

MOM

My mother, Helen Zisovic (nee Klein), was strong and resilient, fragile and fearful, and had PTSD.

Both my parents were Holocaust survivors. They were both born in small neighboring rural farm villages in Czechoslovakia, my mother in Pistrjalovo, and my father in Hukliva but he lived in Zalosh. The borders changed and at one point it was Austria Hungary, and is now located in the Ukraine. They had very different experiences.

During the Holocaust, my father, Max Zisovic, was in forced labor battalions and was ordered to report to several locations for work, and the labor was hard. After liberation he went back home and found out that his father, wife and three children had perished in Auschwitz.

Mom was born on July 1, 1922, and passed away on November 3, 2014. She was always very verbal. Since I was a young child, I remember her talking about her home and camp experiences. She said life on the farm was a hard life, but a good life. Mom's education was intermittent, I believe through the fifth grade.

There were only three Jewish families in the village, my grandparents and two of my grandfather's brothers. Sometimes her father would take my mom to Mukachevo to visit an uncle.

My grandparents had each been married before and their spouses had died. When my grandparents married they combined their children, and had five together, a blended family. They were Orthodox, very religious, observed all Jewish holidays and kept Kosher. There was a church nearby and there would be wedding processions to the church. Mom wanted to watch through the window, but her parents would not allow this. There was not much money. They grew wheat, vegetables and fruit trees. There were only three items they had to buy: coffee, sugar, and tobacco. They milked cows, churned butter, made cheese, baked bread, and kept food in the cool cellar as there was no refrigeration. Mom fed the chickens and geese. She hated the geese because they were mean and would bite her legs. In the winter, my grandmother would bring the baby chicks in the house and put them in a box by the stove to keep them warm. They were very noisy and constantly chirped. She cut up onions to put in the box and the fumes put them to sleep.

One of my uncles loved the horses and would feed them, brush them and talk to them. Mom said the horses were beautiful, but she was afraid of them as they were big, she was little, and she was especially afraid when they reared up on their hind legs.

The farm land was beyond the village. When her father worked the land, mom would walk to where he was working to bring him lunch. Their house was in the small village and had a back room and they sold liquor out a window, which mom helped serve. .

Mom told me that one of her married sisters came home because her husband had beaten her. My grandmother took her in, fed her and let her stay the night, but the next day she was sent home to her husband. That was how it was at that time and place.

Mom could be feisty. Her parents invited potential suitors to the house for her to meet, but she did not want to get married and leave her parents. As they came in the front door, she would go out the back door.

Mom's two oldest brothers left home before she was born. Over time, other siblings left home. My grandmother would get mail with pictures and would cry and call them "mein papier kinder," my paper children. Her favorite sister asked to bring mom to America with her before the Holocaust, but as my mother was the youngest of ten and the last one at home she did not want to leave her parents.

When she was about 21 years old, in 1944, her village was invaded by Hungarian soldiers, who she described as very mean. They rode into the village with plumes on their hats, and their beautiful horses had plumes on their heads too.

As the situation became more dire, my grandfather was afraid to leave the house because men were forced to their knees and their beards cut off, so mom would go out and do his errands.

The day before they were deported, the head of the village came to my grandparents' home and told them the next day soldiers would take them away. My grandfather took mom to the attic and showed her where he was hiding papers in the rafters. He told her, "mein kind" (my child), "Your mother and I will not come back, but you will." I believe this was a verbal gift he gave mom because she always heard his voice in her head throughout her experiences. When she was liberated and returned home, she found the papers.

Before the soldiers arrived, mom and my grandmother put on several dresses. The soldiers took each one into a room and told them to undress and wear only one dress. They painfully examined them for anything they might have hidden on or in their bodies, and mom said the soldier put his finger inside her and it hurt. I could not bring myself to ask if she had been raped, and she never said. Maybe I didn't want to know.

In the beginning of 1944, they were first transported to the Mukacs ghetto in a small town near them, Mukachevo, for approximately five weeks. They were then forced into a cattle car.

