

Introduction to Richard's Story

Richard was a distant relative of mine. He appeared at family events and all we knew of him was that he had been incarcerated during the Holocaust and as a consequence never married. We were told never to ask about the tattooed number on his forearm nor mention the war. And so it was for over 35 years.

After my husband passed away, Richard started frequenting my home/ studio, showing a keen interest in my work. I was photographing objects left behind by the deceased, working with ideas around memory and the power of objects as memorials - and so began the tentative 'dance' around the topic of his war story.

I believe he was assessing my bona fide over time and 'out of the blue' he decided to tell his story, for the first time at age 92. He told me he had been approached by the official testimonies department at the Jewish Holocaust Museum but refused to participate in their program thinking they may edit or somehow change his story.

I was now the trusted, custodian of his long-held secrets.



We went for a drink to celebrate, both knowing there would be emotional hurdles ahead.

We spent two years meeting regularly in his apartment. As a ritual before the “talk”, I would be obliged to “eat something” he meticulously prepared; be it herring & onions on rye bread, hard boiled eggs mashed with pickle cucumbers and always cake as dessert.

I recorded his voice - he reluctantly allowed this, but definitely: “no video!”.

I watched his face struggle with his memories and words. I scribbled these words fervently as fast as I could, as my own coping mechanism.



Each session lasted somewhere between 30 - 40 minutes and by the end he was drained, exhausted and somewhere else. It pained me to watch this, but he insisted on continuing.

Some weeks he would call and postpone saying he was still recovering from his telling the week before - he was voluntarily reliving his nightmare and I became witness.

At one session he asked not to be recorded. He went quietly to his prized antique cabinet and unlocked it carefully to bring out a small box.



The box had a smaller round plastic container within it and slowly as if in a dream he unfurled a tattered belt. After a lifetime of silence, he announced: “this is my most valuable possession in the world”. The belt was symbol of survival, pain, & loss; something tangible from childhood and his beloved home country, Poland.



The story of the belt itself ‘surviving’ is remarkable.

Richard stated often and emphatically, for himself more so than for my ears, that he needed to do this, to finally reveal his long-held story.

At the end of the telling, in awe of his story and resilience, I asked if I could formally photograph him with his belt in my studio. He of course agreed, even though we both knew the toll it would take on him. We discussed ideas for the shoot together; we were now a team with a mission.



As a quiet, unassuming man confronted by mortality, he fought his natural private instincts and made me promise to share his story and subsequent portrait, even though he insisted humbly that his story was just one of many.

He wanted desperately for people to know an individual's lived experience in this dark chapter of modern history.

Here is Richard's Story, unedited, in his own words - 1st September 1939 to the 3rd May 1945.

My War Story

On 1st September 1939 the Germans invaded Poland.

We were told that Jewish men in particular should leave Warsaw and go to the Eastern part of Poland to a place - Lvov.

I went to the railway station hoping to get there by train but found that the only train ready to depart for Lvov was one occupied by The Department of Interior. They were evacuating their staff and archives of government institutions. There was no way to travel inside that train so we hung on the outside of the train all night until midday next day when we saw German planes approaching. As soon as the planes reached the train they dropped bombs and everyone ran for their lives into the nearby forest. Instinctively we dropped down flat onto the ground. This was my first stroke of luck. I was deeply covered by earth and soil that protected me from being wounded.

I joined a group of a few boys, five in total, and together we continued to walk through the forest. We were extremely hungry and tired when we reached a village and entered a peasant's house to ask for food. The villagers didn't have much food but made soup with what they had and after one hour we were invited inside the house. There were three large pots of soup with wooden spoons but no plates or spoons - we ate the soup out of vases. I could not remember eating such tasty soup ever as my hunger was so intense. We ate and then asked the villager's to sell us their horse and cart. We gave them 500 zloty and we were on our way travelling with immense difficulty through the forest route.

