

Kimmelman Contest

1 June 2022

The Holocaust was a harrowing and tragic effort to eradicate a group of people simply because of the antisemitism Hitler felt towards the Jewish society. This hatred, prejudice, and intolerance escalated in Europe from 1933 to 1945 as Hitler's totalitarian government adopted his worldview, and it spread like wildfire by those under his command, leaving six million Jews dead and survivors deeply scarred forever. Although it would be understandable for survivors to want to close out the world and try and forget all the horror, pain, and suffering that was experienced during this inhumane event, many have come forward to shed light on the Holocaust and spread the truth of its existence. Mira Ryczke Kimmelman, one Holocaust survivor, was somehow able to muster the will to survive deplorable living conditions, brutal treatment, and by the Grace of God escape death numerous times in order to live to tell about such a horrific experience so that others will always *REMEMBER* it. Although Mira's worldview changed throughout her life, her worldview from her liberation date became to educate the world so that such an evil act would be remembered in hopes it would never be repeated, and she spent the rest of her life speaking/teaching to do just that. Mira wrote, "If we remain indifferent to human suffering, it can happen again; it can happen here, and who knows who the next victims will be? Only by remembering the bitter lesson of Hitler's legacy can we hope it will never be repeated. Teach it, tell it, read it." It is by these means- teaching it, telling it, and reading about it- that the world can embody Mira's message about the Holocaust and learn how to recognize and combat contemporary instances of injustice. To do this, it's only fitting to begin with Mira's story from the beginning.

Mira Ryczke was born to a Jewish seed exporter in 1923 in Danzig, Poland. She was a happy child who valued her close-knit family and faith. In 1939, World War II broke out and the political climate in the area began to shift to tyrannical views regarding Jews. Mira's father, believing this would soon pass, compelled the family to stay in Danzig while close friends and neighbors began to flee for their safety. "Antisemitism changed life in Danzig- Jewish stores were boycotted, Jews were not allowed to attend school, and Nazi troops would throw rocks at Jews on the way to and from the synagogue for worship." Soon Mira (just 15 years old at the time) and her family, along with all the remaining Jews in the area, were forced on Sept. 2, 1939, to take only the belongings they could carry and leave their homes. Others chose to carry necessities to survive: clothing, pillows, and blankets, but not Mira. "I was not very practical. Instead of putting in more clothing and extra shoes, my photo album and stamp collection filled the suitcase." Mira's most prized possessions were family photos, which she carried with her throughout the entire Holocaust, knowing if discovered, the photos would cause her demise. This proves Mira treasured her family above all materialistic items she could have otherwise chosen to take with her.

Mira's family was relocated to Warsaw, the capital of Poland. This move would be the first of many moves Mira would endure before being liberated from the Holocaust at the age of 21. "The transition to Warsaw left many Jews with little to no housing, without water, and no electricity." Luckily Mira had an aunt there that could house her family. Even though they were crowded with two entire families in the house, Mira was thankful that she and her family were together. Mira stated, "We were uprooted, deprived of our possessions, uncertain of our future, yet we felt fortunate to be able to stay with relatives and have a roof over our heads." Since the beginning of the Holocaust, Mira's worldview was being shaped by her experiences in the Holocaust. She learned to appreciate what she had in life because so many things had been taken

away- like education, belongings, housing, and soon other simple freedoms would be added to the growing list. Losing one's freedom is something hard for those that have not experienced it to understand. In a speech to Jefferson Junior High School Mrs. Kimmelman states, "The freedom we have here is so tremendous that for you to imagine any other kind of life is very hard," but by November, Nazi's had taken Jews' freedom and imposed a strict set of rules for all Jews to follow: "We were ordered to wear arm bands bearing the blue Star of David on our clothing as a means to identify Jews, we were forbidden to walk the main streets of Warsaw or use public transportation, and we were also forbidden from leaving our living quarters from the time it got dark in the evening until light of morning."

Mira and her family knew they must act fast to escape the harsh winter and the increasingly deteriorating living conditions set forth by the Nazis if they were to have any chances of surviving the war. They felt their lives would be better in Tomaszow where her paternal grandparents were relocated. So, in February 1940, they riskily took off their armbands, put on extra layers of clothing, and headed toward the train station in below freezing weather. They walked separately so that if one was caught, they could not be punished as a family. They arrived at the station and waited desperately in the cold for the train to come, only to find the single train to arrive already full. Steadfast in their determination to escape Warsaw, they returned the next day and waited with frostbitten fingers and toes, and were fortunately able to board a train. Upon arrival, things were good there at first, but they too soon worsened. There, too, Jews were forced to the ghettos to live, given scarce food rations, and forced to follow the strict rules imposed; otherwise, they would be beaten or shot. Mira states, "We could not realize what poor living conditions of life awaited us. I was willing to work as hard as possible to help my family with additional food, if only we could be together, if only things would not get worse." Unfortunately, though, things did get much worse for Mira and her family.

