

Bronia and the Bowls of Soup

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Published by Free Kids Books

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by Aaron Zerah

My name is Bronia and I'm 89 years old. I just had a very big birthday party and thirty of my friends came to celebrate with me. I was very happy!

My life is very beautiful! I have two wonderful sons, identical twins, and two grandchildren, a boy and a girl, and I love them with all my heart.

Today, I want to tell you a story about how my life was when I was a girl.

When I was a Girl

When I was a little girl I lived with my mother Miriam and my grandmother and grandfather in a small city in Poland. My family owned a clothing store and my grandfather was one of the first people in the whole country to sell jeans.

We also sold jewelry that my father brought from places very far away. Every time he came back from one of his long trips, he always treated me to ice cream or the special wafer cookies I loved so much!

I liked going to school because I enjoyed learning new things, and also because all of my closest friends, Jewish children like me, went there too.

Sometimes, I made up stories for all of us at school to act out. Everyone had a part to play and it was really fun!

I believe I began to love stories when I was very small. My mother took me with her to the movies or the theatre, and my grandfather told me lots of stories from the Bible about women and men who were great heroes. In my imagination, I wondered what kind and brave things I might do.

One Day Things Changed

Then, when I was only ten-years-old, everything changed. One day, just after coming home from summer camp, I ate a bunch of blueberry turnovers fresh out of my grandmother's oven. Suddenly, I felt terribly sick. I had such a horrible pain in my belly I had to be taken to the hospital. I needed an operation to make me better and I was really worried I'd miss the start of school.

But the next day, it turned out, that was the least of all our troubles. Without any warning, Poland's neighbor, Germany, attacked us with thousands and thousands of soldiers and tanks and airplanes too. I was still not well, but the doctors had to send me home anyway.

We waited to see who would win the war, but in one short month our army was forced to surrender. The German soldiers had won!

Right away, they marched into our town and started beating up lots of the men. They took some of them away in trucks. That's what happened to my cousin Benny, even though he was just a few years older than me.

We Were Very Scared

Everyone was very scared. We knew that the soldiers had been told by their leader, a man named Hitler, that all Jewish people were bad and dangerous. He wanted them to hurt everyone, the babies and children too, and to get rid of us once and for all if they could. This man Hitler only knew how to hate!

The soldiers closed down all the stores, including ours, and they stole as much money as they could find. Before long no one had enough food to eat.

Chicken Soup for the Body

My friend Sala came to tell me that her father was so sick he might die. He really needed to have some soup, but her family couldn't get any for him. I was very, very hungry but that made no difference to me. I knew just what I wanted to do. I took my bowl of chicken soup and brought it over to Sala's house for her father. If anything could help, I thought, it would be chicken soup!

A New Home

Soon after that the soldiers came to our door and ordered my family – and all my friends' families too – to leave our homes. We had to move into a strange new place all cramped together with people we didn't even know. We didn't dare think about escaping. The soldiers put barbed wire around the whole area we now lived in. They called it a ghetto. If you tried to climb out, you would cut your hands very badly. If you were caught, the soldiers would shoot you.

Children of the Ghetto

My best friend Mila now lived across the street from me. Even though she and I were usually very tired and hungry, we still got together sometimes with a bunch of our other friends to put on plays or sing. It made us all feel better to be doing something beautiful!

Then I heard that Mila had come down with a very serious disease. Her brain, Mila's parents said, was burning up with fever. She couldn't eat anything for days or I would have brought her my soup, whatever I had. But there was nothing I could do for her, or anyone else either. When I came to see her one more time, Mila had died.

Times get Worse and Simple Gratitude

I didn't think things could get much worse, but they were about to.

In the spring, the situation in the ghetto deteriorated. The soldiers pointed their guns at us. Then everyone had to move again, only this time we did not know where we were going at all. My grandmother was separated from us along with all the other older people. My mother and I were afraid of what the soldiers might do to her, but we couldn't say anything to stop them. "Maybe it's for the best your grandfather died a year before the war," my mother said, "so he didn't have to go through this and see all of us treated this way." I was just happy that the two of us were still together.

The next thing we knew we were in the big city of Lodz in another ghetto. We had been allowed to take only the clothes we were wearing. Imagine having nothing but one set of clothes to wear when we used to have a clothing shop? Times were rough but again I was just grateful my mother and I were still together.

Working Life

At the new camp my mother and I were put right away to work. She cooked and cleaned in the soup kitchen. I was brought to some fields where my job was to gather straw to make warm boots for the German soldiers. We girls had to go there every day, no matter how hot it was in the summer or how cold in the winter.

Some of the older girls I had made friends with taught the rest of us a song they thought might make things a little bit easier. They had heard it in a movie called Snow White when they were very young. So as we marched we all sang, "Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's off to work we go" and kept singing it over and over again until it was time to start work again.

A Soup Kitchen but Nothing to Eat

Every day my mother and I were given only a small piece of bread and a bowl of soup to eat. I couldn't believe how skinny both of us became, especially my mother. The strange thing was that even though she worked in the soup kitchen, I got a better soup – a little bit thicker than hers. I always made sure to bring my soup to trade with her.

Helping Others

As bad off as my mother was, she still looked out to see if anyone else needed help. One day she saw that an older woman next door was too weak to go out and get her portion of soup. "Please go for her," she asked me.

I waited on line with the little empty pot for a very long time. Finally, it was my turn. The man in charge filled the pot with boiling hot soup almost to the very top. How lucky, I thought, that it was filled so high!