After an hour or so travel we noticed a railway carriage full of soldiers being hauled by big locomotives. We were astounded to see such a site in the middle of a forest. This was our first sighting of Russian soldiers and we wondered what they were doing. The soldiers approached and questioned us: who are you and where are you going? We told them the truth – the soldiers told us to wait – and we thought that was the end that they would kill us. The captain came after a while and re-questioned us and again we told the truth – we were Jewish boys running from Warsaw heading to Lvov. Unbelievably he let us go and continue our journey.

Soon after we encountered wounded Polish soldiers who needed transport to get them to their destination and so we had to forsake the horse and cart to them. We continued by foot until we reached our destination, Lvov. Here we found refugees from all over Poland. We thought we should join the Polish Army that was regrouping in Eastern Europe. We soon realised that Poland would face invasion from the west by Germans and from the East by Russians.

What to do? After a few days I met my best friend from school, Jacob Szafran. Believe it or not the same boy who shared my school bench for ten years! He had decided to go to Russia and begged me to join him. I could not. I missed my mother and sister too much and wanted desperately to return to them in Warsaw.

So I undertook the journey through the terrain covered by February's winter snow for days until I finally reached Warsaw and found my mother and sister. It goes without saying that we were so happy to see each other again but after a short time I knew I needed to find work. Work seemed impossible as Jewish businesses were closing down everywhere. I was anxious to search out my school friends, their families and find as many of them as I could.

One such day I visited my sister's friends, a young couple. I approached their flat, knocked on their door and was confronted by a man in a leather coat who invited me in and proceeded to question me. I replied that I had simply come to visit my friends. I was searched and the man found in my pocket the armband with the blue Star of David that Jews were required to wear when they are outdoors. I was asked why I was not wearing the armband and I just replied that I just didn't wear it. I was immediately arrested and taken to the notorious political prison, Pawiak in Warsaw.

I learned afterwards that the man and his colleagues were Gestapo agents and that my sister's friends maid had denounced them as they were distributing a secret newspaper in Warsaw. I am sure now that they were taken to prison and shot soon after. I never found them again.

While I was in prison I heard shooting daily, people were killed regularly. I had never even seen a prison before and this was a terrible experience. I had to put everything I had onto a table and then the guard took me to a cell on the second floor usually holding 3 to 4 people but there were now about 20 people in it. The Polish prisoners wanted to know why I was arrested and brought to their cell and I truthfully told them it was because I was not wearing the Jewish

armband. I soon learned the status of Jews in prison. The Poles wanted me to be taken to the basement cells where Jews were held not be with them on the 'higher' level. They called the guards to complain and insist I be taken to the basement but the guards retorted that it was not their business and they did not transfer me.

I endured about a week and then I was taken to Gestapo headquarters, Shuha Ave – what an experience!

I was in a big office with a man sitting behind a desk – after a while he began to beat me and repeated asked the same thing: Tell the truth why didn't you wear the armband? At first I didn't know what to say but after continued beating I said: "a few days ago I was walking along the street wearing the armband and a group of boys beat me up so I didn't want to wear it again." I made up this story and it worked. The Gestapo agent seemed satisfied and there was no further questioning and I was taken back to the prison.

My sister learned of what happened to me and she got in touch with the guard who told me that my sister was trying to get me out. I learned later that she approached a German solicitor to help her get me out and apparently, to my surprise the case went to Berlin to be heard in court.

My sister was advised that the court case would be heard in a matter of weeks and she was aware of what was going on. I learned that I would have to remain in prison for 6 months. I was transferred to a different prison in Warsaw one that was non-political. Again Jews were put in the basement cells and non-Jews were in the higher levels. My surname was Polish sounding and as a result I was taken to a cell on a higher level. Again the Polish prisoners asked the guard to remove me and take me to the basement cells. My sister was in touch with the guard who passed on the food parcels she brought me. My fellow prisoners were thieves and murderers and they didn't take to me having parcels. They beat me and I was in a situation I didn't know how to handle. I knew I couldn't tell the guard. Each cell had the strongest and cruellest man as it's head and so I decided to give him half the food my sister sent. This decision saved me from further beatings and if others approached me the headman would beat them. Six months went by and in this time the Jews were closed in the ghetto of Warsaw. My sister who had a connection with the police organised for the police to get me and take me to the ghetto.

