

FEATURES

The painful truth about survival

Horrific: Polish Jews before they are due to be executed are guarded by German soldiers next to a ditch near Belzec

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HISTORY

ALL I can do for my family who were lost is to say, I am with you in spirit. I take on myself, as much as I can bear, the terrible despair, suffering, heartbreak and pain that was visited on you. Although it is only a feeble gesture, I stand with you at the moment of death, and create a living link with you. That's all I can do."

Mark Forstater's book, *I Survived A Secret Nazi Extermination Camp*, is a slim volume in three parts published by *Psychology News*. The first section is a brief introduction to the Holocaust, referencing the unique journalist and biographer Gitta Sereny. The second is a testimony to the Jewish Historical Commission by Rudolph Reder, one of two known Jewish survivors of the Belzec extermination camp in Poland: the other being Chaim Hirszman, who joined a communist militia in postwar Poland and was shot in 1946 before he could testify to his wartime experiences. The camp was "secret" in the sense that, by the end of the war,

it had been covered over with flowers and trees, no visible trace remaining and those responsible for "vanishing" it had themselves been murdered at Sobibor.

Reder had the role of "oven specialist" at the facility where an estimated 600,000 Jews were murdered, a skill that made him valuable to his SS captors for four months in 1942 until he was able to effect an escape so prosaic that "you couldn't make it up" does it a disservice: he was taken into the nearest town as a slave labourer to pick up some supplies, whereupon his captors got drunk and fell asleep, allowing him simply to walk away. He spent the rest of the Nazi occupation of Poland hiding at the house of a woman who had worked for his family and whom he eventually married.

The third part, which is beautifully written—in contrast to the deeply troubling, matter-of-fact staccato of the second—describes Forstater's rationale for taking on the project and the process that formed it. As a Jew from Philadelphia born in 1943, a baby-boomer who has recently been in the UK news for winning a court case against the Monty Python team, he says the Holocaust affected him hardly at all until he was 13 or 14 years old. "It all seemed to have happened very far away, to a people who lived in a black-and-white world, in grimy ancient ghettos. Here in peaceful and plentiful Philadelphia... it seemed an incredible, even an impossible thing to happen. It was no wonder everyone thought of Hitler as a madman."

He says it was not until the advent of the internet—and specifically Forstater's discovery of www.Jewishgen.org—that the thing became deeply personal for him and he was able to trace a web of ancestors whose existence he had barely considered but nearly all of whom had perished at Majdanek—a concentration camp where Jews from Lublin were sent—and Belzec, its closest extermination camp. The chance discovery of Reder's testimony in a museum gift shop "with the title Belzec printed in rough red letters on a glossy black cover" led to this project. Forstater realised when reading it that Reder had probably dug the graves and carried the bodies of his relatives. So, then, a retelling of his own stateside family history, done with an eye for the telling detail, has become a meditation for the extended family he never knew: the domesticity of 1950s and '60s Philadelphia a small compensation for the abrupt silencing of the massed ranks of European Jewry.

It is an extraordinary book. To say that the section containing Reder's testimony—surely one of the pre-eminent documents of the Holocaust—is a "primary source" would be strange because the effect when reading it is of being crowded and jostled by the fictionalised versions of these events that have become standard fare such

as *Schindler's List* and *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. And yet there is something else.

Every so often, the various lenses—the writerly eye or systems analyst—that we must use to view the horror of the events at Belzec, described here in almost unbearable detail, slip and the realisation that they happened to the person actually telling them to you is like a punch in the face, in the sense of a weirdly altered personal reality. To ensure the story made any kind of sense I had to focus on details.

And so I found myself dwelling on the bizarre idea that music was an integral part of the camp's routine: that an orchestra of inmates playing instruments belonging to the dead accompanied the removal of bodies from the gas chamber. That the SS decreed songs should be sung on certain occasions and that one particular SS guard forced the orchestra to play a tune called *Highlander Aren't You Sad?* over and over again.

I found myself wondering whether, as Forstater says he was told, it is really possible for a person's hair to go white in a matter of minutes (internet says no) and what it would do to one's psychosexual development for one's first sight of a naked woman to be in a picture of Belzec inmates running to their deaths, an experience Forstater describes having had while reading *The Scourge of the Swastika* by Lord Russell of Liverpool. I found

myself wondering also, given Reder's detailed descriptions of the behaviour of some of the SS guards, whether psychopathy was a job requirement and how exactly the candidates for the SS were selected? How is it possible—though apparently it was—that Reder was an "oven specialist" and yet did not know about Zyklon B?

It is the issue of empathy that has stayed with me more than anything,

though. Unavoidably, the nature of Reder's testimony is matter-of-fact: its value as a historical document being in direct proportion to its credibility.

And yet in order to remember the events that he lived through without killing himself as many others did—Reder died in Toronto in 1968—a deadening of the mind must have taken place. Would this be a human strength or a weakness? Forstater's warm rememberings of Philadelphia suggest that empathy is a joy and yet, in the context, of Belzec empathy would kill you. Moreover, what are the ramifications of this for modern Jewish identity?

Forstater has made something of enduring value here: he and Reder both survived Belzec in a sense. I urge you not to look away.

'I Survived a Secret Nazi Extermination Camp' is available from *Psychology News* (<http://www.psychologynews.org.uk/catalog/14.html>) There is an audio version read by David Suchet available on iTunes.

