

Frieda Menco

My name is Frieda Menco. My family lived in Holland since 1700, so for nearly 300 years. My grandparents were a daily part of my life. One grandfather was a diamond-broker, the other director of a jail, a very exceptional profession for a Jew in Holland. My father was in my idea the most wonderful man in the world, a window-dresser, painter, designer and teacher. The ladies lived - as usual in those years – their family lives, so I grew up in a happy world until.....

When people asked me to talk about my life I often thought: shouldn't I be left in peace and try not even to think, because it's too painful. But I said to myself: You are one of the few that came back, so with the task to speak. After all, Chasidic and non-Chasidic Jewish stories went from generation to generation, and I happen to be one of the 'Holocaust' generation, who saw what happened with my own eyes.

My Jewish experience before 1940 was small. In our own house German Jews came and disappeared again, as I know now to the U.S., or to England, but it did not apply to my life. I was 10, 11 years old and Holland was a safe country as we thought. We were so narrow-sighted that we believed that what happened since 1933 in Poland, Germany and Austria would never reach our safe country. Until the 10th of May 1940 when the Germans invaded Holland and consequently Belgium and France.

On that 10th of May I woke up at 7.30 in the morning, as usual. I got up and noticed that every door in the hall was open. I looked for my parents. The house was empty. Then I heard shooting. I looked out of the window. Everybody was outside on the street. A morning in May, the sky was blue with white stripes where the planes found their awful way. The invasion of Holland had begun. I went to school; all the pupils had to go to the gym. Our headmaster was there. He said: "Something terrible happened to our country, today, there won't be any lessons. All of you can go home but before you go let us sing our national anthem." He was a tall handsome man in his early fifties. He towered above us and while we sang tears fell from his cheeks. Two years later he was shot because he was a resistance fighter.

Two days later, May 12, my parents and I (I was fourteen years old at the time) packed a suitcase to go to the coast to try to flee to England. The cab drew up in front of our house, at the same time my grandmother arrived who started to cry when she saw the car. She said: "When are you leaving? What must become of us? You can't leave us alone." My father sent the cab away. Decisions of life and death, but who knew that!

On the fifth day Holland capitulated and the occupation began. Life would be distorted forever, until the day of our death. For most of us that moment came soon, for some, like myself there was a long way to go. There are not many witnesses left of the next five years. About five o'clock in the afternoon on the day of the capitulation my father, mother and I went to my mother's parent's home. I slept on the couch, my mother shared her parents' bed and my father sat in a chair. We stayed there for two nights. Forty years later I learned that my father wanted to kill us and himself and therefore was

afraid to stay alone with us.

In the beginning the Nazis played it low key. A gradual elimination and dehumanization process started. The first year and a half wasn't too life threatening. I resided in a Jewish middle class neighborhood. Around the corner also lived the Frank family. Then in 1942 they started to round up the Jewish German children of my age, 12-17 years old. Among them were also Margot and Anne Frank. Two months later I received by mail the order to go with a backpack to the Central Station. My father told me to rub my whole body with sandpaper, then he went to the Germans to tell them his daughter had scarlet fever. As they were terribly afraid of contagious diseases they postponed my working orders. On his way home my father was caught by the Germans. He escaped by dodging them and stayed hidden for two days. After returning home he found a way for the three of us to go into hiding.

My father bought a boat, of course through other people, as a Jew wasn't allowed to purchase a thing like that. We would have liked to have brought some things from our home but everywhere around us were traitors who were always scanning the neighborhood. If they saw that luggage was taken out of a house the Germans would arrive and take the Jews away. One early morning in 1942 we walked to the Amstel River twenty minutes from our home. My mother had sewn on our yellow star very superficially. On the bridge over the river we tore off this star, walked to the boat and boarded it. Five minutes later German soldiers arrived. "What a beautiful boat" they said, "can we have a look? Of course". The two people who brought us away said, "we prefer to leave now but we invite you for some schnapps here at five o'clock. Okay", they said and so we took off.

Late in the afternoon we arrived at the village and the house where we would stay for the next two years. The man of the house said: "You look like normal people I cannot see that you are Jewish". It was the start of unbearable years. We were treated like slaves, starved. This was the middle of July 1942. I was then 16 years old. For two years all of us stayed in one room. We had to whisper and could not walk around because below us was a bicycle shop. Those people brought us potatoes and vegetables to clean and peel but very little to eat. We read and played games. We were afraid and very hungry. When a car stopped in front of the house our hearts nearly stopped beating. We gave the people a lot of money but often at the end of the evening my father or I begged them to give us one slice of bread that we could share. They were really bad people.