On October 31, 1942, Mira's dad left early for his job. Soon afterwards, Ghetto

slave workers were ordered to put on heavy working shoes, warm clothing, and carry all their valuables. Hurriedly, they all complied, including Mira and her mother. All were ordered to march in rows of five towards the railroad station, informed they would be “liquidated” from Tomaszow ghetto and resettled in Treblinka, unknown to them at the time to be a “death” camp. No one dared to look back as random shots were fired. “As I [Mira] neared an SS officer in front of a small white Catholic church, he pointed to me, ordering me to step out. I had no time to turn to my mother to say goodbye. She walked on with the column and I never saw her again. I must have been taken because of my youth and because of my effort to look stronger and braver than I really was.” The so-called liquidation that day decreased the Jewish population in Tomaszow from sixteen thousand to just over six hundred. Of Mira’s initial family of eighteen, only she, her father, her brother, and her uncle remained alive. In May of 1943, Mira and her remaining family were sent on cattle cars to Blizyn Concentration Camp to continue their work as Jewish slave laborers. Mira wrote, “More than three-thousand Jewish prisoners worked either a twelve-hour day shift or a twelve-hour night shift, and all were overseen by cruel SS men.” Men and women were separated in two different camps and roll call was done daily. As if conditions were not hard enough, workers were faced with nightly attacks by giant cat-sized rats that were later discovered to have gotten fat from feasting on the corpses of Russian POWs, who had lived at the camp previously, now rotting in ditches in the forest behind the camp. Additionally, typhoid fever broke out in the camp and Mira and her relatives all came down with the dreadful disease but were fortunate to survive. As they recovered, an SS officer that took liking to Mira’s father allowed them lighter duties and gave them extra food so that they could recover. Mira described the conditions in this excerpt: “Living in filth for fifteen months, being bitten by rats at night, slaving at work, and living in constant fear-this was the life in the Blizyn camp. We hoped we would remain together and the Soviets would liberate us. Hope gave us the strength to endure-to survive.” She and her remaining family were surviving thanks to the decency and

courage bestowed upon them by a couple dreaded SS officers. Mira's worldview now acknowledged that even amidst unimaginable circumstances, some good remained amongst those at the heart of such a brutal event.

In July of 1945, with Soviets closing in, Mira, her father, brother, and other Jews were evacuated and placed into cattle cars and relocated to Auschwitz. Only later would Mira realize older Jews and young children under twelve were brought to Auschwitz to be placed in the gas chambers, which were disguised as bath houses. Fortunately, Mira, her father, and brother were chosen to remain Jewish slave workers. In Mira's speech to Jefferson Junior High School, she states, "Auschwitz was hell. The smell of burning flesh from the six crematoria that were working around the clock was so awful, it was indescribable. Food was scarce. There was very little and people were walking skeletons. Worked twelve-hour shifts. No discrimination between men's and women's work- building roads, railroads, lifting heaving objects, gathering rocks- under terrible conditions, beatings, and during any weather." Despite these conditions, Mira was determined to outlive the enemy and the ever present terrorizing dangers she faced. In April 1945, Mira was liberated from Bergen-Belsen (where tens of thousands were dying from starvation, disease, and exposure) by British soldiers. She later would be reunited with her father as well as learn of her brother's death, which occurred only days before he would have been liberated. He was shot because he was ill and could not work.

Mira was born to a loving family and lived a happy life until it was snatched from her and replaced with sadness, despair, and tragedy; however, she found solace in her family and never lost hope of being rescued or her will to survive this terrible massacre. Mira's message to the world is that of *remembrance*. In her speech to Jefferson Junior High School, Mira asked, "Is it fair if you are hated not for what you are as a human being, but instead for the color of your hair or the color of your eyes, your religion, your skin color, or what your grandmother was?" Mira wants everyone to know the Holocaust is an example of what can happen when a

person or government supports and spreads hate towards a group of people. She understood the importance of this message living on past her generation and this is evident in her quote, “If future generations fail to protect the truth, it vanishes...” This is not an isolated event. It can happen again! In today’s world, there are mass shootings and hate crimes targeting groups for their race, religion, ethnicity, gender identities, and sexual preferences every day. Just as Hitler infiltrated the minds of the Aryan society, especially the youth through teaching hate and intolerance, we must infiltrate the schools with a message of remembrance, promoting acceptance, and appreciating diversity. Fortunately, my hometown school system realized this and devoted classroom instruction to teaching, telling, and reading about the Holocaust as well as creating a memorial where its message can be seen, heard, and retold time and time again. In Whitwell, TN, an actual rail car that transported Jews to the gas chambers at Auschwitz is on display, along with a paperclips exhibition to represent the lives of those who perished during the Holocaust, in hopes that this dreadful event will never be forgotten or repeated. This is an example of how one town has chosen to *remember* and combat the threat of contemporary injustices facing our nation today. Mira’s message will live on through the efforts of Whitwell Middle School and the Paper Clips Project (as well as other survivors’ and schools’ dedication to teaching about the Holocaust), but others must join in the fight to change hearts and minds, even if it is just one person or classroom at a time.

In closure, I leave you with a final thought by Yehunda Bauer: “Thou shall not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all else, thou shalt not be a bystander.” Mira understood this. Another famous Holocaust quotes states, “For the dead and the living, we must bear witness!” *Remembrance* is the springboard for “developing in every person a tolerant, non-discriminatory attitude and a learning environment that benefits from diversity rather than being intolerant to or excluding it.” Everyone has a duty to spring forward teaching it, telling it, and reading about it so that the Holocaust is not forgotten or repeated!

Works Cited

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