It is hard to describe the life in the ghetto. It was hell on earth – people dying daily on the streets, people hungry and sick with no one to help them.

In 1943, after the Jewish uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, the Germans decided to liquidate the ghetto and so transported all the remaining Jews to concentration and extermination camps. My mother, sister and I were put on a train and transported to a concentration camp in Lublin.

We were separated with one side for men and the other for women and guarded by Ukrainian soldiers. Then there was the notorious selection process. The guards called for all tradesmen on one side and others on the other. I decided to register myself as an electrician and perhaps this decision helped me survive the war.

Of course being separated from my mother and sister was heartbreaking and I had to farewell them as I was off to another camp known as Birkenau where all the tradesmen were taken. This was most terrible for me, as I did not know when or if I would see them again.

The journey to the new camp was cold and unknown. We travelled in open carriages covered by snow. When we passed through Czechoslovakia we noticed workers on their way to factories some who threw their lunches into our carriages. This act of kindness I will never forget although not all were lucky enough to get that something to eat.

When we arrived at Birkenau we taken to our barracks. Our food consisted of warm tea made of leaves, sometimes bread made out of something that was not flour. At lunch we were fed warm soup that was supposed to sustain us for years.

In the beginning I got some work around the camp. I remember meeting two electricians who were Jewish who wanted to know any information from outside the camp. They asked me if I was in fact an electrician. I told them the truth and they said they would try and find appropriate work for me.

Two weeks later my number was called. Of course by this stage we no longer were known by names just by the numbers tattooed on our arms – mine was 126576. Up till now I was a member of the good 'electrical commando' but next day I was to actually do electrical repairs. I admitted that I was not actually an electrician. The Poles that were there wanted me immediately thrown out of the commando group. They went to the kapo, the supervisor, and told him about me not being an electrician hoping to get me removed. The kapo simply said: "doesn't matter we will find a job for him" and again I was saved.

The kapo was an Austrian who was arrested for being a communist. Because of him I stayed for a long time with that commando team and was treated the same as the others.

At the camp gates as we were about to go out to work there was about five musicians, mostly Jewish prisoners, playing 'marching' music. They played daily both in the morning as prison workers were departing for work outside the camps and again in the evening as prisoners were returning from work. To hear music under these circumstances did not make sense to me. It was impossible to enjoy or even understand.

I was working with this commando mainly digging holes for tall poles to be installed. I had the ability to move around the different camps because of my electrician commando status and decided to inspect the whole camp looking for anybody I may know. As all the fences were electrified to prevent prisoners from escaping I had the valid excuse of inspecting the fences around the entire facility. Here I must say that some prisoners who were really desperate used the fence at night to electrocute themselves- within seconds of touching the fence they could commit suicide.

I started with the women's camp and desperately asked if anyone knew my mother or sister - none did. I passed by the gypsy camp and went next to the hospital camp. Here I found prisoners lying in bed waiting to die; I knew no one was interested in curing them.

Next camp was the crematorium. At this time it was not in use. The crew that worked there were all Jewish and I was really interested to see what was inside so they let me in to see for myself. First they showed me the incinerators, perhaps 5 or 6 in all, where the bodies were cremated. They explained that after the cremation they threw the ashes into very deep pits.

Next they showed me the crates full of hair and crates full of golden teeth. Inmates who were barbers and dentists worked there to remove these items 'professionally'.

Afterwards they took me to the so-called 'chamber'. On the ceiling here I saw many rosettes. The inmates told me that when a new transport arrived the prisoners or inmates were made to undress, leave their belongings behind and ushered to this 'chamber' that was supposedly a sauna.

The entrance door was then locked as were the windows and the SS officers went to the roof on the outside and dropped poison gas inside the 'chamber'.

I was told that it took several minutes for all the people to die and when the doors were reopened everybody was piled in one corner of the 'chamber'. Then the bodies were taken, one at a time, to the crematorium. The working crews were always Jews and after a time trucks took them to the forest and killed them because they had seen and knew too much. A new crew were selected and the process repeated itself.