D-day came the 6th of June 1944. Excitement, hope. Now it would not be long but after the first state of euphoria we realized that there was still a long way to go. As did the man where we were hiding. He brought us a man who would bring us to freedom in Switzerland for a lot of money. We were so famished, so desperate that we agreed. When the morning came that we were supposed to leave the Germans came and took us to jail where we stayed for five days. Then we were taken for two months to the Dutch concentration camp Westerbork.

Recently a researcher proved that at the beginning of the occupation the Germans did not expect Queen Wilhelmina to flee to England. When she did, the Germans established a civil government under their control. Because the Nazi regime in The Netherlands consisted of civilians, we lost 80% of our Jews. This was much harsher than in Belgium and France where they had a military regime. Most of the people who survived in the Netherlands, when they did not emigrate, to this day still live in their former city or their former neighborhood. Every street every stone reminds us of the past. Computerized in our hearts and minds forever. And no computer virus can erase that.

Thank God there were also very courageous Dutch gentiles, although they were few. On the other hand I always ask myself how many Jews would have been heroes? How many would have hidden Protestants, Catholics or these days Muslims and taken the risk of being shot or sent to concentration camps.

Well, life in the Dutch concentration camp was very bearable. It was better than being in hiding. No hunger. Although we were in a special department for punishment, after all it was forbidden for Jews to go into hiding there was a lot of space to walk around after all those years in one room. We wore wooden shoes, blue overalls with a red top in case we would try to escape. There were nice boys and I 'celebrated' my 19th birthday. But it was not the intention of the Germans to keep us there.

On September 3rd 1944 it was our turn. We were thrown into the cattle trains on the last transport to Auschwitz. One thousand and nineteen people. Four hundred and seventy went immediately into the gas chamber. In 1942 four inmates who managed to escape had reported to governments, military people and civilians about what happened in Auschwitz. So the world knew. Also the great Jewish organizations. If they only had sent a few planes to bomb that railway that brought us to our extermination. Then, there would have been now more Jews in Holland and more potential for vibrant Jewish communities in Europe.

I was together with my mother and father and with a girlfriend whom I met in jail. We were standing in line on that terrible platform. One of the great traumas of all of us who were there. Lights, shouting, screaming. There were four rows, two for men and two for women. One men's and one women's row went immediately into the gas chamber. They brought us to a hall where we had to strip ourselves naked. Germans standing around. They tattooed the numbers on our arms, removed our hair at the three places where they grow. Then we went under a shower, not yet knowing that could be gas. In our case it was water. We came out, no 'towels', terrible draught. They threw something to us and in my case it was a short dress with two left shoes. That was our outfit for the rest of our stay.

My father (of course we did not know these things immediately) went to Auschwitz I. Later I learned that he gave a few lectures for his fellow inmates of which I am still proud of today. We were in Auschwitz II called Birkenau. There was also Auschwitz III. We had to schlep stones from A to B and the next day from B to A. I was young and strong so I took upon myself the heavy duties. Also the 'kubelkommando', 'soup and poep' I call

it. In the morning the stools of the night to the 'latrine' in the afternoon the 'soup of the day', water and cabbage. I suppose in the same vessels. Then in the morning 'appel' for four hours. Then in a row of five carrying the stones for hours. After coming back, again for hours standing appel.

Once in three days we got a piece of dry brown bread. After a few weeks my friend got ill. The evening before, she asked me to scratch her back; ten days later I got scarlet fever too. It was very weird because at home I had faked having it and years later I got it.

I had to go to the 'ambulance'. The 'ambulance' was a kind of room, a part of the wooden horse stables. What they called the Revier was the so-called hospital. They kept me there immediately. When I entered Dr. Mengele just came out. He was tall with boots on. He had just made his choice who would live and who would die, the 'selection'. In the evening he came back to bring a piece of chocolate to the children he came to fetch with the women the next day for the gas chamber. If you looked worn out he took you to the gas chamber if you looked well you were taken for experiments. Well, I did not get better. After the scarlet fever I got typhoid then dysentery and pleurisy on both sides. High fever. I was very ill. During the typhoid my friend and I had to go to another block. There we met Anne and Margot Frank again who had scabies. By that time our mothers were digging canals.

My mother came along in the evening and when she had stolen a piece of bread she shoved it through a hole in the ground. My friend (I could not get up) divided the bread. One day my mother said: "Mrs. Frank and I are hiding. Everybody had to leave on transport but we want to stay with you so we are hiding and will mingle with a new transport". The interesting thing is that she was talking about Mrs. Frank. They both kept up appearances. A survival instinct.

