

ZIGI'S STORY

My name is Zygmunt (Zigi) Shipper. I was born in Lodz, Poland on 18th January 1930. I think it is time I should tell my story so that my children and grandchildren will know where they come from.

My first memories are from when I was around 5 years old. I lived with my father and my paternal grandparents as my parents were divorced. The apartment we lived in had a yard where I used to play with other children. I had no brothers or sisters but I had older cousins. I went to a Jewish school, which was in the same building as we lived. As far as I can remember it was a happy childhood. My grandfather was an orthodox Jew.

At school I learnt Hebrew, Polish and Maths. My father worked with my grandfather and my uncle in the family chemical business. When I think back it seems that we had a comfortable lifestyle. When I was about 5 years old my mother came to visit me and all I can remember is that I wouldn't go to her - I didn't recognise her and I thought she was dead. She had, in fact, left my father and gone to live in Belgium, as I found out many years later.

And so life carried on until 1939 when war broke out. I remember waking up one morning only three days later to find my father standing beside my bed. He told me that the Germans were coming and that he had to go away. That was the first time I realised that I wouldn't have a mother or a father. The reason he was leaving was that a lot of the Jewish young men in the town thought that they could escape the Germans believing they would not harm the women and children. How wrong we were! I had news that my father had managed to get to Russia. After a while, he tried to get back to Lodz to be with me, but unfortunately, he was only able to get to Warsaw and that was the last time I had any news of him.

School had closed for the summer and never re-started. Within a short time the Germans came into our town and life as I knew it had changed completely. We were frightened to leave our homes, naturally we couldn't attend Shul. Food was becoming very scarce. Within a very short time, a decree came out stating

that all the Jews had to leave their homes and go and live in a designated area, which was part of Lodz (Baluty). It was the equivalent of our East End. Any non-Jews living in the area were ordered to leave in order to make room for the Jews. After having a nice apartment, my Grandfather, Grandmother and myself found one room - no toilet - no bathroom just one room. We were on the second floor. The toilet was in the yard -water was also fetched from the yard. That was when hardship really started. I was ten years old.

Between the months of November 1939 and April 1940, the whole Jewish population of Lodz, approximately 150,000 people, had to be settled in the Ghetto, as the Ghetto was closed and nobody could get in or out. As soon as the gates were closed the Germans chose a "Judenalterster" and he formed a committee to run the ghetto. We had our own police and our own hospital.

Within a very short time, my Grandfather unfortunately passed away. As food was very scarce and as he was extremely orthodox, there was very little food he could eat and consequently he became weak and ill and died. This just left my Grandmother and myself.

At this stage the Germans also ordered that all Jews wear a yellow star back and front at all times. Everyone living in the ghetto had to find work. I got a job in a metal factory, producing different items for the German war effort. I had a slight problem at this time, which was that I didn't speak Yiddish - most of my friends today would find this hard to believe. My boss at the time was a man called Willy Zylberszac and a cousin of his is Aron, who happens to be a very close friend of mine today. For lunch, in the factory, we were given soup. Everyone who worked received a ration book, which enabled them to obtain a small amount of food - such as bread, rice, flour and sugar. Unfortunately, the rations got smaller and smaller as time went on and people were dying of malnutrition due to lack of food. Now and again we had transports of other Jewish people arriving in our ghetto from various towns around us. Consequently, we became more and more overcrowded but the Germans soon found a remedy for that. Periodically, they would come into the ghetto and get a few thousand Jews to send to labour camps. At this stage, life took on some kind of routine. In 1941 the Germans asked the Jewish

Committee to supply a certain amount, thousands of Jews per day, for so called "re-settlement". The Jewish police could not cope with the situation so the Germans decided to do it for themselves. No one went to work, we all had to stay in our homes. Every day they came in big lorries and went from house to house rounding up men, women and children. This whole procedure lasted for one week. On one of these raids I was taken away and slung onto a lorry, but I don't know how and I don't know what made me do it, but I managed to jump off. I ran and ran for about half a mile and luckily the Germans did not spot me and I hid in a house for a few hours. Whilst in the house I met a second cousin of mine who had also escaped from a lorry and he, like me also survived the war and is today the Chief Rabbi of Poland. My grandmother was not taken at this time as she, like many other people had managed to go into hiding, but by the end of that week they all returned to their homes in the ghetto. Eventually, I went back to my home and at the end of the week I went back to work.

I worked in the same place until July 1944. At that time, the Nazis decided to liquidate the Lodz ghetto, as the Russians were advancing on Poland. Each week transports were going to unknown destinations. As I was working in a metal factory they decided to move all the people who worked there to a factory somewhere in Germany. When our turn came to go they herded us together to the railway station.

We were allowed to take one suitcase each and we were put on cattle trucks - still now knowing where we were going. We were terribly overcrowded and there was hardly any place to sit. Had it not been for my boss at the time, Willy, I don't think I would have survived the journey. As I was only little, I was being thrown from one place to another and he made sure I was all right. We had no water to drink, it was suffocatingly hot. The only food we had was what we brought with us. In the truck were my two aunts, uncles and cousins and my grandmother.