The crematoriums were busy only when the transports arrived with mainly Jews and many from Hungary. The air was thick with the smell of burning bodies and ash and smoke could be seen drifting from the high chimneys. They told me that only the German soldiers and the selected crew were allowed into the crematorium camp. I was amongst the few that had seen inside the "death factory". I returned back to my camp without telling a soul what I had witnessed. If I were caught I would be killed for sure as I had no permission to move about the camps from the kapo. I did not consider the consequences - I needed to see for myself what was going on.

When I arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau I heard that every group of Jews transported had a nurse who carried a bag of medications. When they were directed to the crematoriums they were forced to abandon the medications together with their other belongings. The clothing was inspected by a group of prisoners who were tailors whose job it was to search for hidden gold and jewellery and to select the clothing that would be sent back to Germany and the others items that would remain at the camps for other uses. The medications were thrown out – considered rubbish. Instead of going to the hospital where they were needed the medication was ditched and the sick inmates were fed white pills that no one knew what they were.

I had a keen interest in medicine. My cousin, George Neuman, was a doctor and I visited him in my school days, before these horrible circumstances. He was a patient and kind man and answered all my numerous questions about diseases and medicines and I realised now how much I learned from him. During the time of the ghetto he worked in the Jewish hospital and sadly he contracted typhus from the many sick and dying patients and he too died.

I made contact with a young Hungarian boy of about 18 who worked in the crematorium and at great risk to him and myself asked him to bring me the medication carried in the bag by the nurses before it got discarded. Bravely he smuggled out medicines every few days and I read the labels carefully working out what medication suited which ailment. Amongst other medicines he brought were Vitamin C tablets I remember made by CIBA of Switzerland. I knew that these were good for inflammation of the gums particularly. My kapo, the electrical commando that allowed me to stay on knowing I was not an electrician, suffered from this ailment and I gave him whatever vitamin C pills I received.

Most of the other medications I distributed to the prisoners for their various symptoms especially skin diseases. I helped many people and they started calling me 'doctor'. What I did was totally forbidden in the camps but no one denounced me to the SS. Of course I couldn't carry the medication with me and luckily because my barrack kapo relied also on the medications he suggested I leave all the medications on my bed covered tightly by the rug. I wanted to thank the young Hungarian boy who risked so much to bring me the medicines and I gave him whatever food, such as onions and sugar that I received from grateful 'patients'.

There were inmates who tried to escape. They were always caught by a large number of German soldiers with German Shepard dogs. When this occurred the whole camp, all the prisoners from each of the barracks except the crematorium commando, were forced to assemble and the SS guard brought in the caught escapee and hanged him in front of the whole assembly. The Germans used this as a deterrent and promised the same treatment for anyone who tries to escape.

In 1944 there was a selection in our camp. All the inmates were hauled out of the barracks and were inspected by Dr Mengele. He was personally selecting people whom he considered sick, wounded or weak. Those selected were forced to one side ready for passage to the crematorium. I was one of those selected. I had 'bandages' on my legs; actually the bandages were toilet paper bound around each leg. I had deep open wounds, the size of 5-cent piece and just as deep, simply covered with toilet paper. I knew these wounds were the result of vitamin C deficiency but I never allowed myself the vitamin C pills that were smuggled I needed them for others especially my kapo. (Even today 73 years later if I inadvertently touch the area, the wounds reopen - the healing was so slow and the new skin so fine.)

Somehow I didn't panic.

I was rather quiet, thinking of my mother and sister who I now knew perished in 1943 in Lublin. A Polish prisoner who arrived from the Lublin concentration camp told me that all the Jews, about 17000, were killed before his departure.

I thought of my mother and sister and asked myself: "is it right that they were killed and I am alive?"

I was calm because I knew if I have to die, I would be with them.

Somehow I noticed my kapo talking to the SS officer and within a few minutes the kapo approached me and led me away from the group condemned to the crematorium. It was a strange feeling because I was preparing myself for my death. I wanted to thank the kapo for saving me but it was difficult for me, as I could not speak German. I will never forget what he did for me and I remain sorry that I could not express myself to tell him how much I appreciated what he did for me.

