

IN THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT AT SIX

How did that happen? How old were you when the war started?

Five, and I was six when the camp opened.

And you got involved in the resistance movement at the age of six?

That's the way it happened.

How did it happen?

My parents were very active in helping prisoners. First, they made contact with the engineers who came into Oświęcim to do surveying work around the site of the camp. The army barracks that stood there at the beginning served as the Main Camp. It was only later that bricks from demolished buildings were used to build the upper stories, making the blocks that stand there at present.

My parents established contact with the prisoners who went around outside the camp doing surveying. They took correspondence, medicine, and food with them. It was a very active group. They pretended to be hard at work, measuring the same thing ten times over, the same house, the same barn. The SS men were bribed. They got their share, mostly in vodka. What the prisoners needed to have "organized" for them was bread, basic foodstuffs, and warm clothing in the winter. Women sewed gloves, or mittens rather. They hid all those things in places where those men worked. That's how it started. Afterwards, the Germans resettled us because the camp expanded to take in where our house was, and they moved us into town. We got an apartment on the square, an apartment that used to be Jewish-occupied, in a very good location because it had an entrance on the square. You could also cut through the courtyard and an apartment house and come out on another street, and you could go through little passageways or cellars and demolished apartments and nobody could even see you. So it was a good contact point. People came and they could arrange things with Mama, with Father—arrange various matters and then sneak away unseen.

What was your first assignment?

I would walk along the bridge when the prisoners were returning from work. I would walk with a bunch of other kids and we'd be singing and fooling around. The prisoners knew us, they knew who we were. Above all, they knew me. They could pick me out of the group. Our signal was a song they sang. When they sang "Hi-lee, hi-lo," it meant to stay away because the SS men couldn't be bribed. But if they sang "Hello, hello, Dear Helena," it meant that everything could be arranged.

But didn't you get into trouble over that song?

I got mixed up once, and when they sang "Hi-lee, hi-lo," I went up and walked alongside them. An SS man saw me handing something to a prisoner, and he grabbed me by the ears and frog-marched me all the way across the bridge. Then he gave me a kick to finish things off, and I cried. My ears were torn, dripping blood, but I got home in one piece. I was lucky to come out of it alive.

What were your parents involved in?

Mama worked in the resistance movement, for the Oświęcim district. She was in one of the leadership positions, and had a lot of people working for her, that is, women couriers who distributed food, most of all at places where the prisoners labored outside the camp. They collected correspondence. I also delivered secret messages. Prisoners would drop messages as they walked across the bridge. When the column had passed, I would run out, stuff the pieces of paper in my pockets, and carry them to my parents.

How long could you manage to do that before getting into trouble?

Unfortunately, things could go wrong. First, I came down with typhoid fever. After I got better, they sent me to my aunt's and uncle's in Mielec, in the General Government, where I spent the rest of the occupation. My Mama got arrested, and the Gestapo interrogated her, and then they let her go so they could observe who she was in contact with. Two women couriers gave her away. They were caught delivering food, and the first question was, "Who put you up to this?" Then, "Where does that woman live?" Mama was on her way home and she saw two men standing out front with those couriers. She pretended not to know them and went inside, then went straight out the back door and disappeared. But when the Gestapo threatened to shoot those two women, Mama turned herself in. The Gestapo interrogated her, but they wanted to find out more, to get at the higher-ups. So they pretended to release her, just so they could observe her. She went home, went in the front door and out the back door, and never went back again. She went and joined the Sosienki partisan band and remained active there.

My father worked in the locomotive factory in Chrzanów. Chrzanów was in the [General] Government, and Oświęcim in the Reich. So he crossed the border twice a day. He could carry correspondence and send it on from there. That's how the various communiqués got to London.

My father also got into trouble. He walked into the factory one morning. When he was punching the time clock, he saw two SS men standing there, and also noticed that his card was sticking ever so slightly out of the rack. What should he do? He could have taken any other card, gone onto the factory floor—they would have come searching for him. So he simply took his own card, punched in—and bang! They arrested him. Father had a very responsible job, namely the final inspection of the locomotives. And he spoke German very well, and signed off on the locomotives in the presence of officials from the railroad and the factory. The Germans couldn't just arrest him and take them with him. They had to wait for the OK from the manager, who wasn't due at work for another hour. So my father was sitting there in the manager's waiting room, and he was carrying material that was supposed to be sent to London. How could he get rid of it? He politely asked one of the Germans—he spoke German very well—if he could smoke. The German said OK. Pretending that he was going to light up, Father pulled out the secret message, stuffed it inside the cigarette pack, and said, "Ach, that's the last cigarette," and threw the pack in the trash can. But he still had a notebook full of addresses. What could he do with that? When the German started pacing around the room and turned his back, Father threw the notebook behind a safe that stood in the corridor. He thought that he was clean, and they wouldn't be able to do anything to him. They kept waiting until the manager finally arrived, and they told him that they had to arrest Father because someone had informed on him, and so they arrested him. But before three days were out, the manager had a tantrum, saying that he had no one to do the job, no one to sign off on the locomotives. The Germans released him, and that's how he got away with it.

There was also the interesting case of Moll.

Moll lived in our house. What a butcher. And so devious that it's hard to even imagine it. At morning roll call, for instance, he'd ask the prisoners whether anybody wanted to come and work in his garden, at his house. People would volunteer eagerly, because they hoped they'd get something to eat, some fruit. He'd take them there, feed them breakfast, sit down for dinner with them, eat dinner with them and then supper in the evening, and then take them back to the camp. As soon as they went through the gate, he'd shoot them all.

What, you look like you don't know what to say.

I don't know what to say. And he's the one who later came up with the plan to destroy the camp and murder the prisoners. Why didn't that plan come off? What happened?

Because the secret got out. The Allies learned about it, made a fuss, and the Germans backed down. They only managed to blow up the crematoria, but they didn't destroy the camp.

At least there was one thing they failed to accomplish. Thank you very much for the interview.

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