using every last bit of their composure trying to sooth them. Once we arrived at the train yard, the train was waiting there with at least ten separate cars.

"Single file line everyone! One hundred people to each car! Move quickly!" the police shouted.

Night had fallen by the time it was my mother and I's turn to board the train. I quickly grasped for my mother's hand. After we both got into one of the cars, the utter heat of the ninety-eight other people became intense. The air was musty and humid—making it barely breathable. There was barely any room to sit or lay down. Once we were all boarded, they distributed some bread and pails of water to each car. I only took a few sips of water. I had gone the whole day without food. I was not hungry, but utterly debilitated. As I sat down to relive my exhaustion, I felt the cold metal floor begin to vibrate. The train had started, and we were on our way.

We were on the train for four days. My hunger, thirst, and need for fresh air became unbearable. The conditions we lived with on the train made the trip nearly unlivable. There was still some food and water left, but not nearly enough to satiate all of us.

Finally, the rhythm of the rolling wheels came to an end. It was bright outside. We had arrived at our fateful, unknown destination. The squeaky metal door opened, and we were all forced out of the cars. After days of sitting, my legs became weak and walking felt like something new I had to re-learn.

"All of you have now passed and entered the German border. You are now under German authority. If you are in possession of any valuables, you must hand them over now," announced a Hungarian officer. Several officers went through the lines of people with baskets to collect the valuables.

As started to look around, I saw barbed wire fences and a huge gate which marked the entrance of the camp. It looked like what would be the entrance to hell itself. After the officers had collected all the valuables, it was time to enter the camp. I squeezed my mother's hand. Once we had all made it inside, we were all assigned barracks to sleep in. Barracks on the left

side of the camp was reserved for men, and the right side was reserved for women. Before we went inside the barracks, they gave us uniforms to wear. The uniforms were covered with white and orange stripes. "Where are we?" I asked a Hungarian officer before entering the gates.

"Auschwitz. Now go," he replied.

I had no previous idea about where that was, but I was here now and didn't think I would be leaving any time soon.

Once we made it inside the barracks, I immediately noticed it looked, felt, and sounded like an insane asylum. A few women inside were moaning and wailing. Inside, it was dingy, dark, and depressing. We laid our things down and got changed into the uniforms we were given. I didn't know much about fashion, but even I could distinguish how ugly the uniforms were. After changing, we were ordered to get our heads shaved. We all walked in a single file line to a small room where one by one, we lined up to get our head shaved. I was near the back of the line and all I could hear was, the blunt buzzing of the razor. I loved my hair. I loved how my silky, chestnut-colored locks fell over my shoulders. It acted like a shield covering all my insecurities. But now it's gone. After my last line of defense had been abruptly shaved off my head, we got straight to work at the factory making brick molds.

Ever since then, life hasn't been the best.

I've been working from seven thirty in the morning to eight at night. The food isn't good at all. Half of the time, it's barely edible and doesn't resemble human food. We eat mostly bread and a mush of random, over-boiled vegetables. At least I have some time to rest at night and look back on my old memories and ideas. I haven't seen my dad since we left Warsaw. I miss him so much. I miss his wittiness and his quirky statements. I don't know what I'll face next, but I hope one day I will be able to come out of this infernal camp alive.

Besides, there's not much else I can do here—surrounded in this darkness...