

HELEN WEISZ A SON TELLS HIS MOTHER'S STORY

Helen Weisz, author David Gold's mother, lived in Dolha, a small town of 4,000 inhabitants on the banks of the Borzshava River in Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia. On one day it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then it was part of Czechoslovakia, and then it was part of the Hungarian Empire. Today, Dolha is in Ukraine.

Dolha was not very different from many small towns and villages inhabited by Jews across Europe. Most of the 120 Jewish families in Dolha made their living in trades and small businesses. There were two doctors, a pharmacy, a Ruthenian School, a Czechoslovakian school, and a traditional Jewish school called a *cheder*. It was also home to Ruthenians, Hungarians, Schwabians and Gypsies.

In 1939, Dolha came under Hungarian authority, and the Hungarians passed restrictions on the Jews that were based on the Nuremberg Laws. Jewish businesses were confiscated, Jewish jobs were lost, and Jewish men and boys were pressed into slave labor. It did not matter that Helen's maternal grandfather and many other Jews were loyal citizens who fought for the Austro-Hungarian Empire during World War I.

Choked off from any source of livelihood, the Jewish community was impoverished and began to starve. On April 29, 1944, Hungarian gendarmes forced the entire Jewish population of Dolha out of their homes and deported them by train to Beregszaz, where they were imprisoned in a brick factory.

As the Jews left Dolha, their former neighbors and "friends" taunted them and scorned them as they were being led to the train station. They could hardly wait to pillage their neighbors' homes.

Trapped in the brick factory, the prisoners, who had no food, water or sanitary facilities, had no idea what was yet to come. On the morning of deportation to Auschwitz, Helen's father, David, awoke to find that overnight, he had grown streaks of white in his hair. He instructed his wife, Malka, to make sure that Helen was dressed in a way that would make her look older than her 13 years. He also told Helen that she would be the sole survivor of her family, which consisted of 11 souls, including her grandparents on both sides.

His advice was well-taken and saved her life. After a three-day journey in a packed cattle car, she arrived in Auschwitz on May 18, 1944. As the "passengers" were forced off the train, SS guards shouted, dogs barked, whips snapped, and rifle barrels hit people as they were pushed into line. Helen left the cattle car holding her little brother in her arms, but her cousins took him away so that she would not be holding him.

At the head of the line stood Dr. Josef Mengele, the notorious doctor of death, who chose who would live and who would die by sending people to the right or to the left; to the left meant death, to the right meant slave labor. Helen's two brothers (Mordechai Isaac and Ezriel Hirsch) and her two sisters (Yocheved and Sheyndl), her parents and all her grandparents were sent to the left. Helen was sent to the right. Within a few hours, except for 64 young people (including Helen), the entire Jewish community of Dolha had vanished in a plume of smoke.

When the survivors of the selection entered Auschwitz, they were disinfected in cold showers and were handed ragged clothes and wooden clogs to wear. Astonishingly, the Germans were no longer tattooing numbers on the inmates' arms. But Helen's head was shaved and she was sent to a wooden barrack where she and 13 other girls waited for another selection. There, they all slept together in nine square feet of space.

Surviving each day in Auschwitz was a miracle. Even the tiniest act could make the difference between life and death. Having a pair of shoes that fit or an extra piece of bread could make all the difference. Helen's wooden clogs did not fit and were causing her feet to blister and swell up. A cousin who also survived the selection found her a pair of leather shoes. A student of her father saw her and gave her some extra food. Hunger constantly gnawed at her belly since food was so scarce. They looked for food everywhere, but when they went to steal what they thought were cabbages, they found instead piles of decapitated heads.

After six weeks of constant terror and hunger, Helen was selected to join a work detail and sent to Geislingen, a sub-camp of the Natzweiler-Strutof concentration camp near Stuttgart, Germany. The main camp was located in Alsace in France and it consisted of a network of more than 70 labor camps. The main camp was one of the places where inmates were used for medical experiments by Nazi professors from the Reich University of Strasbourg.

Geislingen was set up in 1942 to provide labor for SS contracts with private companies. At Geislingen, the contract was with the Württemberg metal goods factory (Württembergische Metallwarenfabrik AG) for the production of ammunition, machine guns, airplane engines and tail units.

After the morning roll call in which you were forced to stand for hours in snow and rain, the first of two shifts began. The work was divided into two twelve-hour shifts starting at six in the morning. For over ten months Helen was a prisoner in Geislingen, and operated a stamping machine that made parts for machine guns. She slept in a room without heat and worked in a factory with no heat. Forced to go barefoot in the cold, her feet froze and she contracted typhus.

That did not stop Helen and the other women in the camp from sabotaging the munitions they produced so that the bullets or guns would not work properly. If they were caught, they could be executed. As it was, the guards often threatened them and beat them. Just receiving an extra piece of bread or an apple from a non-Jewish laborer was cause for flogging. Because of this, for many years after the war, Helen had night terrors and would scream out in her sleep, "*Nicht schlagen!*" ("Don't beat me!")

As the Allied forces advanced, the Germans started the evacuation of prisoners so there would be no eyewitnesses to tell what had happened. If evacuation to the Tyrol Alps was not possible, mass execution was to take place through machine gun fire or bombing.

The prisoners from Geislingen were shipped to Allach, a sub-camp of Dachau, where BMW used slave labor to produce automotive parts for the Germans. When Dachau and Allach were evacuated, Helen was put onto a train of open boxcars and became one of 3000 hostages for the SS High Command. At the same time, 7000 prisoners left Dachau on a "Death March."

On April 29, 1945, the train was liberated by the American Army in Staltach, south of Munich, just several hours before explosive charges planted by the Germans were set to go off to blow up the train.

Once she was liberated by the American troops, Helen spent a year recuperating in a hospital. She married David's father and immigrated to America and settled in Brooklyn, where David and his two sisters, Sharon and Malka, were raised. Helen was successful in rebuilding a happy family life filled with love and kindness.