When the cattle car stopped and the doors opened, they had arrived in Auschwitz and camp prisoners herded everyone off the car. These cars were not quiet, the prisoners were terrified, yelling crying, trying to console their children, pregnant women going into labor. They were told anyone holding a baby or small child should leave them with an older person or put them on the floor as anyone who did not give up their child would immediately be selected for the gas chambers. These camp prisoners were not being cruel; they were trying to be kind and save lives. But who could leave a child behind? As they were herded out of the cattle car mom had lost track of her father, sister-in-law and her children, but she held on to her sick mother's arm. Dr. Josef Mengele was the senior official who made the selection and he used his baton to hit their arms to separate mom from her mother and they went in separate directions. She never saw her parents again. When she asked where they were, she was told by other prisoners to look up at the sky, filled with smoke and ashes, and there was a sickening stench from burning flesh.

Mom was about 21 years old and was selected for slave labor. When she got to her barracks she was crying. The Polish women asked, "Why are you crying? We built the barracks in rain and mud." She

never got over losing her parents under those horrific circumstances. For the rest of her life, for 70 years, she always talked about and missed her parents and other family members. They haunted her. I grieved for her loss of family. I now realize that mom did not have the love and support of her parents, Growing up I felt the loss of not having grandparents.

Mom and others who became slave laborers were first sent to showers, deloused, and the hair all over their bodies was shaved. They were given thin uniform dresses, no underwear, and wooden shoes which caused blisters. If the blisters burst, they could become infected and lead to death.

The Auschwitz prisoners were given about one-half cup of "coffee" all day. The weather was very hot and they sat on the floor with no food or water. In the late evening they went back to their barracks. If anyone had to relieve themselves, they had to walk to the area and the water was rusty and caused diarrhea, resulting in many deaths from typhus. Mom did not want to live, she wanted to be with her parents. The other women told her that would not bring her parents back. After six weeks she was chosen to work. Roll call was taken twice a day and took 4-6 hours. Every morning and evening they had to stand five in a line and if the numbers did not match, it started over, and if they moved or talked they would be punished. For two days and nights mom was with a group of women in a yard with no food or water and finally were ordered into a building where they were tattooed. Her tattoo number is A7922. The "A" stands for "Arbeit lager," work barracks. She felt dehumanized because her identity was taken away, no longer known by her name, only by her number. Every morning she would leave the barracks to work, no matter how she felt, knowing that anyone who stayed behind was never seen again.

They were then sent to work. First mom dug ground to tend to plants and pull weeds, which she was used to doing on the farm. One day a guard dressed in black, not the blue or green SS uniforms, beat her all over her body, in addition to seven or eight other women. Her wrist was badly hurt, probably broken, and very painful, but she had to continue to work or she would be killed. She tried to run cold water on it when she could and eventually it healed.

One time mom was very sick with a high temperature. Her face was very red and when a nurse walked through during roll call she was taken with a of couple other women to the hospital. The beds had no sheets, no mattresses, just a board. For about ten days she knew nothing. The other women told her the hospital did nothing for her. They were given only coffee and no food. One day Adolf Eichmann came into the hospital and told everyone "einshtallen," stand up, and take their clothes off. There were two lines of approximately 300 people, and Eichmann walked through the lines and pointed at three women to get out of line; one was mom. The rest were told to go out a door and to get into red cross trucks, which turned out to be modified gas chambers using carbon monoxide gas. The three women were told to go to the right and go back to their barracks. As mom approached her barracks the women inside looked out and said, "Are we dreaming?" "Is this Helen?" They thought they were seeing a ghost as hardly anyone came back from the hospital.

Mom then worked digging ditches and moved dirt to form a mountain, seemingly for no reason, and it was very hard work. She was then moved to another commander, she does not remember how, and was forced to dig very deep ditches and to put pipes in the ditches. If anyone stopped working the SS beat them with sticks.

