

Blue & White Striped Shirt

Marian Zelman's Story of Survival

Introduction

September 1, 1939 marked the start of WW2 when the German army invaded Marian's homeland, Poland. He could hear the bomb explosions miles away from his village near the city of Loge. Shortly after the attack, the round ups began. Jews and other minorities persecuted by the German Nazis had to leave their homes and move into a ghetto. Marian's father had to close his bookkeeping business, and the family had to leave their 10-apartment home behind. Marian had just celebrated his 20th birthday.

Loge Ghetto

The ghetto was surrounded with barb wire, and every 150 feet was an armed German guard. Living quarters were cramped and the room Marian shared with his mother and father was only 16' x 16'. First, everyone was ordered never to appear in the streets after dark. Second, all Jews had to wear the Star of David on both sides of their bodies.

There were bigger problems, like no sewers, and toilets were scarce. The water tasted terrible and there was very little food. By 1942, hundreds, including Marian's mother, died daily from starvation if they didn't die first from typhus spread by lice.

During the day, Marian worked in a small factory and made items needed by the German army. Workers would walk into the village to take apart houses to use the wood to make furniture. When no one was looking, they took small leftover pieces to bring to their apartments for fuel. If caught, you would be put in the ghetto jail; most were never seen again.

Ghetto Liquidation

After 3 years in the ghetto, the Nazis told them the enemy was coming closer so they would need to be evacuated to a resort in the mountains. They were instructed to pack their belongings and have everything ready to go by the railroad station.

Most were terrified to leave because the underground rumors were that they would be killed upon arrival at their destination. Many wanted to escape, but there was no place to hide. With fear, they climbed in, 100 to each railroad boxcar formerly used to transport animals.

Auschwitz – Birkenau Killing Center

The mountain resort they were promised was instead Auschwitz – Birkenau. When the boxcar door opened, Marian saw people wearing blue and white striped shirts, yelling and screaming. They thought they had arrived in the wrong place and tried to explain to the guards that they were workers producing items needed for the German war effort. A German soldier grabbed Marian by the collar as he attempted to help his father and then pointed to the dark smoke in the sky. He told Marian that tomorrow, this will be you, this will be all of you. Then the selection began – *go left, you go right, left*. Marian avoided the gas chamber, but he never saw his father again.

Gleiwitz 1 - Auschwitz Subcamp

After less than 1 week in Birkenau, Marian and many of his fellow prisoners were loaded onto trucks to Gleiwitz. Marian was still capable of hard work and spent most of his time drilling deep holes for building foundations. Others less capable



*Blue & White Stripe Shirt Circa 1944
Survivor Marian Zelman was given this shirt in Gleiwitz concentration camp, a sub-camp of Auschwitz. The tear on the shoulder, which Zelman repaired himself, occurred when an SS soldier threw him into a truck, saving his life.*

engaged in the pointless task of carrying stones from a nearby slag heap to the camp and back again.¹ He was there for 5 months, then moved to another concentration camp from which he escaped.

Blechhammer – Auschwitz Subcamp

Living conditions at the Blechhammer subcamp were like those in other subcamps of the Auschwitz concentration camp system. The prisoners' wooden barracks were greatly overcrowded and there were not enough toilets, washrooms, bathhouses, or food. Almost all the surviving punishment reports about Blechhammer have to do with illicit food dealing.²

Often when the overhead bombing started, prisoners would run to the kitchen to try and get food during the chaos. Usually, they were caught and shot. One night, the bombing ignited a fire in the barracks, and someone said they found some meat. Marian watched him reach for the meat and realized it had to be a fellow prisoner who had burned in the fire. Terrified, Marian ran outside.

Escape – January 29th 1945

Outside, an armed guard demanded the prisoners line up for roll call. When finished, Marian noticed that the gate was open. With two of his buddies, they ran through the gate and into the forest through deep, deep snow. Marian never looked back to see if they were being followed. When they reached a small town, they found Russian soldiers who were allies and other prisoners who had escaped from Auschwitz. They began to beg for food, and a Milliner gave them something to eat, then asked them to lay down on straw beds. He then threatened to find German soldiers who will know they are prisoners because of their clothing. This never came to pass as the Milner's attention was diverted by a woman being raped in an adjacent room by a Russian soldier who threatened her by surrounding her chair with grenades.

Finally Free

Marian returned to Loge less than a week later. None of his family members could be found. He did find his father's Tallis sack used to store a Jewish prayer shawl. The shawl was gone, but he found some family photos that had been hidden inside.

After the war, Poland's ruling party wanted to cover up what had been done to the Jews, so they made it hard for them to leave the country. Despite all the obstacles, Marian finally made it to New York. He volunteered to drive a Russian woman 2,850 miles to Seattle and decided to stay. He found a job in Bellevue and even attended college for one and only one reason - *to learn how to speak English*. The most important thing to Marian was to be able to tell young kids everywhere possible "the truth, the story, what Jews suffered."³



*Marian Zelman
January 26, 1992*

Questions

- 1) **How does this artifact—and the person connected to it—help you better understand the Holocaust?**
Explain in your own words.
- 2) **What does this make you think about in your own life, in something you've read or watched, or in things happening in the world?**
Why does that connection matter to you?
- 3) **Why do you think so few non-Jewish people helped rescue Jewish people during the Holocaust?**
List as many reasons as you can.
- 4) **What's one thing you learned that: Surprised you? Interested you? Troubled you?**
Explain why for each.

Sources

¹ Gleiwitz I. Retrieved from <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/auschwitz-sub-camps/gleiwitz-i>.

² Blechhammer. Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/blechhammer>.

³ Oral History of Marian Zelman. Retrieved from <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn512689> interview: 1992 January 26