



## ***Short Stories to Start the Day on the Bus in Poland***

***Compiled by Eli Rubenstein, National Director, March of the Living Canada***

### **1) Gratitude (Based on testimony from the USHMM)**

A man was praying in a concentration camp. “What are prayers are you saying just now?” his friend asked him.

“Oh it’s a prayer of gratitude to God,” came the answer.

“Gratitude? For what? What could you possibly be grateful for, here in this awful place?”

The man looked at his friend, then pointed to the Nazi guards. “I am grateful that God did not create me to be one of them.”

### **2) Why? (Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz*.)**

A well---known story from the Holocaust is told by Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz*.

Shortly after Levi first arrived in Auschwitz, he saw an icicle hanging from one of the barracks. Attempting to relieve his parched throat, Levi reached for the icicle only to have it snatched away by a Nazi guard.

“Why?” the naïve Levi asked the guard, yet unfamiliar with the alien rules of “Planet Auschwitz.”

The guard responded bluntly: “There is no why here.” There is no “why” in Auschwitz.

This simple story illustrates the grim reality of a universe created primarily for the purpose of causing human suffering, and ultimately murder, where rules existed for the sole reason of crushing the human spirit, and where this cruel intention was made amply known to the prisoners.

### **3) Legal Murder (Source: Sachsenhausen Camp Brochure)**

One of the first victims of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp (established in 1936) was Gustave Lampe.

The Nazi guard threw his cap over the fence, then ordered him to retrieve it. When he approached the fence, he was shot and killed. Later it was reported that he was executed for the offence of trying to escape the camp.

In their twisted logic, the Nazis looked for legal justification to carry out their act of state-sanctioned murder.

#### **4) The Eyes of a Child (Source: Speech by Romeo Dallaire)**

Romeo Dallaire recalled an event that occurred to him in Rwanda. As head of the UN contingent there, one of his jobs was to ensure the delivery of food and aid to the outlying villages through UN convoys. The enemy was sometimes so vicious, they would send innocent children into the roadway to block the convoys. When the convoys would slow down, the enemy would open fire, killing the children and as many of the UN convoy as they could.

On one such day, Dallaire and his convoy noticed a 4 year old child wandering in the middle of the road near a close by village. Dallaire ordered the convoy to come to a halt far back from the child, while he and a few troops went close to investigate whether this was another enemy ambush. As it turned out, the bruised and battered child was alone. In the days preceding, his entire village had been wiped out, and he alone had somehow survived. The enemy too was gone.

As they wandered through the huts of the death-stricken villages, suddenly they lost sight of the child. Dallaire quickly ran back to the roadway, where he found the child continuing to wander in a daze. Dallaire grabbed the child to pick him up, and as he did so, he remembers wondering to himself, "What do I have in common with this child? This wounded and battered, emaciated 4 year old boy, who doesn't speak my language, who doesn't seem to understand anything?"

And then Dallaire said, "I looked into his eyes...and I saw the eyes of my own 4 year old child back in Canada, I saw the eyes of a child who wanted to be held, and to be hugged, and to be loved. I saw the eyes of my own child."

Dallaire then went on to speak of the common humanity we all share, and how we must never believe the fallacy that some of us "are more human" than others. The Rwandan genocide was an example of the failure to realize this. "No human is more human than any other human," Dallaire emphasized, expressing a profound truth he has consistently pronounced.

"No human is more human than any other human." When we all truly realize this ethic, the urge to commit genocide and humanity's indifference to it, will have been defeated.

#### **5) Isaac's Treasure (Source: Jewish Folktale)**

Isaac ben Yakov was a poor Jew who lived in Krakow. One night, he had a vivid dream that he went to Prague and discovered a great treasure; the next night he had an even more vivid dream that he went to Prague, dug in a particular spot by the Charles Bridge and discovered the same great treasure. Convinced that this was no ordinary dream, Isaac ben Yakov set out on foot to journey to Prague --- when he arrived (several weeks later), he found the spot by the bridge and began to dig. A Czech guard asked him what he was doing.

When Isaac ben Yakov explained, the man began to yell at him "You stupid man! I also had a dream that I went to Krakow and dug beneath the stove of Isaac ben Yakov house to find a great treasure. But do you think I am foolish enough to leave my wife and my family to travel off on a wild goose chase just because I had such a dream? Do you think that man even exists? And even if he does, that a treasure would be found behind his stove? GO HOME!"