Early morning, the train stopped - the guards opened the doors and we all had to get out, leaving all our belongings on the train. We were told we would get everything back later. We had arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The sky was hazy and there was a terrible smell. From a distance we saw chimneys with smoke coming out. At that time we didn't realise what it was. But rumours started spreading that it was a crematorium. I still didn't know what that meant. We had to line up in front of the Nazis for 'selection'. As far as I know we were the only transport from the Lodz ghetto that arrived in Auschwitz with over 500 people who were all on a named list. This was because we were supposed to be going to work in another factory. The entire transport of over 500 people eventually left Auschwitz together.

After "selection" men and women were separated. We were taken to showers - we were made to undress and give up whatever possessions we had on us i.e. jewellery, spectacles etc. Then we were shaved everywhere, disinfected and put in communal showers. When we came out we were given striped suits with numbers on to wear, as at that time they were not tattooing numbers on. While in Auschwitz, we did no work at all. We were getting black coffee and a slice of bread morning and evening. We slept three people to a bunk, three bunks high. All I can remember is that there were a lot of people in the barracks and the smell was unbearable. After a couple of weeks, an order came that the whole transport that had arrived from the metal factory was

going to another camp. Again, we were put on cattle trucks and once again we didn't know where we were going. Eventually, we arrived at a place called Stuthoff, which is near Danzig. It was a much smaller camp than Auschwitz - conditions were just as bad, if not worse. Apparently we were waiting to be transported to the factory where we were supposed to work. After a few weeks, still doing no work and getting very little food, some German officers came in and took about fifty men from our transport to prepare and build the factory in Germany. By then it was November 1944 and the weather was bitterly cold. We had to stay outdoors all day long in freezing conditions. The only way to keep warm was by making human ovens; this was a few hundred people all huddling together, as those in the middle got warm they went to the outside of the group and so on. I managed to sneak into the middle, as I was very small. It got so bad after a while that I didn't think I would survive - the cold, the lack of food and no warm clothing. Then one day, some Nazi officers came in and said they wanted twenty boys to go to work in a labour camp. It was so bad in Stuthoff that I volunteered to go. They took us to showers, gave us warmer clothing and by passenger train we were taken to a place called Stolp in Pomerania, where we worked and lived in a railway yard. Conditions were much better and at least we were working and getting more food. The only problem we had was that we were twenty Polish Jewish boys with about six hundred Latvian and Lithuanian Jews and we were very much in the minority.

Working on a railway yard there was always the chance to steal some food. One day five men managed to steal some cigarettes from a train that was going to the front. Unfortunately, they were caught; they were put in a small room for a week. They rounded up the whole camp and we thought that they would be let out, but unfortunately, they were let out only to be hung in front of the whole camp. Each one of them jumped off the stools they were put on so as not to give the Nazis the satisfaction of knowing they had killed them. This was just one of the many horrors we were witness to.

And so we worked there until March 1945. We were taken back to Stuthoff where conditions were even worse than before. No electricity, very little water and very little food. The Russian planes were flying and bombing all around us, unfortunately they didn't bomb the gas chambers. About a month later, they took us again to another camp called Burschgrabben, this time in lorries. It was a very small place and I don't know why they took us there - it was just as close to the Russian front as we

were in Stuthoff. In fact at night we could hear the Russian music from the front.

One day when we woke up there were no guards and we all thought we were free. We didn't know what to do, we were frightened to go forward towards the Russians and we certainly didn't want to go backwards! So we waited for the Russian troops to liberate us, thinking that when we went to sleep that night, by morning the Russian troops would arrive. To our horror on waking up in the morning, we were surrounded by German S S troops in luxury coaches, waiting to take us away again. From there they took us to Danzig and we had to go on a forced march. Eventually, we arrived in a place called Gdinia where we were put on barges. We didn't know where we were going. At that time I had typhus. We had no water, no food and certainly no medication. After days on the barge with no water some of us drank sea water which made us even worse. After about ten days, we were near land and at night the Nazis left on small boats, presumably to go to town for the evening. We had on the barges, some Danish and Norwegian prisoners of war, who were far healthier than we were. They decided to take everybody off the barges and put us on dry land, thinking we would be safer there. By morning, the Nazis returned and to their surprise found us all on dry land. Instead of putting us back on the barges, they decided to march us into the nearest town which was about 15km away. I was still ill and had it not been for my friends who helped me to walk, would have been shot had I fallen down, as anyone who fell was immediately shot. Eventually, we arrived at the naval town Neustadt waiting to go, so they told us, on a large boat to Denmark which of course was not true. By that time British planes were bombing the town and harbour. One bomb hit the boat that we were supposed to go on which already had people from other camps on it. Chaos erupted; people were jumping off the boat to try to get to shore. We were looking up at what was happening and people were shouting and yelling, it seemed with joy - they were waving things. I turned around and could not see any Nazis anywhere - all I could see were British tanks all around us. When I went over I couldn't understand what the British soldier was telling me, but I kept asking him in German for water which he understood and promptly gave me some. That was the first water I had drunk for days. He also threw down to me a little package which I stuffed down my shirt. Within seconds there must have been twenty people on top of me trying to take the package from me. Being little, I managed to wriggle out and they were left fighting and looking for me. I found some of my friends, we huddled together so that nobody could see what we were doing and unwrapped the package which turned out to be some dried bread.

