

Images from the Holocaust

A LITERATURE ANTHOLOGY

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Reunions

Bernard Gotfryd

Born in Radom, Poland, in 1920, Bernard Gotfryd was involved in the Polish resistance movement during World War II. He was captured by the Nazis, who sent him to a series of concentration camps. He, his brother, and his sister survived the war, but their parents were killed. Gotfryd was a slave laborer in the stone quarry at the Mauthausen concentration camp. After the war, he immigrated to the United States. He had a successful career as a staff photographer for *Newsweek* magazine. The following story is from *Anton the Dove Fancier and Other Tales of the Holocaust*, a collection of stories and vignettes, which is Gotfryd's first book.

Even after the war was over, Jews in some European countries were not entirely safe. In this short story, Gotfryd describes the dangers a young man faced as he searched for his sister.

It was May, 1945, and the war was over. For two days I had been in Linz, Austria, alone, living in constant anxiety over the fate of my family. I was afraid to think about who was still alive. Every day I crisscrossed the city of Linz, hoping to find a trace of something familiar, a clue, a contact of some kind. I wasn't even sure if I still remembered the faces of my brother and sister or my parents; I wasn't sure that they would recognize me if we were to meet.

Nightmarish images were always before my eyes, keeping me awake at night. I had nothing left, not even a picture, to prove that I had once belonged to a family. I didn't know who I was; I had doubts about my own name. I remembered only my prisoner number, as if it were engraved on my brain.

Who am I, I kept asking myself, and what am I doing here? I looked and searched but kept running away from myself.

Soon I moved on to Salzburg, about seventy-five miles from Linz, to get away from an imaginary SS man I thought was out to kill me. In my mind he looked like Horst Gartner, whose parents had invited me to stay at their house. Salzburg was no better, only somewhat larger than Linz; registrations and inquiries, survivors looking for relatives, lists of survivors on walls, and notices in different languages were everywhere. Everybody was looking for somebody else, but no one, it seemed, was looking for me. I found no familiar names, not even that of a neighbor. Slowly I was coming to terms with the fact that, at the age of twenty, I was alone in the world.

One early morning, while walking near the railway station in search of a photo shop, I heard someone calling from the other side of the street. The call came again; it was my name. At first I couldn't identify with it; when I finally turned I saw a stocky young man of medium height with a full, round face and closely cropped hair. Who was he? He had the face of a stranger, and his voice was unfamiliar. He was wearing a pair of baggy pants and a striped shirt with rolled-up sleeves; he carried a small suitcase with reinforced metal corners.

When I stopped he started running toward me, yelling my name at the top of his lungs. When he realized I wasn't responding he dropped the suitcase, grabbed me by my shoulders, and shook me hard, as if trying to wake me from a sleep.

"I'm your brother, don't you recognize me?" he yelled. He had heard that I was in Austria and had traveled for two days from Stuttgart, sitting on top of a coal car, to look for me. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Or is there something wrong with you?" We hugged, and he nearly squashed me; he was strong.

"I just couldn't recognize you," I said, fighting back my tears. "I didn't think I would ever see you again. It's almost unreal how different you look; you've gained a lot of weight, your hair is short. God, you look like a different person. How could I have recognized you?"

"I had a bad case of typhoid," he said, "and since I got well I haven't been able to stop eating. I've been liberated since April and have been living on a farm with some friends. Recently we slaughtered a pig; you can imagine how well we eat.

"You probably don't know that Father was shot," my brother went on to say. He had witnessed Father's execution. Matter-of-factly he described the whole scene to me. "I begged the SS man to let Father go," he told me, "but he threatened to shoot me, too, and I think he would have if I hadn't stepped back into

the ranks. I remember him very well. I even know his name and where he came from. It was terrible and frightening. I can't forget it."

For a split second I remembered my father throwing the egg to me at the Szkolna camp. I remembered his tears when the SS guard hit him with a stick for doing so; every time I thought of my father there were tears; still, I couldn't cry. It seemed impossible that I was talking to my brother.

An Austrian woman with big, sad eyes and a knapsack strapped to her back stopped to watch us; she stood a few feet away shaking her head. I didn't think she knew what was happening or who we were, but when we started walking away she looked back over her shoulder, still shaking her head. I heard her say "*Wie traurig*"—how sad—before we disappeared around the corner.

My brother had heard rumors from survivors who traveled across Europe looking for their families that our sister Hanka was alive and looking for us in Poland.

We stayed together for a while, but toward the end of the summer we parted again. My brother remained in Germany; I went to Poland via Prague to search for our sister.

It was a difficult and lonely journey that took me back to a country I dreaded, a journey full of strange and unpredictable encounters. I traveled in the backs of trucks or in unheated trains, standing up for hours on steps or in open freight cars, often enough in the rain. The Nazis had robbed the country of everything; there were few scheduled trains or buses. The same hateful faces greeted me wherever I went. The same resentment came through all of their eyes; I could see they were wondering why I had come back.

