

Shalom

My grandma survived the Holocaust.

She was only 7 years old when her mum and her were torn from her dad, never to see him again. Not even his body.

She was only 7 years old when they were forced into Auschwitz.

She was only 8 years old when she was made to shovel dead bodies off the streets of the ghetto.

8 years old when her mother placed fake papers into her little hands.

8 when her mother hugged her one last time by the gates of Auschwitz and told her to never forget your name – Asta Swartz –never forget you're Jewish.

She was 9 years old when the Polish family she was hiding with quickly took her somewhere else after someone told that a Jew lived in their house.

She was only 9 when she became homeless.

11 when she tried to find the only family member that could still be alive, her grandad who was a Rabbi, only to watch his house, and his 11 children torched inside.

She was only 14 when Auschwitz was liberated. When she walked across Poland in search of her mum, who was reported to be in a hospital somewhere.

She was 14 when she found her. Her mum had tuberculosis. 3 days later she buried her.

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I was 24 when I first shared her story here in Auckland, as part of a university assignment.

I called it The Girl with the Red Shoes.

Because grandmother wore the same pair of red shoes until the war [was] over.

I made a video. I wrote a blog about my own experience in Poland, at the March of the Living as a teenager. And I submitted it.

To my surprise, the project was more than well received. It sort of spread at my university. I was invited to present it at events, at cultural days, and university showcases. People related to it, they cared about it.

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Now, over 10 years since I created that project, I look back and wonder why it resonated with people so deeply.

When I made it, I thought it was because of the story itself and how unbearably sad, how brutal, how deeply inhumane it was.

Or maybe it was the way I told it. The images I used, the Hebrew music I chose, the way my voice cracked when I narrated the video

But I don't think that's the only real reason why it stayed with people here in New Zealand.

I think it stayed with them because the story didn't feel far away for once.

Before I even told the story at my university - I was their classmate. Their peer. Their friend. Their student. They could relate to me. They already accepted me as part of their community. And I, accepted them as part of their world.

So when I finally shared it, it was the first time that they heard a Holocaust account not through a screen, a movie, a video on their phones, a textbook, a class.

For the first time, it wasn't something that happened far away in history and geography.

It was right there.

In their classroom.

In someone they knew.

The story didn't belong to history anymore.

It was standing in front of them.

And it came from inside their world.

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I think that's how we can keep these stories alive, understood, and respected here in New Zealand.

By telling them in the places we, as Jewish people, already belong,

Where we work.

Where we study.

Where we live.

To our friends.

If we bring these stories into their world, told by us as real, living breathing ancestors of any Jewish person who had ever been harmed, then the stories become more real, more personal, more tangible. We put a face to the story, and I think that's key.

I was going to end this speech here. But I can't

Because I can't stand here and pretend like the world hasn't changed since I shared this story 10 years ago. Of course it has. Antisemitism is now normalised, just disguised as anything but that.

But I think my point still applies, if anything, maybe it applies even more right now – for the time being, maybe we only tell these stories in places we feel accepted already, to an audience we have approved of as one that will listen to understand.

Maybe for the moment being, people need to earn the right to hear these stories.. maybe.

What I know for sure is - My grandmother is now 96. Her story had touched the minds of 300 people in New Zealand, who aren't Jewish.

So the power of a thousand stories like hers, told through all of us, in places where they can be accepted, that's how we keep these stories alive, respected, and heard

Am Israel Chai.