

Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide

6 Every Wednesday through June 11, we hope you'll join us for **Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide**, exploring past and present atrocities through the oral histories of genocide survivors in our region. Produced in partnership with the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center.

Chapter Six

FRIEDA'S STORY: A CZECH HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR

As spoken by Frieda S. Written by Dee Simon,
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In 1933, the Nazi party was elected in Germany and Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor. Hitler and the Nazi Party quickly put into practice their belief that Germans were "racially superior." Jewish people were not only defined as "inferior," but became the primary target for Nazi hatred.

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. By the end of that same year, Nazi forces occupied Czechoslovakia. For the next five years, Nazi forces occupied country after country in Europe.

In 1943, at the age of 14, Frieda was deported to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in her native country of Czechoslovakia, because she was a "mischling" — half Jewish. Frieda's mother was not Jewish, but her father was. Against the odds, Frieda survived the Holocaust in Theresienstadt.

After the war people told me I was lucky to have been sent to Theresienstadt. It was the model camp. Intellectuals, artists and individuals who might someday provide something to the Reich were sent to Theresienstadt. I was sent to Theresienstadt because I was a "mischling" (half Jewish). I didn't feel lucky.

I didn't know at that time that 1.5 million children were going to be murdered because they were Jewish. I also didn't know that of the 140,000 Jewish people sent to Theresienstadt between 1941 and 1945, 15,000 were children. Only 10 percent of the children sent to Theresienstadt would survive the war (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum - USHMM).

What I did know was that people around me were starved, beaten, shot and sent away on trains. I did know that I was taken from my home and my family; I was hungry all the time and made to work long hours. I know now that it is only because of luck that I survived.



PHOTO:
Frieda S.
in Seattle,
2008.

My childhood before the war was filled with picnics, hikes, skating and celebrations. I grew up celebrating Passover and Christmas. I knew I was Jewish but religion was not a central part of my life. When Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, my religion came to define me.

In 1943, when I was 14, I was deported by train to Theresienstadt. My mother, who was not Jewish, didn't have to go. My father was in a local jail for his political beliefs.

I was taken to Theresienstadt with others from my hometown, Ostrava.

I was tall and strong, so I was given the job of farming. Every day, I worked planting, tilling, harvesting and moving rocks. Sometimes I stole vegetables. I knew I would be shot if caught, but I also knew that this was keeping me and others alive. Although I witnessed daily horrors, somehow I grew up. I had girl friends, I had my first kiss and I found ways to keep going.

Every day, the trains took people from Theresienstadt. We didn't know where they were going but I thought it had to be a place better than this. One day, although not on the list, I stood in line to get on the train. As I tried to board the train a Nazi SS officer yelled at me and told me to go back. I was so angry. Later, when I learned the trains took people to Auschwitz, I realized I was lucky — the Nazi officer saved my life.

My father and brother were deported to Theresienstadt a few months before the war ended. When the Russians liberated Theresienstadt in 1945, my father stole a horse and wagon from a nearby farm and loaded it with children from Ostrava who had survived Theresienstadt. He took us all back to our hometown. When we returned to Ostrava, many of the children found they had no home or family left. They came to live with me and my family until they could find a place to go.

When I was 18, I decided to go to Israel. I met my husband Aaron in Haifa. We had three children and then immigrated to the United States. I now live in Seattle, my children are grown, and I have five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

In a lecture my daughter gave recently, she said she is proud of survivors because they bear witness with dignity. I think that so many of us are humbled by the guilt that we survived while others did not. We are reluctant to share the fact that we witnessed cruelty and inhumanity in its most unimaginable form, but we also feel lucky. For us, bearing witness with dignity is not an option — it is a continuing act of survival.

For more information on this article, or others in this series, please contact the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center: www.wsherc.org or info@wsherc.org.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ❖ Hitler and the Nazi party believed that Germans were "racially superior" and Jewish people became the primary target for their hatred. What is your opinion of race relations in America? Do you feel that everyone is equal? Why do you think some people believe they are better than others? Do you see racial barriers in the current presidential election?
- ❖ Find an example of race relations in today's newspaper? Share your findings with your class.
- ❖ Frieda's daughter described pride in the "survivors because they bear witness with dignity." Frieda feels that survivors are humbled by the guilt that they survived and the others didn't and feels it's not an option, but "a continuing act of survival." What is your view on these two perspectives in describing the feelings of the survivors?