One day a siren went off. The prisoners were counted and then had to run with dogs chasing them for nine miles back to the camp, where they saw dead men in the grass, and the crematorium farther

back among trees. They heard later, they were not sure if it was true, that Jewish men working in the crematorium threw one SS guard in. The other SS guards killed all the other men working at the crematorium. She had a young cousin who worked at the crematorium who did not survive. Men who worked at the crematorium were murdered within six months and replaced.

Slave laborers who worked outside the camp like mom were forced to march under a gate morning and night, sometimes with music playing, with the German words over the gate, "arbeit macht frei," which means "work sets you free." These words are very ironic, because how many prisoners believed their slave labor would set them free. Of course, the prisoners were accompanied by armed guards and attack dogs. Mom disliked dogs for the rest of her life.

Mom said that city women came off the trains wearing their city clothes, and then of course had to wear camp uniforms. In the summer they were not used to the hot sun and they would get blisters that would burst open and get infected, and many died. Mom did not get blisters as on the farm she was used to being outside in hot summers, as well as cold winters.

Mom did not remember how they knew it was Yom Kippur, and prisoners decided not to eat their lunch which consisted of some water with a little bit of foul smelling cabbage. A soldier in black clothes stood above them and for approximately 20 minutes made a speech, saying things like, "Why are you fasting? Nobody needs you and you don't have a God. God does not see you, need you, or want you. You'll all die here. You won't be freed. You are useless people. He doesn't care if you eat or not. Nobody will save you. You will work until you are dead." He could have kicked their food over and they would have nothing to eat later, but he did not do so. They cried bitterly until there were no more tears. Another time a soldier made a speech about how they would never get out, there was no food, there was no God, and that they should give up and die.

In November 1944 the prisoners were forced onto a train for approximately two weeks. It stopped in Berlin, which they could tell from the small window, for a whole night and then started moving in the morning. The train stopped again and they heard bombing and saw the light from the window. The train was not bombed, but the tracks were. The soldiers left the train at night and the prisoners talked among themselves, figured the soldiers would find protection at night, such as bunkers, and they did not care if the prisoners died.

Mom was transferred to the Stutthof camp at the very end of 1944, located in a secluded, marshy, and wooded area near the village of Stutthof (now Sztutowo) east of the city of Danzig (Gdansk) in the territory of the German-annexed Free City of Danzig. She did not speak of what happened to her there.

Next, she was moved to Ravensbruck by train some time in 1944 and was there until the beginning of 1945. There were other Jews from Holland and France wearing regular shoes and clothing, they were not shaved, and some were still wearing make up. They were sick and the barracks were quarantined. The healthy prisoners were forced to collect the dead and take them outside. Mom did this only once and she passed out. The original prisoners died after six weeks. The sick prisoners had a lot of lice all over their bodies. Mom had marks all over her body from scratching.

In the winter, December/January, the windows had no glass, mom had no shoes and her toes were freezing from the terrible cold. There was no food, only coffee in the morning and evening, and no work, but mom knew it was best to try to find something to do.

Mom had an unbearable ear ache from the severe cold and biting wind. A nurse came a couple of times a week and she was taken to the hospital. There they put her to sleep and cut her ear, covered it with a paper bandage which got wet from the infection and came off. It was too cold to work and her ear hurt and got worse and started swelling. One day they were in line for their coffee and some of the women were noisy. Everyone was hit on the head to keep them quiet. Mom was hit on her ear and saw stars. This caused the ear wound to open and pus oozed out. She squeezed the infected area to get rid of the pus and eventually it healed.

One day mom saw a woman from home who brought her some rags and strings to cover her feet. She always believed that if not for this, she would have lost her feet. It horrifies me and leaves me ill knowing she was afraid of losing her feet. Mom asked if she knew anything about a sister. This woman said she saw the sister taken on the street by the SS and that she was not alive. I know this was very painful for her, and it is painful to me.

Mom went back to work in a basement loading vegetables on trucks for the SS, and she was able to very carefully eat a little piece now and then for a few weeks. She wanted to bring some back for the other women, but did not dare do so as she would be punished. Another time she carried mattresses from one place to another in the camp. They wondered what happened to the women who never came back. Someone said they saw through a window some women sitting under cold showers day and night until they died.