Cold winds and rain blew incessantly across the Polish landscape, turning it into one huge mud pie. I traveled from one city to another searching for my sister, only to find that she had eluded me each time by leaving a day or two before I arrived. I kept moving from place to place, hoping to catch up with her; in Lodz a Polish friend of the family, Mr. S., gave me some money my parents had left with him for safekeeping and told me that my sister had left for Stettin on her way to the west.

The following day I hitched a ride on a truck going toward the German frontier. As soon as I climbed in the back of the truck it started raining, so I slipped under the tarpaulin and stretched out on a pile of potato sacks behind some wooden crates. It was late in the evening when the truck approached the first intersection; it slowed down. I heard part of a conversation with the driver, and soon I saw two armed men in uniforms climb in the back. They settled themselves directly across from where I was lying; even in the dark something told me that they weren't friendly.

I was correct in my assessment; when the truck started moving again I heard the two men talking. They complained about what a wasted day it had been; they hadn't found a single Jew. I broke out in a cold sweat. What if they discovered me? Suppose they decided to lift the tarpaulin. That would be the end of me. What could I possibly tell them? About my time in the camps, and how much I longed to get back to my home town and find my people? How could they understand me if they were out to kill me? Only several days before I had heard someone talk about armed bands of Polish nationalists who were organizing pogroms against Jewish survivors. These people were no better than the Nazis; I hated the thought that I might have survived the camps to meet my fate at the hands of Polish hooligans.

My stomach felt as if it were tied into a knot. I tried not to move or even breathe. If only I could shrink to the size of an insect or change into an earthworm! Kafka's *Metamorphosis* came to my mind, and I prayed for a miracle.

Suddenly I felt like sneezing. I was terrified; instinctively I pressed my nose against the edge of a crate and stopped breathing. It worked. I hoped I wouldn't have to repeat the trick; next time I might not be as lucky. I could still hear my traveling companions making threats against the Jews.

It must have been well past midnight. There was no moon, and the rain was coming down incessantly. One side of my face kept getting wet, and drops of water were rolling down my neck behind my shirt collar. It was getting cold; I began to shiver. From time to time the truck would zigzag to avoid a pothole, and the smaller load at the tail of the truck would slide and bounce against the crates, pushing them against my legs.

The two men continued to discuss their exploits and their frustrations. The one with the hoarser voice was recounting how he and some of his friends had recently executed a whole Jewish family who had survived the war in an underground shelter in the woods. He described the episode in vivid detail. It was a bloodcurdling story. The two men sat at the edge of the truck with their feet hanging down and with their backs to me. With one eye I was able to make out their silhouetted torsos against the misty night.

Some hours passed, and finally I heard a knocking above my head, at the driver's cab window. At the next intersection the truck came to a stop, and the two men got off. I watched them jump across the ditch and disappear into the woods. I felt as though I had been liberated for the second time.

I didn't know how far it was to Stettin, but I didn't care. I crawled from under the tarpaulin and looked out. It had stopped raining, and the haze was lifting. There was a strong aroma of rotting leaves mixed with cow manure. At the side of the road I could see faint outlines of bare trees with twisted branches, as if multitudes of crisscrossing arms were reaching for the sky. Some distance away I could make out farm huts with thatched roofs; the flickering lights of kerosene

lamps reflected against their tiny windows, making them look like squatting monsters with burning eyes.

It was a sad and desolate landscape. Here and there were clusters of birch and pine trees. The white birch trunks seemed to be moving across the fields like ghosts, as though they were racing with the truck. From time to time I could hear the driver curse in Polish or sing old Jewish tunes. I was astounded. How did he know Jewish tunes? He had a husky voice and a rich vocabulary of four-letter words with which he seemed to amuse himself.

It was dawn when the truck reached the gates of the city. When it came to a full stop the driver clambered out of the cab, yawning and stretching, to announce our arrival in the city of Stettin. This was as far as he was going.

"This is it," he said. "Last stop." I jumped off the truck holding on to my knapsack. Every muscle in my body ached. I walked over to the driver. He was a husky blond man, perhaps in his thirties. "How do you happen to know Jewish tunes?" I asked him carefully.

"Oh, well," he answered, "it's a long story, but since you ask I'll tell you. I happen to be Jewish. Simple as that. So are you, right? I didn't even have a good look at you, but my antennae tell me you must be one, too," he said, winking at me.

"How could I deny it?" I asked him, and the two of us laughed. It felt so much safer now that the trip was over.

"By the way," I said, "do you happen to know who those two armed men were you had on your truck?"

"I don't know them personally, but I imagine they were members of some political faction; fanatics. There are quite a few of them around, and they always hitch rides; it could be dangerous for me to refuse them. Don't forget, they're armed, and I'm not."

"I was frightened when they got on the truck," I admitted. "They were really dangerous."

"Frankly, I had no idea you were Jewish," he said. "I never had a good look at you before you got on the truck. But don't be afraid, it's over. God protected you."

"You look so Polish, so Christian," I said. "I would have never taken you for a Jew."