A few days later my friend and the Frank girls were 'entlassen' and I stayed. My mother also got dysentery. She also came in the 'Rivier'. After that I got pleurisy on both sides. She faked that she was ill. Fact was that in a concentration camp the only possibility to stay alive was when you had a close friend or in my case: my mother. Togetherness created a possibility to feel human. Hope for the future in my case was also sustained by little beautiful deeds, i.e. a friend who put small pieces of bread in my mouth when I had typhoid. During ten days I did not know where my mother was. Later I learned that she was digging canals. When I thought I was alone in the world a French girl told me: "You are our child. After this you will go with us to Paris and you will always be together with us". These things I will never forget. Friendship in that inhuman darkness is more than sixty years later a basis for values in life.

Let me tell you that in November the gas chambers were dismantled. They had Jews do that job. News trickled in, also about the attack of the allies during Christmas in the Ardennen. By the way we got a Christmas dinner. In our daily soup a few pieces of horse lung.

January 18

A few days earlier the kapo's (a terrible kind of female guards) became nervous but at first we did not realize why. Now and then at a very great distance we heard explosions. It remained like that for maybe four days. One morning Germans entered our shed shouting: "Alle auf Marsch, jeder der zuruck bleibt wird erschossen" (everybody has to go. Those who stay behind will be shot). As I was lying in the cot already for four months and I had all those illnesses I told my mother to leave me and go ahead. But instead of that she went outside and came back with some rags. She put them around my feet and my body and we went to the place in front of the shed to fetch a piece of bread that we were promised for the road. I leaned towards a wall while my mother fetched the bread. When she came back she did not see me. I had fainted but everybody was walking over me. In the end I was found. My mother dragged me back to the cot. I begged her to go. She didn't. We stayed there together. They did not shoot us but at some distance they set fire to another block. The sky was all red, but the wind was in the other direction.

In all that hassle my mother lost the bread. Next day she found a small kohlrabi and we lived on that and snow for nine days. There was no water, no electricity. We lived like animals in the dark, dying.

January 27, 9 days later

Afternoon. Loud clattering against the wooden walls. Tall man in white sheets came in. The clattering: their skis. The white sheets camouflage. In their hands candles.

A man said to me: "Du Kind, du wirst das erste Stuck Chocolate bekommen", you child will get the first piece of chocolate. Of course he thought I was not older than twelve, thirteen and dying. (We got the first piece of chocolate three months later on the first of May). In fact there were only a few of them sent out to confuse the Germans on the Western front who would feel more threatened by the idea that the Russians were far in Poland. But it saved our lives. They nearly had no food with them and that also saved our lives because most people had edema and would have died instantly when they would have eaten a lot. In my memory I was just lying there most of the time unconscious of what was going on around me. Bodies moving or not moving anymore but my mother was there. About three or four weeks later the Russians decided to bring those of us who were still alive to Auschwitz I. They threw women on top of each other on carts. A Hungarian woman under me screamed but I could not move. My mother walked the four kilometers next to the cart and so we arrived in Auschwitz where we got a bed for ourselves in a stone building where it was less cold.

At first they put me in a separate room with three tuberculosis patients. Miraculously there appeared a rontgen apparatus. They carried me there and I remember myself hanging between two people in front of that thing. I did not have tuberculosis so I was allowed to go to that larger room where my mother was.

Next to us was a very nice woman who cried day and night. Like all of us she did not have her period anymore. She had had sex with an SS officer for a piece of bread. She was now afraid that her husband in Germany would never accept her again.

I have to tell you about a girl of my age. Her name was Adele Roet. Her bed was next to my mother's. Sometimes I saw her sitting by the edge of her bed all skin and bones. We looked at each other. We never talked. No energy. During the night one naked bulb remained burning. One night it was completely silent when I heard a delirious voice. It was Adele. Very slowly she said the sjema (a Jewish prayer when somebody dies), the whole sjema and she died. I have since thought of her thousands of times. She is one of the reasons I am here. Another reason is a Belgian girl who shouted before she was hanged: "Tell the world".

What loneliness. I had my mother. I was ill and everybody expected me to die. Nobody cared, one more, one less. But my mother did. On her walk to the 'Lagerstrasse" she met a one time medical professor from Tschechoslowakia (now Slovakia), Bratislava. She took him to me. His name was Professor David Grossmann. Again my life was saved. He got from the Russians two injections per day of insulin and glucose and I started to eat again, a miracle. He died at his home within sixth months as a consequence of Auschwitz.

During that whole time under Germans and Russians I never believed that I would die, although I was on the brink of death for six months. I wrote a postcard to a non-Jewish friend in Holland. On May 1945 I wrote: " My dearest wish is when God allows it to be back in Holland together with my father". I have never understood that I wrote this in that human made inferno. The last week of May the Russians told us that all Dutch people had to go on transport to Holland. Only I was not allowed to leave because they were sure I was going to die. But I signed a letter that if I would die it would be my own responsibility. I don't know if I would ever have come back otherwise.

