

It Can Happen Again -

“It can happen again”, my father warned me. “Lily, listen to me. Don’t think it can’t happen again.”

I think of those words whenever I am in a shul and see the gold inscriptions on the walls.

“Never forget”

I know they are referring to the holocaust.

My father spoke little of his experiences during the war. I know he was the sole survivor, and he suffered terribly. His parent’s somber faces were prominent in the photograph hung on our living room wall and he spoke of his beautiful older sister Helen and a younger brother Lieb. They all perished in the war.

My father used to paint by paint by numbers sets. I have one of his pictures, a dancer dressed in green, painstakingly painted amid the hubbub of family and work. Amazing that he found the time: parent of three, president of the synagogue, owner of a business. He must have found this to be a soothing and relaxing project. My father was very good with his hands, and this was helpful to him during the war and in his employment after.

He did errands for the Nazis and was rewarded for his speed.

“Those extra pieces of bread saved my life.” he exclaimed.

My husband likes to throw things out. That’s because he grew up thinking they would always be replaced. That’s because he does not feel that the other shoe is going to drop, 24/7, like me. Because he does not understand the connection some objects mean to mothers and daughters. especially when nothing else remains.

“If I don’t remember them, who will?”

My mother told me,

“They woke us in the middle of the night, in the cold, bitter night to have us line up and be counted. It was just to torture us. We had these very small, thin blankets in the barracks and it was hard enough to fall asleep. They did it to torture us.”

My father was number 11, when they counted every tenth to be shot.

My father taught me that there is good and evil in all peoples of the world. There were sadistic Jews and there were sadistic Nazis. There were good Jews and better Nazis.

My parents withstood evil around them and came out the other side, loving all peoples, knowing that kindness is in all people.

Before the surgery that ended his life, my father in his hospital bed, was so humble, so appreciative of the nurses of all colors, who cared for him.

“They are wonderful”, he said to me, and he told them as well.

He had the sweetest, most appreciative look on his face.

“Go home, Lilly. Please, you have been here all day.”

That was the last time, I saw my father alive. As always, concerned for me before himself.

My mother was so small that she could hide behind Lucia, her best friend through the war. When the final selection happened, the Nazis chose one to go left, the other right. They stuck together, choosing not to separate, going into the death camp together.

“Mach Schnell, Get moving, before I kick you, or shoot you, or torture you. Mach Schnell”, my mother learned to get into line in a hurry, hesitation could cost her life. But this small Polish girl, my mother, survived.

“I got typhus, I was so sick, I almost died.”

“I lost all my teeth because you know, I had no food, no nutrition.”.

I do not know how she got the dentures.

My parents suffered. groveling in the dirt, like in Schindler’s List.

“That’s how it was”, she told me. “Just like that.”

No dignity, powerless, hopeless, dirty, diseased.

My parents looked so healthy and sweet in their photos after they married. They were only 20 and 21. They had youth, and remarkably, they healed and made a new life.

It was a hot, sticky day in August and I was invited to my brother’s apartment for supper. He and his wife lived right near the subway, and I came directly from my summer job in the city. I sat with my brother Max, his wife Gail and my father at the small table. I don’t recall my mother or other brother Abe being there, but I

remember the sound of plates clattering and idle chitchat as they were being passed.

“This is the night they murdered my parents”, my father announced.

There was a hushed silence, and we stopped and looked at him.

” I remember it, because it was during T’isha Bav.”

My father had soulful brown eyes that were magnified threefold by his glasses.

His head was always covered, by his hat or a yarmulka. He had a quiet voice, a quiet strength that was palpable always, and at this moment, we could see the emotion in his face. His lips were straight and stoic and quivered slightly. His eyes were sad and wet.

He announced it, as a matter of fact, although I never remember him mentioning his parent’s death this way before. We looked at him, and he looked at us and after a brief silence, we resumed eating and the small talk resurfaced. This is how it was. He said little, we didn’t ask, but the undercurrent of the Holocaust and what it cost us was always there, simmering below the surface.

Had the Nazis not been eradicated, my parents would have perished in concentration camps.

My grandmother told my 15 year old father, “Elie, if anyone survives this, I think it will be you. Remember your uncle in America.” Had they not emigrated to America, they might have ended up in Israel. Although my mother laughingly tells the story of a cousin in the DP camp, who told my father that if he didn’t marry my mother very soon, he was taking her with him to Australia. I have cousins in Australia!

DP or Displaced person’s camp is where my oldest brother was born.

“It can happen again,” Looking at me to make sure I was listening, “Lily, don’t think it can’t happen again. It can.” When I prodded him, he said, “We heard things were bad for the Jews but that was still elsewhere. We had a business that served Jews and non jews alike and life was ok. Where would we go anyway? We had no idea how bad it would be. Who could even imagine what lay ahead of us? The amicable relationships they had for years with their gentile neighbors went sour quickly.

No one from the family survived.

My mother was taken to the Warsaw Ghetto with her mother who died early on. She was alone – her siblings long gone.

“They came into our village and lined up the people, all the people and shot them -- dead. I saw this in front of me with my own eyes.” my father said. He and his younger brother were taken to a work camp and his younger brother died early on.

They both grew silent when I asked about the death camps that came after. They wouldn't go there and I didn't push. I think how differently things may have gone if they were full of hate instead of love.



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Let us be more specific: had Zionism and its demands not existed, what would have become of the survivors of the ghettos and the camps, the partisans emerging from the forests and mountains who, according to all logic, should have scorned the human race and dedicated themselves to hating and despising it? Outraged, betrayed, these men and women, disowned and victimized by society, had the right and also the means to pledge themselves to nihilism and let their anger explode -come what may. They had nothing to lose, no one to spare. No ties to country or life. No more illusions about the trend of history or man. They could easily have become social misfits, even criminals. Had they set fire to all of Europe, no one would have been surprised. But they did not.

