

Surviving a HELL on Earth

Read my story and you'll understand why Anzac Day is so important to me

**Olga Horak, 89,
Sydney, NSW.**

The train ground to a halt and the doors were noisily flung open.

"Out!" screamed the SS soldiers.

The sunlight was blinding as my parents and I were forced out of the crowded, dark, stinking container.

It was 1944 and we had just arrived at the Auschwitz death camp in Poland.

I was only 17 and terrified.

My family was Jewish and even before the war, restrictive Nazi laws had been implemented in our native Czechoslovakia. We weren't even allowed out after sunset.

The 'collecting' had begun in 1942. Jewish boys and girls aged 16 and above were taken away to death camps.

One night, me and my family were at home when Gestapo officers kicked the door down and grabbed my older sister, who was 16.

We all sobbed, but there was nothing we could do.

She was lead away and taken to Auschwitz.

Not long afterwards, our home was destroyed so we went to stay with a neighbour. But our neighbours betrayed us and the guards took us away.

We were taken to a collection camp near a railway line and shoved into a cattle car with at least 100 others squashed inside.

The journey was horrific. There was no food or water and only a bucket for the toilet.

Over the next two days, several people died in the conditions.

When we exited the train at Auschwitz, guards separated the men from the women. I tried to grab my dad's hand, but he was forced away from me. I never saw him again.

Then we had to undress and a man in uniform began the 'selecting'.

Women with babies, elderly people and very young children were taken straight to the gas chambers.

The rest of us had to line up to be inspected.

If you looked weak, you were pushed to the left to be killed. If you were deemed healthy - like me and my mum - you were made to turn right.

After the selection, we were taken to a shed where we were shaved completely.

We were given tattered rags to wear, and clogs instead of shoes.

I was too numb to cry, but other people around me were hysterical.

Every day was the same. We were given virtually nothing to eat or drink. And every now and then a doctor would come and select people to take to his lab. He was conducting experiments on the people he chose.

I prayed I wouldn't be next. Soon after, we were transferred to a village and began back-breaking work digging trenches for the Nazis.

We were told that if we disobeyed the guards or stopped working for even a second, we would be shot.

One morning, we were taken to the highway. Through snow and hail, the guard marched us in the streets for days.

Many people fell down dead or were shot. We had no idea why they were doing this, we were just told to keep walking.

Finally, after walking hundreds of kilometres and

being put on a train, we arrived at the death camp Bergen-Belsen in Germany.

It was huge but there were no gas chambers, instead bodies were burnt day and night in several open pits.

The smell was disgusting. We all became ill. Huge lice spread diseases like tuberculosis, typhoid, scarlet fever and cholera. But still we were forced to work.

People were walking around like skeletons.

One morning, we were standing outside the barracks for roll call and none of the guards showed up. Suddenly, tanks burst into the camp. We all jumped, wondering if we were going to be killed.

But then we realised they weren't German. British and Canadian armies had been fighting nearby when they found our camp.

It didn't seem real. The British army had no idea what they were walking into.

I remember seeing strong soldiers vomiting and crying like children because they couldn't believe what they saw.

I was too weak to cry with relief. I'd gotten sick soon after we arrived, and by now only weighed 29kg.

The next day, we had to register as survivors.

As we lined up to receive our document cards, Mum was in front of me.

The moment she took her survivor card in her

hands, she collapsed.

I bent down to help, but she was already dead.

She was 39 and my last living family member.

I was alone.

I was so malnourished that I could barely take it in. I was rushed to a nearby sick bay and transferred to a hospital. But it was staffed by German nurses who refused to treat me.

I was left in a corner to die. One day, a Catholic priest from the British army visited. He noticed me in the corner - a bundle of bones, with no hair - and started giving me the last rites.

"Sorry, Padre," I said. "I'm Jewish, and I'm not going to die."

I asked him to get a Rabbi from the British army and to take me away from the hospital, and that's what happened.

The war ended in Europe but my struggle wasn't over.

Back in Czechoslovakia I was diagnosed with typhus, cholera and diphtheria.

No-one expected me to live. I was too weak to walk; my body was shutting down.

But after long, painful weeks, I was released, and I travelled back to my home.

Two years later, I met John. He was a fellow Holocaust survivor and, despite everything he'd endured, had a great sense of humour.

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I had almost forgotten how to smile, but he gave me a reason to live.

We got married and decided to go to Australia for a new life.

In 1949, we arrived in Sydney. I loved the sunshine but more importantly, I loved the freedom.

John and I started our own textiles business and five years later became citizens.

We had kids too, and now we have grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

My daughter once said to me, "Mum, don't live in the past, live for the future."

But no-one can understand what it's like. I don't live in the past, the past lives in me.

It's important that while I'm still here, I tell my story. We need to teach the younger generations about what hatred can do and why Anzac Day is so important because we thank those who died to give us freedom.

My experience has taught me to always have hope. Life is a gift and shouldn't be wasted.

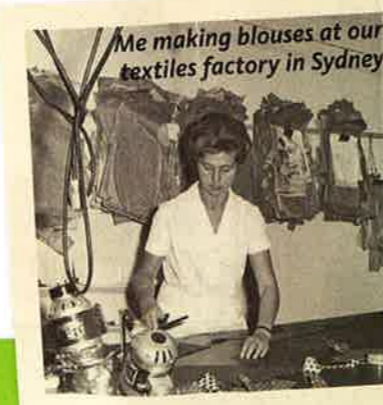
For more on Olga, go to sydney.jewish.museum.com.au

"I was left in a corner to die"

"I was only 17 and terrified"



The Auschwitz death camp in Poland



Me making blouses at our textiles factory in Sydney



At my Australian naturalisation ceremony in 1954



Me with my daughter, Suzie, and grandson, Jonathan

Please turn over for more Anzac stories

AS TOLD TO PAUL EWART. PICTURES: CORBIS, GETTY, THE SYDNEY JEWISH MUSEUM, KATHERINE GRIFFITHS, THINKSTOCK