Well, it was a very long journey. After a few weeks we arrived in Pilzen Tschecho-Slovakia, where the demarcation line was between east and west. The British and American soldiers took care of us with food and love. A British soldier put his coat over me. My son still has the buttons. Although the Russians had been very good to us we could finally communicate. Via Brussels we reached Holland. And then another story starts. A story of cold reception, of having to fight for every single thing and especially the story of mourning. No grandparents, one grandfather shot in the kitchen, three grandparents gassed in Auschwitz. No more uncles and aunts, no house--just bare life. Like in Auschwitz, my before the war so luxurious and spoiled mother, was in that period a hero, a lion taking care of her young.

When we came back we tried to tell people our experiences but nobody wanted to listen. Some people in the Netherlands had suffered from starvation especially in the large cities and they did not want to be bothered. And as nobody wanted to listen we shut up and I remember feeling guilty about troubling people. The authorities considered us a pain in the neck. A Jew who came back and wanted something. My mother and I came into what they called a repatriation home. I could not yet walk properly so my mother had to do everything. The first half year at least. She had a brother in Brooklyn and he sent us parcels. By bribing a civil servant with one parcel she managed to get us an apartment. She threw the mattresses on which we were lying out of the window of the repatriation

home and dragged them to the apartment. There are habits, developed in Auschwitz, that remain with you. This was not stealing this was 'organizing'.

The few of us who had survived had no idea about the impact of Auschwitz on our future. Everything had to be ordinary. Marriage, children. Was it different if you had a Jewish partner or not? Was that better or worse? Most people find that the non-Jewish partner listened and could comfort the other. Others thought that you could only understand each other when you both experienced the shoah. But there was and is no rule. I myself was married to a Jew who came back from Auschwitz. He was an introverted man. An economist who had been so lucky to be able to study. But although I was not an introverted person he did not want to talk or listen which fitted in fact with the general behavior around me. We had two sons. There was what we called 'the deafening silence'.

There were also families who could not stop talking about it. When a child hurt himself the parent would say: "Go away. Stop whining. This is nothing. I can tell you stories!". So the children learned never to complain but to pity their parents. I knew people who had the portrait of a forty-year-old man on the mantelpiece. The children wanted to know who he was. They were told never to ask again. In most families there were and are secrets. Only my mother and I talked sometimes about our common past. Most of the time (as happened in most families) as a joke. "Can you remember that Polish woman who came during the night to strangle those who were too difficult? Our diarrhea stopped. We got no food or drinks for four days so we were sent to another barrack".

In the meantime earning money was the aim. Climbing in society and smile and tell yourself how wonderful life is. And the children felt like outsiders but they only felt it, they could not put their finger on it because there was a secret. Their parents did not talk about it. Also not among themselves. But still, The children felt left out.

There was a missing generation, in fact two missing generations. Parents did not have many friends and where were the grandparents of the children. In my family there were two surviving grandmothers. One had been in Bergen Belsen and the other with me in Auschwitz. As my husband and I never touched the subject the children seemingly just accepted it as a fact.

So relationships between parents and children were not easy. During my puberty I was two years with my parents in one room. The rest of the war in actual life threatening danger together with my mother. She saved my life so how could I be angry with her? How could our children be angry with their parents who suffered so much when they were as old as they were in their puberty?

My parents did not give me a Jewish education and probably I would not have done anything Jewish if there would not have been a shoah. But when my children became three and four years old I felt the need to bring them into Jewish life. I brought them to a Jewish kindergarten. Later, they went to public schools having established themselves as Jews also by becoming barmitswah. I felt a tremendous urge of being of use to the remnants of Dutch Jewry. Although I was a working woman I started a group of women

in our synagogue to help on a very small scale. It was a miracle of building up. It started in 1964. I made my "career" as a volunteer, nationally and internationally for which I am honored by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands as a knight. From less than an insect to a knight, my story.

A friend of mine always said: "Every discrimination leads to the gas chamber". I am thankful that I stayed alive as a witness, who can help a little bit fighting for justice.

I suppose that all of you read books of Elie Wiesel or read about him. Always he comes back to 'indifference'. I feel that as long as the largest part of peoplehood remains indifferent to what is going on in the world we do not have a chance. I know that not all of us are influential, not all of us are politicians and not all of us have only good qualities. I believe in the idea of tikkun olam (our duty to heal the world) although I do not believe that it will ever be reached. It is easy to believe in God when your life is wonderful and to thank him or her for it but there is the story also described by Elie Wiesel about three learned rabbis in Auschwitz talking the whole night to judge God about allowing the murder of so many of his children. The verdict was 'guilty'. After this session of Tribunal one of them looked at a watch that he had hidden on his body, and said: "it is time for our morning prayers" and the three of them bowed their heads and prayed.

I think each day is a gift for old and young. I shared with you my history in honor of the six million Jewish men, women and children who cannot talk anymore.