"That is exactly what saved me," he said. "My looks. But who are you, and where are you going?" he asked. I told him briefly where I came from and for whom I was looking. "My God," he exclaimed, "it must have been real tough for you. You should be happy to be alive and have a sister. Look at me; I'm the only one from my family left alive. I know what it is like to be left alone."

When I tried to reward him for his trouble he wouldn't accept any money. I offered him my last pack of Chesterfields, but he would only take a few ciga-

rettes. He drove me closer to the center of the city and let me off in front of a teahouse surrounded by ruins. "This is the only place in Stettin where you can get some food. Good luck. I hope you find her," he said, smiling and shaking my hand.

I was in a strange city in which only a few buildings remained standing. It was still early. The teahouse was open, however; I could smell freshly baked bread, and the aroma reminded me of my hunger. I hadn't eaten since I got on the truck in Lodz almost twelve hours before. In the teahouse marble tables stood on massive wrought-iron stands; a long marble counter adorned with brass fixtures, a reminder of better times, ran the length of the room. On the wall hung a small Polish flag.

A young woman was filling orders behind the counter, and a teenager with a blond ponytail was waiting on tables. They didn't have much to offer; only hot tea and buttered rolls or bread. For me that fare was a treat. I sat there warming my hands on a tall glass full of steaming tea, feeling the warmth travel all the way down to my frozen toes. The place began to fill up. People were drifting in, settling in at the tables, dragging metal chairs noisily over the marble floor. I noticed a young man enter the teahouse. He wore a creased raincoat tied with a wide leather belt and carried a knapsack. He looked around as if searching for someone, then proceeded directly toward my table, where there was an empty chair. "Is it all right if I join you?" he asked.

"Please do; I haven't talked to a soul in days," I answered.

"My name is Moshe, Moshe Feingold. I'm a survivor," he introduced himself, shaking my hand rather vigorously. He pulled out the chair across from me and quickly sat down, dropping his knapsack under the table next to mine. I told him my name, and he leaned forward, coming closer to me, as if he had difficulty hearing.

"I think you must be a survivor," Moshe said in a low voice, looking at me suspiciously. "Yes, I am," I answered. "Now that our hair is still short, our clothing fits badly, and we look hungry, lost, and frightened, it must be easy to tell," I said.

"You're quite right," Moshe said, biting into his buttered roll. He was thin, and his eyes were dark and intense. When he talked his head kept turning like a radar dish, left to right, right to left. His short, curly hair was growing in in a very odd shape; the curls were connecting and pressing on each other, as if fighting for space. We sat there exchanging stories, ordering more and more tea. As far as he knew, his entire family had disappeared.

"I crisscrossed Poland, I went to see every camp that ever existed, and all I found were piles of ashes. Poland is one huge cemetery. What else is left?" he asked. "I come from Otwock, not far from Warsaw. There is not a single Jew left in the town. I got married one week before the war started. I had a wife and a

little son. My son would have been four years old by now. My parents, my wife's parents, and the rest of the family were shipped to Treblinka. This much I found out."

I felt bad for him and didn't think it was appropriate for me to talk about my losses. Moshe was on his way to the west, he told me, to join some friends who were getting ready to emigrate to Palestine. We wished each other luck; a few hours into the morning he left.

I got up and went over to the counter to buy some more rolls, but before I had a chance to place my order the young woman behind the counter asked me excitedly, "Do you happen to have a relative named Hanka? I don't know her last name. You look just like her, the same mouth and eyes, the same face. She's my neighbor. She lives right around the corner, on the second floor to the right. I know her. She usually comes here for her rolls. I'm surprised she didn't show up yet this morning. I noticed the strong resemblance as soon as you came in, but then I got busy, and I lost track of you."

"I'm her brother," I answered, my knees shaking. "I've been looking for her everywhere for weeks."

"Please sit down and have some more tea," she suggested. "You must be starved. All this traveling in such bad weather." I thanked her and told her I had already eaten well, paid my check, and ran outside.

It was still early when I knocked at my sister's apartment. A young woman dressed in a long robe opened the door and instantly threw her arms around me.

"How did you find me? This is a miracle. I've been looking for you all over Poland," I heard her say into my shoulder. I couldn't speak. There were no tears, only sadness, and when we hugged a strange feeling came over me. It was as if something inside me was asking me why I was alive while so many others weren't. It pressed and nagged at me, bringing back images of those who were gone. Should I tell my sister immediately what had happened to our father? Or should I wait? I had a feeling that she already knew, that she, too, must have been wondering if I knew about Father.

I wanted to tell my sister how happy I was to find her, but I couldn't find the words. It all seemed abstract, hardly believable. What was one supposed to talk about at such moments? There was no point in recalling the tragic events; it was simply good to be alive, and to be together. Over the next few days we talked at length about many different things but never mentioned the war, nor the camps, as if it had never taken place, as if the six years had just dropped out of the calendar and disappeared. I was getting used to the idea that I was free, no longer alone, and that there were others like myself, roaming, searching, and wandering.

About ten days after my arrival my sister left Stettin, heading for the west to join our brother, and I set out in search of Alexandra, my wartime underground contact. I planned to rejoin my family as soon as I found her.