

White Rose Essay

Elli Friedmann

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Born in 1931, Elli Friedmann was no stranger to chaos. Hungary annexed Šamorin, her Czechoslovakian home town, in November 1938.¹ As a Jew, Elli was subjected to persecution by the government. Even through hardships, she excelled in school and dreamed of becoming a poet. Her blissful life was marred only by the Hungarians' occupation of Czechoslovakia and fear of a growing Nazi party. She was thirteen years old.

This relative bliss was shattered on March 19, 1944², when Elli's brother Bubi arrived unexpectedly from Budapest, frantic with news of a German invasion. The Third Reich had added Hungary to its growing empire. Within a week of "liberation," all schools closed. A few days later, Jews were registered, their valuables collected, and their homes and clothing flagged with the Star of David. Afraid of walking outside, humiliation trapped Elli indoors. After Gentiles and Jews were forbidden to interact, her neighbors became indifferent. Being labeled and treated so ruthlessly created emotional pain that left Elli devastated.

April 18, 1944, marked the beginning of Elli's journey through the Nazis' terrifying system. Šamorin's Jewish residents were deported to the Nagymagyar ghetto³. Like most ghettos, or segregated areas where Nazis forced Jews to live, it was overcrowded. Five hundred families lived in a synagogue, a yard, and a few surrounding houses. Overwhelmed by injustice, Elli learned to enjoy living in the ghetto because she was part of a larger Jewish community. For a full month her family clung to a desperate hope that the worst persecution was over.

Suddenly, a call-up of the ghetto's middle-aged men ended the peace. Elli's father was taken to a labor camp with only a few hours' notice. Mere days after this blow, all Jewish documents in Nagymagyar, including Torah scrolls, were burned. By the 21st of May, the entire ghetto was emptied. Elli, her mother, brother, aunt, and all the remaining residents were carted to

¹ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1938.html

² http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Chronology_1944.html

the Dunaszerdahely ghetto. After only a week, their ghetto was again liquidated, but this time crowds were packed into cattle cars and shipped to a concentration camp⁴.

Auschwitz has been a testament to man's cruelty since its construction in 1940. About 1.3 million men, women, and children were sent there from across conquered Europe. More than one million of them were murdered. Elli, forced into this nightmare, began by being sorted according to ability to work. Elli's blond hair pleased Dr. Mengele, who was in charge of the selection, and he instructed her to pretend to be sixteen. Serena, Elli's aunt, did not pass, and she was sent to the gas chambers⁵. The workers' line was stripped, shaved, and dehumanized. Elli and her mother, who managed to stay together, found family members at the camp. Together they adjusted to the insane conditions that now governed their lives.

After ten days in Auschwitz, Elli and her mother were transported to Plaszow, a Polish labor camp, where they remained through June and July of 1944. Subjected to exhausting work and cruel kapos, survival was nearly impossible. One day a sudden rainstorm sent their labor unit scrambling to find shelter. The guards called this sabotage, or disruption of work, and the punishment was decimation, a form of execution that would kill a random one-tenth of the group. Elli was horrified that her mother could be shot beside her without any warning. The murder was unexpectedly forestalled when a nearby town's resistance group was discovered. As the SS guards were busy, punishment was cancelled and the unit resumed work. That night, inmates heard the partisans being tortured. Soon after, Plaszow was evacuated⁶.

By August 8, Elli Friedmann had suffered and been reduced to a skeleton by sheer Nazi brutality. A grueling transport delivered her to Auschwitz and weakened her mother. Numbers

³ Bitton-Jackson, Livia E. *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*. p. 218.

⁴ Bitton-Jackson, Livia E. *Elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust*. p. 32-54.

⁵ www.ushmm.org/wlc/en//Auschwitz

⁶ Bitton-Jackson, Livia E. *I Have Lived A Thousand Years*. p. 101-115.

were tattooed onto their arms, and Elli, newly named A-17630, guided Mommy to their new bunk. That night, a partition collapsed and the falling beam paralyzed her mother. With an old neighbor's help, Elli managed to retrieve her from the rubble. She was taken to the camp infirmary, where she regained speech and limited movement. Just before a selection of the sick, her daughter smuggled her back to the barracks to save her. The next day they were both chosen for transport and again taken away⁷.

Without their next work assignment at an Augsburg factory, Elli and her mother probably would not have survived the Holocaust. The guards there treated the incoming workers like people, giving them real food, warm clothes, and easier work. A civilian working in the factory befriended Elli, treating her kindly and sneaking her paper and food. Her mother made a full recovery, thanks to rest and a break from manual labor. They remained in this haven from September until April of 1945⁸.

Unexpectedly, all the Augsburg women were evacuated. Muhldorf, a satellite of Dachau, was filled past capacity with starved, sick prisoners, but it was their destination. Miraculously, Mommy and Elli discovered Bubi in Waldlager, the neighboring camp for men. When they met him, he was painfully thin and weak. Elli shared her bread ration with Bubi over a few weeks, and he eventually regained his strength.

With the Allies advancing, Nazis only guarded the two camps' perimeters; gates between Waldlager and Muhldorf were left open. On April 24, 1945, thousands of prisoners were loaded onto one last transport. Air, food, water, and space were all virtually nonexistent. The trains stopped after the guards deserted, and the prisoners who thought that the war was over freed themselves. However, thousands were shot as the Nazi army herded them back onto trains. More

⁷ Bitton-Jackson, Livia E. *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*. p. 119-144.

⁸ Bitton Jackson, Livia E. *Elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust*. p.118-139.

captives were hit by machine gun fire. Finally, after six days of travel and a year of imprisonment, Bubi, Mother, and Elli were all liberated by Americans on April 30, 1945⁹. They went on to find that they were the only members of their family to survive the camps, and less than one tenth of Šamorin's Jews lived. Six years later, they were cleared to immigrate to America.

Elli's journey and insight have shown me that our attitudes do affect others. An act of kindness might save a person, and one of indifference could wound them deeply. In Elli's memoirs, the pain of ignorant neighbors or uninformed classmates makes her feel less like a human, and more like some strange creature called "Jew." Her Gentile friends might have at least smiled, but instead they follow the Nazis' orders. However, after the war she remembers caring gestures --a friend hiding her poems, a neighbor risking her own life to save Mother, and a civilian who smiles every morning in a factory. The compassion of those people made a profound difference in Elli's struggle. Any one of us, faced with suffering in our quiet, safe lives, can look at these examples and decide that extreme situations made those actions different. We would be wrong. I can act friendly to a stranger, smile at a rival, or pick up a toddler's toy, and it will be the same compassion that gave one victim the strength to keep surviving. Our little actions really could change someone forever. In Elli's case, they saved her life.

⁹ Bitton-Jackson, Livia E. *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*. p. 172-199.

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