That was the 3rd May 1945. I was liberated by the British Army. It was the first time in five years that I had had any food or drink as a free man! Soon my friends and I went to look for more food and we found some in the naval barracks.

My first night there, I remember sleeping on my own in a bunk with clean, white sheets. On waking in the morning, my sheets were black which I couldn't understand. The sheets were covered in lice. The unfortunate thing was that we all ate so much, so quickly and not being used to this a lot of people died in the first few days of the liberation. Every day British soldiers came to the places we stayed in (I was actually staying in prison, not as a prisoner) to see who needed medical attention. After three days I finished up in hospital and stayed there for three months. When the time came to leave hospital, I realised that I had no clothes as my old clothes had been taken away and burnt. I managed to get a British uniform which was altered for me by a nurse. They also found me shoes and underwear. All the time I was in hospital, my friends visited me. Eventually, they picked me up and we went to live in a children's home near Neustadt. There were about forty people including adults living there - all Jewish survivors. We had one man who was our teacher. After a few months I had to go back into hospital for an operation. Whilst there, one of my friends brought me a letter that had come to the children's home for me. I looked at it - it had an English postmark. I couldn't understand who it could be from as I knew no-one in England. I opened the letter. It was from a woman telling me that it was quite possible that I was her son, as she had a son living in Lodz, Poland before the war; same name as mine, same day and month of birth but the year was different. She had these details from the Red Cross but she remembered and asked me to look at my left wrist to see if there was a burn mark which she knew had happened to me as a four year old child. I knew then that the letter was from my mother. I didn't know how I felt, I was numb and shocked. I hadn't seen my mother since I was five years old. This woman was both a stranger to me and my mother. I did write to her to tell her that she was in fact my mother. She replied, asking me to come and live with her in England. That was the last thing I had wanted to do as all my friends who were like family to me, had decided to go to Palestine. But they all persuaded me that I was one of the lucky ones, to have found a mother alive and that I must go to her. So I decided to come to England. In the meantime, I left hospital and went to live in Blankenase, Hamburg in a beautiful home which had been donated by the Warburg family. I was with my friends; we went to a school that was run by the Jewish Agency. We lived well and for the first time in five years we went to cinemas, concerts and generally enjoyed

ourselves. Most of my friends who were with me there were being prepared to go to Palestine.

The saddest moment of my life was when I was standing at the docks in Hamburg, waving goodbye to all my friends and boarding the ship for England. Once more, I was all alone going to a strange country, not knowing anyone, and not knowing the language. After a week at sea we arrived in Hull, North of England, to be met by a man who turned out to be my Stepfather. The first thing I remember him asking was "Where is your luggage?" I burst out laughing and replied in Yiddish "What I'm wearing is what I have with me!" We boarded a train and left for London arriving in the West End of London to my mother's apartment. I was a little apprehensive and didn't know what to expect. When we met it was very traumatic - both of us cried hugged each other. I think she had more problems than I did as I suppose she felt guilty having left me all those years ago. She tried to make up for the lost years to the best of her ability.

For the first six months all I did was go to the cinema, eat, drink, and sleep. My mother wanted me to go to school and study but I had other ideas. I did learn English and then found a job in tailoring, which I hated. I had still made no new friends and felt quite lonely. Then one day I met someone who mentioned that there was a youth club in Belsize Park, London where young survivors like me met. One Saturday evening, I decided to go along to a Dance organised by the club. As I walked in I recognised boys that I had been with both in the ghetto and also in the camps. From then on everything in my life changed. I felt as though I had found my family again. After a few months, I met a French girl at the club who I started seeing. Eventually, we got married and I left tailoring. My wife Jeannette and I opened a delicatessen, which we had for about two years, but this didn't work out, so I went to work for my father-in-law in the stationery trade. Some years later I left my father-in-law and started on my own and I am still in the same business today. In 1956 my first daughter, Michelle was born. In 1961, my second daughter, Lorraine was born. At last I felt that I had a family of my own.

Today, both my daughters are happily married and I have four grandsons and two granddaughters. You cannot imagine how I felt when my oldest grandson was Barmitzvah'd, when in his speech he said he would like to share his Barmitzvah with me as I was never able to have one of my own. I was able to share this with my

closest friends, also survivors like me who I have been together with for the last fifty or so years. Having no brothers or sisters, they are my brothers and sisters!

Many years after my arrival in England, I found out that sadly my grandmother had died the day the war finished and she did not even have one single day to live as a free woman.

And so I am at the end of my story, very much abbreviated. My only regret is that I don't know, to this day, when and where my father perished.