

In A Polish Ghetto

Nazi Germany's attempt to exterminate Europe's Jew—along with millions of Gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals, and people with disabilities—is called the Holocaust. As World War II raged between 1939 and 1945, the Nazis uprooted Jewish families and herded them into ghettos and sent Jews off to be murdered in special death camps such as Auschwitz.

*In carrying out their atrocities against Jews and others the Nazis were often aided by local henchmen. These people acted sometimes out of hatred for Jews and sometimes out of fear for their own lives and families. The following document tells of an encounter between two acquaintances who found themselves on opposite sides in a roundup of Polish Jews. It is taken from the book *Alicia: My Story*, by Alicia Appleman-Jurman. The author was a nine years old in 1939, when the war first came to her village in eastern Poland. There, Polish Jews had lived side by side with Christians of Polish and Ukrainian background. First the Russians and then the Germans occupied the village. By 1942, the author had lost a father and two brothers and was living in a ghetto with her mother and younger brother.*

All of my nightmares became reality one late afternoon in December 1942, about four o'clock. I had just returned from pumping water for our tiny household. I had set the water buckets down in their usual place in the hall and pushed the front door shut when suddenly there was a heavy knock. I had still had my gloves on, and my heavy shawl was wrapped high around my head, covering my nose and mouth again the bitter outside cold.

I opened the door and saw a Ukrainian policeman. He held a pencil and a small notebook, and seem to be checking things off some sort of list. "Frieda Jurman?" he asked.

I swallowed hard, and a wave of sickness swept over me. "Yes," I said.

He made a check in his little book. "Come with me."

And so I went. I said nothing, fearing he would realize that my voice was too high and childlike to belong to a woman. It may seem strange that he thought me an adult, but I was tall for a twelve-year-old, about five feet six inches, and the coat and shawl disguised my body well. The thing I most feared had happened. They had come for my mother. I wanted to get away from our house as soon as possible, so I walked quickly in the direction the police indicated.

He brought me directly to the police station, where I was put into a cell with many others. It was a bare cell. The people were sitting on the stone floor all huddled together. I found a corner and sat down, pulling my legs up and encircling them with my arms. I put my head down and closed my eyes. I made up my mind that I wasn't going to cry or think about what was going to happen to all of us....

Dawn was just breaking, when a prison guard came and unlocked the door to our cell. "Everybody line up and go upstairs into the waiting room," he called out. The people who had remained awake were heavy with fatigue. I, like some others, had taken the opportunity to get some sleep; I knew I would need it to be alert.

As the line moved, I could see that the people were stooping and writing their names on a yellow ledger in front of a policeman seated behind a table. I blinked hard when I realize that I know the police man. I felt ill inside.

This man, who was helping murder my people, was the father of my childhood friend, Olga. As I came nearer, I watched him silently. He did not look much at the people who approached him, but kept his eyes on the ledger.

When it was my turn I stepped up, took the pencil, and wrote "Alicia Jurman" on the yellow paper. I did not sign my mother's name, as I feared Olga's father would recognize me, realize what had happened, and send for my mother. His eyes widened as he recognized the name. "Alicia"—he looked at me—"what are you doing here?"

I straightened my shoulders. "I was taken here like the others," I said. He seemed baffled; clearly there had been a mistake. All of the others were adults; they had not meant to include children in this action.

Olga's father looked around to see if any of the other policemen had noticed his outburst, then motion for me to come closer.

“Look,” he said, “the Germans will be here soon to take you away. When they get here, I want you to get down on your knees and beg for your life.”

He searched my face for a nod or some other sign of acknowledgement, but I only stared back. His words “beg for your life” were still ringing in my ears. He looked uncomfortable under my gaze. “All right,” he said. “Move on.”

I took my place with the others. I still couldn’t believe that Olga’s father could be part of this. I still remembered when he had told his daughter how fortunate she was to have me help her with her homework and how glad he was that we were friends. Friends, I thought bitterly, and hatred began to settle into my heart. Will he accompany the Germans and help them shoot us? Will his bullet find its target in the heart or head?

It wasn’t long before the Germans came. I could see by their uniforms that they were not usually SS men, known to us as Hitler’s most brutal killers, or even the Wehrmacht (army). They were the local German police.

As one of them explained that we were to be loaded into sleighs for a journey to another city, I watched Olga’s father. Our eyes met. I could almost hear his thoughts. Say it! Do it now! I looked back at the German, then at me again. Beg for your life, his eyes commanded.

But I would not. Never! Never! I was frightened but angry at him, at the Germans, at the whole world. I wanted desperately to live, but I didn’t think for a moment that going down on my knees before a heartless German murderer would save my life. If they released me, would they look for my mother again? Call it what you will, anger, dignity, courage, or just hatred, I couldn’t beg and the moment passed.

Finally the German finished. The doors opened, and the people were being pushed outside. Suddenly Olga’s father stood up and came over to me. Swiftly he swung his open hand to me. The blow caught me on the cheek, throwing my head to one side. Then his hand swung back, connection again my other cheek. The force of his slap threw me off my feet, onto the crowd of the people. Hands reached out to catch me, and I was quickly steadied.

Olga’s father stood in the middle of the room, his body stiff, and his eyes glaring at me. Then something seemed to break inside him. He turned and went back to the table, where he sat down. He folded his hands in front of him and studied them. He did not look up again as we left the room.

Taken to prison in a nearby town, Alicia suffered beatings and other mistreatment. She was thrown unconscious onto a pile of corpses. When Jewish gravediggers discovered that she was still alive, they revived her, and eventually she was able to rejoin her mother and brother. Her book tells of further harrowing adventures, and of the eventual capture and execution of her mother and brother. Somehow, Alicia survived the holocaust and the war. In the 1948, she managed to reach Palestine, where she fought in the Israeli navy during the first Arab-Israeli war. She eventually married an American, became a U.S. citizen, and moved to California, where she wrote her book.

Review Questions

1. Why did Alicia go with the Ukrainian police officer?
2. How did Alicia feel when she was in the cell?
3. How did she react when she recognized the police officer in charge of the prison ledger?
4. Why did Alicia refuse to beg for her life?
5. Who were the SS?
6. Why did the officer in charge of the ledger slap Alicia?
7. What eventually became of Alicia?