Mom worked there until February/March 1945, and then approximately 300 women were loaded onto trains which did not take long to reach Leitmeritz, outside Poland and Germany, closer to mom's home in Czechoslovakia.

Mom arrived in Leitmeritz the beginning of 1945, which was a men's concentration camp. A couple of barracks were emptied for the new prisoners and it was known they had a lot of lice. They stripped and their clothes were taken to bake in ovens to kill the lice and they had showers. No SS were inside the building, only outside. They had straw to lay on, which was unusual. They cried and were so happy they no longer had lice. There was no work, and very little coffee and food. After 3-4 weeks the prisoners were forced on a death march for a couple of days at night to Theresienstadt. Mom had only rags on her feet and for the rest of her life her feet were painful due to nerve damage from frost bite.

Theresienstadt was a camp in the garrison city of Terezín, located in German-occupied Czechoslovakia, which was even closer to mom's home. She later found out she was only 90 miles from Prague, the closest city to her home. They were told to sit down on the grass by a giant gate. There were a lot of other women, a few hundred. The SS left them and went through the gate. Other soldiers opened the gate and told them to come in. They did not see SS soldiers, only other soldiers. There were 40 women in a room with platform beds. Mom was told by a woman from my father's village that it was no longer a concentration camp. There was no food. Sometimes someone brought them some bread and for three weeks they only had crumbs. There was shooting and they were told to lay on the ground. The Russians were close. This lasted for three days and nights. The shooting stopped and they were told to get up, the war was over, and they were free. There were a lot of bullet holes through the building.

Theresienstadt was liberated on May 8, 1945 by Russian soldiers. When the prisoners asked the soldiers for food, they said they were hungry themselves and had no food; all they had was Vodka.

They were told to go down a road, cross a bridge to a town the Germans had left when the Russians arrived. They could go into the homes and take whatever they wanted. Many of these liberated prisoners ate food they found in the empty homes; including fatty foods and meat, and died the next day because their systems could not handle this food after being starved. Mom ate only bread.

When they were liberated, the surviving prisoners were asked by the Red Cross if they had family members who could be located, as it could be arranged to send them to family. Mom said no because she wanted to go home to see if any of her family would return home.

Mom said it was hard to believe that a person could take so much punishment and still survive. She eventually made her way back to her village and after a while a brother, Harold, and a cousin, Sylvia, arrived. Mom and Dad met and they married in November/December 1945, and Harold and Sylvia married.

As I mentioned earlier, mom could be feisty. She saw a woman on a wagon wearing her mother's good scarf (babushka). She asked the woman to give her the scarf as she had nothing from her mother. When the woman refused, mom went behind her and tore the scarf off her head and ran. Of course, she could have been punished for this. I had the scarf treated by a textile professional and framed. It hung in mom's bedroom, and now I am very pleased that it hangs in my bedroom. The scarf had been folded and kept in a small box for many years. When I took it out of the box under the scarf was the birth certificate of my mother's favorite sister Harriett. Mom did not remember putting it there. We agreed that it belongs to my cousin, Harriett's middle child, and gave it to him.

They decided to leave their village as they agreed it was not a life for Jews to live under the Russians, under communism. Uncle Harold, my mother's brother, went to Prague and sent letters to Aunt Harriet, my mother's favorite sister, and to my father's sister, Esther, in Pittsburgh. Responses, letters, money and packages were received. Harriet told Harold to bring the child (referring to my mother) and to make sure that she was not left behind. Esther signed an affidavit for my parents, and Harriet signed one for Harold and Sylvia. My parents and Harold and Sylvia entered America legally on the quota, as they had been sponsored. America allowed a certain number of immigrants to enter the country legally, the "quota," if they had a sponsor who would sign an affidavit stating they would help with jobs and places to live so they would not become a burden on the government. Harriet was like a mother to my mother and died at 47 from cancer, yet another loss.

The Russians did not allow them to take much out of the country, only a small amount of bedding and clothing.