On one day when I was working in my commando digging holes for tall electrical poles I saw the sky completely filled with planes. It was encouraging but nothing happened and I was not sure in which direction they were heading.

At this time I was friendly with one of the kapos and he recommended me to work in the office with German pilots. All the planes that were shot down during the course of the war around Europe were transported to Birkenau and the prisoners worked to dismantle the metal, re-crate it and send it on to the foundries of Germany. I was sitting in the office writing addresses of the towns on pieces of wood that marked the destination of the crates sent by train. This was a light job and in the winter I was in warm conditions and even had soldiers bringing me crusts of bread from time to time.

This 'comfort' did not last long. Soon after we heard Russian gunfire and the whole camp was to be evacuated with the approach of the Russian army. On January 26, 1945 I remember well it was extremely cold and we walked quite a distance to reach the train station where we were transported to Austria to Mauthausen concentration camp.

After the difficult train trip we were forced to walk uphill in the freezing temperature. I remember the Germans transporting many thousands of prisoners to the Austrian concentration camps. When we arrived we waited in the cold. I recall sitting on frozen concrete out of sheer fatigue. Finally we went inside and undressed for our sauna.

As in previous similar situations I discarded my clothes but kept my belt on. I did not ever leave my belt – I showered with it and slept with it in fear of it being stolen. The guards all through my incarceration saw that I showered with it but chose not to acknowledge it. Another amazing piece of luck – this enabled me to own one precious possession from my life before the war. The belt signifies so much and is a treasure I guard fiercely.

After the sauna we were given underwear and then returned to the freezing outdoors for a long cold wait till we were led to our barracks. The barracks were crowded and supervised by terrible looking Spanish prisoners incarcerated by the Germans in 1936.

I will never forget the way we had to sleep there - we were like sitting sardines; legs crossed, arms crossed, upright, one in front of the other with no space between.

After a short stay in the terrible Mounthausen we were again moved to Gusen2, a smaller camp surrounding the central Mounthausen complex. Here there were many Russian and Italian prisoners working with us in concrete tunnels. The tunnels were built inside the hill and housed the unfinished airplane, Messerschmit112. Here the plane was getting its electrical installations ready for transportation to the next camp for more work until they were ready for flight.

This was my last concentration camp.

On the 1st of May 1945 the whole camp had to assemble in the tunnel where we usually worked. We were sitting there for hours not knowing what will happen and why we were assembled there. Afterwards we learned that the SS guards were waiting for an order from Vienna to destroy the tunnel together with all the assembled inmates.

Again fortunately the order never arrived and next we saw the SS leaving their arms and run away to unknown destinations.

In their place some very old men arrived, armed with guns to keep guard of the camp. We sensed something as going on, something was changing. Two days later, May 3rd 1945, we saw a tank approaching with a small car by its side bearing the Red Cross - we each received parcels from them – it was a moment hard to believe. From the tank walked an American soldier of Polish origin with only a few Polish words in his vocabulary. We couldn't communicate with him really or the Red Cross staff. We saw they took the guns away from the old men and poured petrol over the stack of guns and then they left.

We understood that they were going to other camps to liberate them and we understood to wait until the follow-up trucks with clothing and food arrives.

There were prisoners who were waiting like myself but many ran away to the villages taking what they could from farmers and going to Linz, the closest big town to the camp. A group of us waited for the trucks for food and clothing. I remember I got shoes with wooden soles and as I was extremely weak I doubted that I could walk far so I intended to wait for the trucks. But some boys from the barracks insisted that I should walk with them the 15km to Linz otherwise I could be waiting unknown time starving and getting sick. I was persuaded to go with them and walked painfully the 15km.

In Linz we found only sugar in some cellars. We ate the sugar – a taste I had not experienced for 4 long years.

I got really sick and thought to myself - *I survived the war but will die now.*

This in fact happened to many people who ate too much after their liberation and died because their bodies could not cope – they survived the war and died on liberation.