I walked only a few steps toward home when something awful happened. Someone bumped into me and the soup splashed on my chest – right over my heart!

The pain was incredible, but I never dropped the pot. I rushed back just as I said I would and brought all the rest of the soup to the old woman. It turned out I was burnt so badly I couldn't work for two days. You might think that was a good thing, except it also meant for those two whole days I got no soup at all!

Losses are part of Life in the Holocaust

By the time I was fifteen, my mother looked like she was all bones. She got very sick and had trouble breathing. I was right by her side when she took her last breath. For the first time since I was a very little girl, I cried and cried and cried. Then I had no more tears.

Again, Things Will Get Worse – Auschwitz

A few weeks after that I was thrown onto a train packed with people. We were taken to a most terrible place, a place called Auschwitz. I had never heard of it before but the German soldiers called it a Concentration Camp.

Once inside, they gave us prison uniforms to wear that looked like black and white striped pyjamas. Just for fun, they made all the tall girls wear very short pants and the shortest girls like me the longest ones. Switching was absolutely forbidden so we had to keep wearing exactly what we had. Still the thing I remember most about being there was a red-haired woman guard who loved to hit me – and everyone else – with her whip whenever she felt like it. I will never forget her face.

Again, Things Will Get Worse – Bergen-Belsen and a Death March

In the winter I was dragged away again. This time, we were all headed for a different Concentration Camp in Germany called Bergen-Belsen. I was ordered to walk hundreds of miles through the freezing cold. At night, all I had was a large paper bag to cover me. But I made it, thanks to a German soldier who was kind to me when I was too weak to dig ditches. He let me stay indoors and get strong enough to travel again.

In Bergen-Belsen, there were so many girls and women crowded together sleeping on the floor that when one person moved the whole group had to move that way too. The little soup we got was not meant to keep people alive for long and everybody, including me, was sick.

Again, Helping A Friend

Then, one day, I heard something amazing. A girl a few years older than me from my school was at Bergen-Belsen. Her name was Zelda and she was in the hospital. This was very bad news. Only the sickest people got sent there and most of them were never seen again. I had to help her.

That night I sneaked into the kitchen. I knew they'd probably kill me if they saw me, but all I thought about was Zelda. I was hoping to get some soup for her, but I found only hot water. Somehow I had a feeling it would be good enough.

I thought to myself, no matter how bad I felt there was always still someone worse.

The War is Finally Over

In a few months, the war that lasted almost six incredibly long years finally ended. I could not believe it. The soldiers at Bergen-Belsen ran away and we were all free! It was such a beautiful feeling to be alive!

So, at the beginning of this story, children, I told you about my birthday, but I want you to know that I am so lucky that I actually have two of them, my regular birthday on December 23rd and my second one, April 15th, the day I became free again and my new life began.

Now you know why I always remember that however bad things may seem, there's always hope that good will come. And since we've become friends, I hope you will remember that too – especially whenever you have a birthday or a nice big bowl of really good soup!

– THE END –

This is the end of my tale as a young girl and young woman, but the start of something else, a new beginning.

Epilogue – What Happened After...

Now that you've heard my story, I thought that you would want to know more about what happened after the war to me – and to some of the other people too. Because I was alone and not yet old enough to be considered an adult, some very good people gave me and other teenagers like me a special place in Germany to live.

We were safe there and had lots of good food to eat for the first time in years. I even began to study again. As I was expecting to go to America, the first thing I wanted to learn was the English language!

Amazingly my cousin Benny found me. He too had been at Auschwitz and survived. I was so glad that someone else from our family was alive and I wasn't the only one. After a while, Benny moved to America and ate so much he became as round as a ball!

One day, I discovered that my friend Sala had to come to stay in the same place where I was living. It was great seeing her! Soon Sala fell in love with a young man and they decided to get married. I saved up my money and gave her a pair of precious silk stockings as a wedding present!

I met a young man too. His name was Joseph and he grew up in a town not far from mine. I remembered that when I was a very little girl my grandfather used to go there all the time. Joe (I always call him Joe) and I were married in New York and that's where our children were born.

Many, many years later I was at a gathering of people who, like Joe and I, had lived through the war. There were over a thousand people all in one gigantic room. All of a sudden, who do you think I see? It was Zelda! She had made it out alive from the hospital at Bergen-Belsen after all!

It felt so good that the good deeds I did really helped someone.

And that's what I learned as a child – to help whenever someone is in

need – and I still believe that's the best way to live today.

- THE REAL END -

About the Holocaust in Germany and Occupied Europe in World War II

Sadly this is not an unusual tale but a common tale, one that happened to thousands, in fact millions of men, women, and children under Hitler's ethnic cleansing. Most were not as lucky and did not make it. We should never forget this tragedy, as now children are growing up unaware of their history and actual living survivor numbers are getting fewer and fewer, as the memorials say “Lest we forget,” We post this book as a memorial so that we never forget”

Further Recommended Reading/Watching

The Boy with the Stripy Pyjamas

Schindler's List

Anne Frank – The Diary of a Girl

About the Author

Aaron Zerah is an interdenominational faith minister who currently lives in Canada with his daughter. He wrote this book as a tribute to his Mother, Bronia, who is still alive at the time of publishing of this edition of the book on Free Kids Books.

About the Publisher

Free Kids Books has published this book as a tribute to holocaust survivor's everywhere. Free Kids Books is a website which publishes good quality totally free books for the benefit of readers and writers of children's books everywhere. Free Kids Books believes that everyone can write their own fairytale, and everyone who wants to should have the right to read it, stories are about being told not about money.

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