

Sol Filler

Sol Filler, (1929-1999) was born in Poland. He survived harrowing persecution in his home town, and three years in Auschwitz-Birkenau labour camp, then spent another four years in a displaced persons camp in Germany post-war. Seventy-four members of his family were killed under the Nazi regime. After the war he moved to Sydney, where he met his future wife Ruth, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany whose family arrived in New Zealand in June, 1938, on board the SS Remuera.

Sol Filler, a migrant from Poland, remembers life in his small town before the war.

I was born in Brzozow, an almost unknown town, in South East Galicia, Poland. Unlike most towns in Galicia, the Jewish population was relatively small, about 1,300'.

The Jews conducted small businesses and workshops, mainly servicing the needs of farmers in the surrounding villages. Jewish life in the town was limited to rabbinic activities, the provision of kosher food, maintenance of the mikveh and the cemetery. Volunteers provided for the needy. Nechtikn, the custom of spending the night with the ill who needed constant supervision, was practised. Private cheders provided Jewish education. Three youth movements were involved in diverse cultural activities such as Jewish thought, Jewish history, Hebrew language and literature, and the geography of Israel and Zionism. Two public Jewish libraries provided literature in both Yiddish and Hebrew.

I lived for 18 years in this shtetl with my mother Runia, my father Gedalye and my four brothers. My parents owned the largest bakery in town and were reasonably prosperous before the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939. I was then 17. My life was happy, centring on public school, cheder, a Zionist organisation and good comradeship.

We Jews were acutely conscious of being rejected by the Poles, of being treated as foreigners in our own country. Non-attendance at school on Shabbat and dressing and speaking differently to Poles singled us out as a minority. We were regarded as a threat. The constant distinction drawn between Jew and Gentile at school often led to nasty skirmishes.

We worked very hard in the bakery. As a small boy I used to get up very early to deliver our products. Often my mother would meet me with my school books when I was running late and take the basket and money from me so I would be punctual for school. In summer it was not too bad, but in winter I would arrive at school with frozen hands and feet.

Anti-Semitism was rife in the late 1930s. Gentiles often picketed Jewish businesses.

Shortly after the Germans arrived in Brzozow Jewish men and women were forced to sweep the streets, especially the marketplace, and to do other degrading work. A Judenrath, or Jewish Council, was formed and had the responsibility of supplying Jewish labour for any work commanded by the Germans. All Jewish shops were requisitioned with the exception of ours. The bakery had to continue operating as it was necessary to feed the occupying German Army.

A curfew was imposed on all Jews. All had to wear white armbands with a blue Magen David at all times. Many Jews were shot by the Germans for no apparent reason. Many Jews were betrayed by their Polish neighbours. Early in 1940 I and several other men were ordered to Dynow, a nearby town, to dispose of the corpses of Jews murdered a few months previously. In July 1940 I was forcibly removed to a work camp, thence to Auschwitz. I learned in

August 1942 that the entire Jewish population of Brzozow, including my parents and relatives, had been murdered in a small forest just outside the town. I was liberated from Theresienstadt by the Russian Army in May 1945. After my liberation I spent four years in a Displaced Persons Camp in Germany. I was active in Aliyah Bet, the illegal movement to enable Jews to enter Palestine. I immigrated to Australia in 1949 and there met my wife Ruth Adler. My early years in Auckland were very difficult, coming from a foreign culture, with little English and poverty-stricken. We worked very hard to establish ourselves in our own small bakery. I became a proud Kiwi. In 1975 my wife and I returned to Brzozow to recite Kaddish at the mass graves situated in the forest, marked by a small monument. No Jew lives in Brzozow now.

The Despairing Years

The despairing years began in 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland and I was a boy of 17 still living in Brzozow. Poland was divided in two, the Eastern part having been taken by Russia, the rest by Germany.

At this time many Jewish men, older than I, from my town and elsewhere, escaped across the nearby border to Russia, often leaving behind destitute wives and families who had to exchange clothing and other articles for food just to survive. Things were grim for the families of those men who had escaped. When they had nothing left to sell or exchange they subsisted on cooked weeds, grass and foraged as best they could. The escapees meanwhile were caught and rounded up on the Russian side and deported to Siberia.

The lives of those who stayed behind changed very much for the worse. We were forced to do unpaid often very hard, degrading labour for the Nazis such as sweeping the streets, digging graves, chopping wood and shovelling snow. One day I was commanded with 20 others from the town to go to a neighbouring village to exhume the bodies of over 200 murdered Jews and then to rebury them in a mass grave.

We continued to do forced labour until early 1940 when I, with many other younger men, was taken to a nearby forced labour camp. There we were guarded by Polish police. Life there was just tolerable. Without the help of any machinery we had to dig a big canal and divert a river. For over six months we were poorly housed, slept on straw, and given only one meal a day – a thin soup of sorts – at noon. However, if one was lucky enough to have money or food sent, with great sacrifice from home, life was a little easier. We were returned home around October 1940 and again were compelled to perform menial labour tasks.

After a short time at home we were once again rounded up and taken to another camp, also nearby, to build a road. Here we were given absolutely no food but we were occasionally allowed home. There were shops for those with money. We existed by schnorrering. Work was very hard, conditions were terrible. We were constantly kicked and beaten. It was very cold. Nevertheless we still had some contact with our families.