Isaac ben Yakov rushed back to his house in Krakow and dug under his stove, where he found the great treasure he had been dreaming about --- he donated his newfound riches to the community and the Isaac Shul in Krakow now bears his name

Moral: Sometimes we fail to appreciate that which you have had all along. But, adds Rabbi Yitzcha of Vorki, we must still make the journey to find this out.

### **6) Heroism on the Train** (Source: Story told by Great Niece Shifra Penzias)

A Jewish woman was traveling on a train through Italy illegally --- when the Nazis boarded the train to demand valid identification she began to cry as she knew that there was no escape. A fellow Italian passenger asked her why she was so upset and she told him the truth, not caring as she knew her fate was sealed.

"I'm Jewish", she said "and I have no papers. If the Nazis approach me, my life is over!!"

When the Nazis entered their car, the man began to scream at the woman and she became even more hysterical.

When the Nazi asked what all the commotion was about, the man explained: "I am an Italian citizen, and here are my papers. And this woman sitting next to me, this idiot, this fool --- where are her papers? Aha, where are her papers, her glasses, her purse, her watch?? This is my awful wife! She's forgotten her papers again, that's where they are!! I can't handle this anymore – I've had enough!!!

The Nazi asked the man to stop making a scene and left the compartment without penalizing the woman.

At the next stop, the man got off --- she never even found out his name.

But, in a split second, the man not only had the moral courage, but the moral imagination to take the steps that would save her life.

What a level of ethical development!

Note: After hearing this story from Eli Rubenstein, his religious leader, Anthony Green, then a young student at NYU, made an award winning short film based on the story, called "Pigeon".

**From the Pigeon Study Guide:** You've said that your rabbi told you the story. In what context did he share it with you?

**Anthony Green:** I was searching for a short film story [to use for my final film project at NYU]. One of the best storytellers I know is my rabbi [Eli Rubenstein] – and I'm not particularly religious, but I love his stories. And as fate would have it, he was coming to New York the next day. He told me about ten stories at dinner that night, but this one resonated with me. There was a certain weight to it for me – probably at that time I didn't know what it was. There's suspense, payoff. I'm always drawn to stories with a moral conscience and that say something good and [where] the audience is left with something. I was basically given 50 words and I fleshed the rest out in detail later. We actually ended up getting in touch with [a member of Ms. Penzias'] family, who sent us the story that was passed down to him. (A slightly different version of this story is told by Lawrence Kushner, in *Invisible Lines of Connection: Sacred Stories of the Ordinary*, Jewish Lights Publishing.)

### **7) Only a Little Jew**

"Are you a Jew?" asked one of the guards. "Yes," answered the child at the barrier. "Jews are not admitted," snapped the guard.

"Oh, please let me in. I'm only a very little Jew."

From a game played by children aboard the SS St. Louis. The ill-fated ship sailed from Germany on May 27, 1939, with over 900 Jews headed for Cuba. The ship was turned away by Cuba, then the U.S and Canada, and eventually forced back to Europe, where many of her passengers eventually perished in Auschwitz, Sobibor or other places of Nazi persecution.

## 8) Distancing the Other

In the biblical story in Genesis, Joseph's father sends him to find his brothers. Joseph locates them, but instead of acting like brothers, they plot to murder him, only changing their plans at the last moment.

When Joseph's brothers first see him on the horizon looking for them, the biblical texts states, "*And Joseph's brothers saw him from afar*" (Genesis 37:18) Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorki, Poland asks: "Why does the Biblical verse state, "*And Joseph's brothers saw him from afar.*" (Genesis 37:18), before they plotted to kill him?... Why do we need to know they saw Joseph from afar?"

Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorki explains that Joseph's brothers only sought to do evil to him, because "they saw him from afar."

We do evil to each other, because we fail to draw the "other" person near. Instead, instead of allowing them to approach us, we hold them far from us, create false stereotypes about them, and then conspire to do evil to them, based on the untrue image we have created of them.

## 9) One Destiny

In one story that took place in eastern Poland, Holocaust survivor and historian Israel Gutman tells us the following:

“A Jew.. knocked on the door of a poor farmer’s cottage and asked for food. They let him in and discovered that he had been wandering about in the woods for several days with his wife and two children. The poor peasants took them all in. In time, the two families bonded so well that they became as one. One day, the farmer returned from a trip to a neighbouring village and told them that the Germans found a Jewish family sheltered there and murdered them all, both the Jews and the Polish family hiding them. They all lapsed into silence. The Jews realized that they couldn’t keep endangering their Polish protectors so during the night, they packed up their belongings. In the morning, the Poles came to their room. “We’ve been talking about this. Stay. Whatever happens to you, will happen to us.”

