

Present Memories, Sonia Weitz

0:01

Our final transport from Venusberg to the infamous Mauthausen in Austria took 16 days, 120 to 140 women crammed into a sealed cattle car.

0:17

There was no air, no water, sick with typhus and fever, weighing about 60 lbs and more dead than alive.

0:28

My sister Blanca would prop me up against the wall and would pinch my cheeks so that the guards would not throw me away with the corpses.

0:39

In order to reach Mauthausen, we had to climb the hills between the railroad and the camp.

0:47

In our group of five, two of us were deathly sick, so the other three had to drag us along, otherwise the s s would have dumped us into wagons heaped with bodies, some dead, some still alive.

1:06

In that camp, many of the prisoners worked in the quarries where they were forced to carry heavy boulders up and down the slippery mountains.

1:18

In my mind's eye, I can always see my father and Blanca's husband Norbert among the victims.

1:28

May 5th, 1945, the American armies entered Mauthausen.

1:34

The soldiers looked at us with disbelief and horror.

1:40

Although the Allied leadership knew about the death camps by 1942, the soldiers were uninformed and unprepared. Mostly delirious, and unable to distinguish between nightmare and reality,

1:58

I stared at an African American soldier and I imagined that he was the Messiah.

2:07

A black Messiah came for me.

2:10

He stared with eyes that didn't see.

2:13

He never heard a single word, which hung absurd upon my tongue.

2:22

I was placed in a makeshift hospital and my sister immediately volunteered as a nurse.

2:29

Although she was not a nurse.

2:32

She lied because fear of being separated even after liberation was unthinkable.

2:40

I was still desperately ill when a miracle occurred and Blanca and Norbert were reunited. Barely alive.

2:51

after liberation, Norbert followed every rumor, every lead, and searched for us until he found Blanca.

3:01

I learned later that during the reunion, at the American headquarters, many of those war hardened soldiers wept openly.

3:11

One GI who witnessed this incredible moment removed his wedding ring and gave it to Norbert, who placed it on Blanca's finger.

3:23

When I regained consciousness, we were a family.

3:28

Norbert picked me up like a baby, carried me to a borrowed car where I promptly threw up all over the backseat.

3:37

We drove to an abandoned farm near Linz, which became the first of many DP displaced persons camps.

3:48

Some of the survivors prepared a little room for us.

3:53

My bed was near the window and there were birds singing in the trees.

4:00

It was so quiet and peaceful and clean. In the camps,

4:06

we dreamed about dying in bed.

4:10

Now, I wondered, was I going to die?

4:14

I didn't die because an American doctor came with his bag full of magic pills and shots and vitamins.

4:25

Someone gave us a radio, candy and fruit.

4:30

Slowly I regained my health.

4:33

I listened to music, wrote poetry again, and grew stronger each day.

4:40

But soon the enormity of our tragedy became clearer and we began to mourn the unspeakable personal losses.

4:51

And then the dimensions of this catastrophe overwhelmed us with sorrow and emptiness.

5:00

And yet we didn't give up.

5:02

We stood a little taller.

5:04

We picked up the pieces of our shattered lives.

5:08

We worked, we studied and we fell in love.

5:13

Most of all we looked to the future.

5:18

Ah, but then the ugly reality set in.

5:22

We still had no place to go.

5:25

Poland was a vast graveyard to us, still infested with anti-Semitism and hatred.

5:34

There was no Israel, and the United States had very strict immigration laws.

5:41

A truly devastating thought.

5:44

Would we spend the rest of our lives in DP camps, stateless and abandoned?

5:51

Later we learned that in those days it was easier for the killers, the SS and their collaborators to enter a Western nation than it was for the survivors.

6:09

When the fog finally lifted that spring of 1945 and Nazi Germany was defeated, I was among the handful of The Walking Dead.

6:22

For me, the devastation was almost complete.

6:25

My mother was killed in the death camp of Belzec.

6:29

My father was murdered in Mauthausen

6:32

only a few weeks before the Americans came.

6:36

84 members of my extended family perished.

6:41

My sister Blanca and I survived the Krakow ghetto and five Nazi camps, Plaszov, Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Venusberg and Mauthausen.

6:54

We endured the death march, box cars, slave labor, starvation, diseases and constant dehumanization.

7:05

After searching for three long years, Norbert found an uncle in Peabody, Massachusetts.

7:13

In May 1948, Uncle Harry welcomed us to the United States.

7:20

My husband, Mark and I have three children and three grandchildren.

7:33

My own reconnection with life occurred when I visited Israel for the first time.

7:42

In that tiny corner of the world, I finally felt whole.

7:50

My very own miracle happened to me when my eyes beheld the blue skies above, the meadows so green, and the emerald sea as deep as the love that seemed to surround me.

8:06

Not a cloud

8:07

in sight, my heritage, priceless in the face of time,

8:12

I drank of its beauty in wondrous delight, suspended, sublime.

8:19

I want to shout praises so the world may hear until mountains tremble through rock and debris.

8:27

For my heart is singing oh so loud and clear.

8:33

I am free.

8:34

I am free.

9:17

[Music]

9:44

[End Credits]