One day a decree was posted that all males born between 1907 and 1928 must assemble at a central point in the township. The Gestapo then ordered all tradesmen to fall out and return home. At the time we thought they were the lucky ones. We, the unfortunate ones, were herded onto trucks, transferred to locked, closed-in goods wagons and transported to Plaszow, a camp near Cracow. My younger brother, Ben, aged 13, was with me. In this camp we were compelled to build a railway line. After six days we were informed by a non-Jew from our town that all the remaining Jews, including the 'lucky tradesmen', had been taken to a nearby forest, murdered and then buried in a mass grave. Approximately 1,000 people of Brzozow perished in that incident.

In Plaszow the conditions were extremely bad. Work was impossibly hard; there were constant beatings, tortures, shootings and 'selection' of the weak for execution. Food was almost non-existent. The camp was filthy. It was cold. Typhoid fever raged and at this place I lost many of my contemporaries. If anyone was injured or became sick they were immediately removed, never to be seen again. My younger brother, Ben, and I managed to escape from this intolerable situation and found shelter in the Cracow Ghetto. Here, although we did not have to perform hard labours, conditions were, if anything, worse than in the camp from which we had escaped. We had to sleep in sewers. We were always hungry and as we were fugitives we had to stay in hiding most of the time. I spent three months living that life. Then the Ghetto was liquidated by armed force. We were taken by truck under heavily armed guard to Auschwitz-Birkenau. There we went through a further 'selection' process by the S.S. My brother and I were sent in one direction. That was fortunate for us. Those sent in the other direction were sent directly to the gas chambers, although we did not then know such existed. That same evening we saw flames leaping skywards from what we then learned were the crematoria chimneys. We were informed that our fellow transportees had been killed and their bodies were being cremated.

The rest of us were taken to barracks and put into so-called quarantine. Our heads were shaved, numbers were tattooed on our forearms, our clothing was removed and we were issued with dirty, ill-fitting, Russian prisoner-of-war uniforms. Each morning we were awoken at 4 a.m. and numbers were checked to see if there had been any escapes in the night. There were constant beatings, and we were kicked and bloodied by other prisoners who took malicious sadistic pleasure in these activities. They had unlimited power over us. Although it was then spring, it was still very cold and muddy and we had to spend all day in the open, fenced off from the rest of the camp by barbed wire. At midday we were given a meagre ration of potatoes and watery soup. In the evening there was a further assembly when more beatings took place for so-called misdemeanours such as coughing, not standing erect or moving slightly.

We slept on wooden bunks with seven to a bunk, no straw, no mattress and two or three blankets for covering. Everyone had to turn together as there was no room for individual movement. Within a short time many were dead from sickness, malnutrition, torture or murder. Those of us who were still considered fit were then issued with striped uniforms, transferred to another barracks and assigned to work for 12-16 hours a day in nearby coal mines. We were given wooden clogs, no socks, and striped caps. Our distinctive uniforms, our shaven heads, and emaciated bodies, marked us as prisoners and precluded escape. We rose again at 4 a.m. and walked three kilometres to the mine. Here it was the survival of the fittest. At the slightest sign of weakness, illness, or injury, the prisoner was removed and we all knew his fate.

Occasionally on a Sunday there was no work. We then had to strip naked and physicians, so-called, including Mengele, would make 'selections' for the removal of the weak and unfit to the gas chambers. Those who could fight no longer, who were devoid of hope, were called Musulman by their fellow prisoners. That term means absence of all hope. Some were in such despair that they committed suicide by touching the electrified wires round the camp.

Some afternoons after heavy labour in the coal mines, we were allocated hours of 'sport'. This 'sport' was for the guards, not for the inmates. It consisted of being made to run, or jump, into big holes while being cursed, kicked and hit with whips and rifle butts. We were frequently knocked to the ground.

After some months a transport arrived from Greece. Those transportees did not survive long as they could not understand the German orders, nor could they comprehend Polish in the

mines. The same fate befell those prisoners sent from Italy about a year later. There were many accidents in the mines. Luck alone determined who survived each day.

In January 1945 Auschwitz was evacuated and my brother and I were sent on one of the infamous death marches to Buchenwald Concentration Camp. This was run by political prisoners in contrast to Auschwitz where the inmates in charge were the worst types of criminals. We left Buchenwald after two days and continued to a place called Remsdorf, an offshoot of Buchenwald. This was the filthiest camp of all – muddy, no drinking water, everything and everybody covered with lice, by far the worst camp we had been in so far. Here we worked clearing rubble and filling in bomb craters. The person in charge, or lagerfuehrer, a prisoner himself, was a gypsy and a greater sadist cannot be imagined.

After about a fortnight we left and walked all the way to Theresienstadt (Terezin), a Ghetto in Czechoslovakia, where we arrived in May 1945. Only a handful of us survived this march although more than 30,000 commenced it. Many died, or were shot because they could not keep up with the march. We were a sad, emaciated bunch on arrival. Theresienstadt was used as a model Ghetto to hoodwink the Red Cross and we were amazed after all our years in terrible camp conditions to find inmates there reasonably fit and wearing civilian clothes. Although we did not then know it, gas chambers were already being built in that camp for the final destruction of all inmates. Fortunately they were not completed before the camp was liberated so miraculously we survived.