And thus was the Jewish family saved.

“What happens to you, will happen to us.” Are there any more beautiful words than these, that were ever spoken during the Holocaust?

The story symbolizes the most noble in values that can be found among two harshly persecuted peoples in the Holocaust --- the Jews and the Poles. The poor farmer and his wife first offer food to an even poorer, starving Jewish man, then they rescue him and his entire family. Then the Jewish family decide they cannot place the Polish family at risk, and resolve to leave – but the Polish man and woman insist they stay, telling them:

“What happens to you, will happen to us.”

## 10) Opening the Door

The war was over, but not for Gerda Klein. Lying in her barrack, weak and emaciated, physically and psychologically all but destroyed. The American soldier who walks into the barrack, has told her the war is over, and she is free. But is she really? She hobbles toward the door. The American soldier stops her, then opens the door for her. A most important gesture. For in that simple movement of opening the door for her – he gave her back her humanity, her dignity, her self---respect, all of which had been stolen from her, beaten out of her, by the Nazis.

Now she was truly free.

The question for us is, then, who can we open doors for? Who in our world, through no fault of their own, have been robbed of their dignity? How can we work to help restore their faith in themselves?

### **11) The Legacy**

The following tale was told by a young girl at a storytelling evening in Toronto during Holocaust Education Week:

“My grandmother came from the town of Apt in Poland. She was a young, newly married woman, when the Nazis occupied Poland. Within short order her husband was deported to a labor camp. Over the protests of her family, she went in search of him.”

“She returned to Apt the next day, only to find that the Nazis had unleashed a savage attack on the town almost immediately after her departure. Her entire family was murdered, gone forever. She would never see them again, and was not even able to say one last goodbye to her mother.”

The girl concluded her story with the following lesson:

“Ever since then, my grandmother had a rule. You were never allowed to leave her home angry or in a fight with another family member. My grandmother insisted that we make up, and forgive one another. She also insisted that our last words before leaving, no matter what had transpired before, had to be I love you.”

“Because you never know when that opportunity will be taken away from you, forever.”

### **12) A Lesson in Music** (Source: Yad Leyeled Museum at the Ghetto Fighters' Museum)

Among the most famous and noble victims of the Holocaust was Dr. Janusz Korczak. The director of a Jewish orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto, he refused many offers to escape. Instead he accompanied the 200 orphans to cattle cars that took them to Treblinka where they were all murdered.

In one story that took place before the war, the conductor of an orchestra in Warsaw offered to bring his musicians to play a free concert for Janusz Korczak's orphans. After a few minutes of playing, however, the children became noticeably bored. And not much later, the conductor abruptly ended the concert, complaining to Korczak, “Why couldn't your children sit still for the beautiful music that my musicians performed for them?” Korczak thought for a moment and then said, “Why couldn't you have chosen to play the kind of music that my children could sit still for?”

### **13) Remembrance and Hope**

The following story begins in the 1932-1933 time period, during the Holodomor, the Stalinist man-made famine that resulted in the deaths of millions of ethnic Ukrainians.

The resourceful head of a Jewish collective farm managed to bribe the local authorities to obtain food for the starving Jewish peasants under his authority. But most of the Ukrainian peasants in the surrounding area were not so fortunate.

One day during the Holodomor, Andrei Novikov, a starving ethnic Ukrainian from the region crawled into the Jewish village.

Andrei Novikov was adopted by the Jewish community, who provided him with all the necessities of life.

His life was thus saved.

But years later, when the Nazis occupied the Ukraine, he was not able to reciprocate the goodness shown to him by the Jews – much as he wanted to. The Nazis had his home under observation, and Novikov knew there was nothing he could do.

The only thing the Jews of the village asked of Andrei Novikov was to remember them after their execution.

So Andrei Novikov learned by heart the 127 names of all the Jews from his neighborhood who the Nazis murdered.

Years later he completed his pledge to his martyred rescuers, by sending all the names of his beloved Jewish friends to Yad Vashem, Israel's national memorial to the Holocaust.

**(Source: Based on a story told by Dr. Igor Shchupak, director of Tkuma.)**