

## 8 *Displaced Persons Camps* 1945-1948

---

Norbert wanted to take us out of Mauthausen the same day he found us. But he faced some real difficulties getting permission from the authorities to move us. The Americans felt that I was much too sick to leave the hospital. They wanted assurances that I would be under medical supervision.

Blanca refused to leave without me, and Norbert would not leave without her. So the officers in charge cut through the red tape and broke some rules. They phoned the military headquarters in Linz and located a doctor attached to a medical unit. They arranged for him to see me at Camp Hart the next day.

Norbert picked me up like a baby and put me in the back seat of the car. I vomited all the way to Linz. By the time we arrived at Camp Hart, someone had prepared a room for us. My bed was near the window, and there were birds singing in the trees. The room was quiet and peaceful and clean. I could not believe that this was reality. In the camps we used to talk and dream about having a real home, about dying of natural causes in a real bed. Now I wondered, was I going to die?

The first person who came to see me at Camp Hart was Niusiek Strahl. Like Blanca and me, Niusiek was a survivor of many camps. More important, he was a dentist and thus had some medical knowledge. He agreed to take care of me until the doctor arrived.

The first order of business was delousing. All survivors of the camps had to be deloused. But when Niusiek began the procedure, he nearly fainted—not because of how I looked but because of who I was. His family and my family had lived in the same

apartment complex before the war. Now we were neighbors again at Camp Hart. Niusiek continued to nurse me when the doctor was not available. He carried out the doctor's orders to give me vitamin shots and take blood tests.

Despite such care, I remained in critical condition through June. In fact, one night, I became so violently ill that Niusiek and Norbert left the camp to get help. But they did not get far. A violent rainstorm stranded them outside of Linz. Fallen trees blocked their exit. Blanca spent the long night watching me slip away and worrying about the fate of her husband and friend. They, in turn, spent the long night wondering if I would be alive in the morning.

Some hospital care was available in the area, but Blanca, Norbert, and I decided that I would not go to a hospital. We still feared hospitals. Our experience over the past six years had taught us that hospitals were places of no return. And so we refused to let them move me to some strange place from which, we were convinced, I would never return. Luckily my doctor, Major Greenspan, agreed to let me stay in Camp Hart and be treated there. Within a month or two, I began to recover.

During my recovery, Norbert and Niusiek would carry me outdoors into the fresh air and place me gently on a mattress. Blanca would serve me wonderful fruit drinks, just like the ones I had fantasized about in the camps. Only these drinks were real. I even had a radio, and for the first time in six years I could listen to music.

Oh, that radio! An American soldier named Joe had given it to us. He was of Italian descent and spoke Italian in addition to English. But he did not understand a word of German, Yiddish, or Polish. And we, of course, knew no English or Italian. Somehow, however, we managed to communicate with him. He was so touched by the miracle of Blanca's and Norbert's reunion that he gave Norbert his own wedding ring, Norbert, in turn, put the ring on Blanca's finger. (She treasures this ring to this day). Joe and other kind and thoughtful American soldiers never opened a package from home without sharing their gifts with us.

One afternoon, resting outside, watching birds in flight and wildflowers swaying in the summer breeze, I let my mind wander and my imagination soar. That day I began the reconstruction of my diary.

Soon I also began to write poetry again. Although the rabbis had told us not to recite the *Kaddish*, the Hebrew prayer for the dead, because there was still hope that our loved ones were alive, I knew in my heart of hearts that my mother was dead. I knew I would never see her again. And so I wrote:

***Jahr--Zeit***  
(*For my mother*)

---

Through cloudy skies, she's looking down;  
A furrowed brow, an anxious frown ...  
Her love still warm, below her breast,  
Her broken heart won't let her rest,  
With anguish ... only a mother would know,  
When torn from her child, before it has grown.  
The clouds will soon pass, so she may find,  
The little girl she left behind ...  
She had such hopes for her, such dreams  
The years to give, so few! It seems  
They fluttered by like a gentle dove ...  
But she bequeathed a wealth of love,  
Of hope, of truth, of will to live  
In such a little time to give ...

(So helplessly she departed,  
When my life had barely started)

---

I was not alone in mourning my losses. In time we all began to mourn the enormity of our personal tragedies. Eyewitness accounts of murdered mothers, fathers, husbands, wives, daughters, sons, brothers, and sisters filtered through Camp Hart. The agony grew unbearable. Each day brought news of still another Jewish community completely destroyed by the Nazis and their collaborators. When the dimensions of this catastrophe became clearer, we were overwhelmed with sorrow and emptiness.

And yet we didn't give up! We stood a little straighter. We picked up the pieces of our shattered lives and began the long uphill fight to build a new future. We studied languages and learned new trades. People clung to each other and fell in love.

There were weddings and great celebrations when babies were born . . . a declaration of life.

Soon I was well enough to think about my future. What a marvelous feeling that was. I had lost my childhood and young adulthood, but I was going to have a future. Over and over again, I repeated these words to myself, “I made it! I survived! I am safe! I am going to have a future!” These thoughts were so exhilarating that for awhile I could think of nothing else. But, in time, I did think of something else. I began to wonder about our future. Where would we go? Where would we live? Would we spend the rest of our lives in DP camps?

The fact that we had no place to go was devastating. Rebuilding our lives in Poland was not an option because we had nothing left there. To us, Poland was a vast graveyard. Besides, those who did go back were met with hatred and anti-Semitism.

Israel—a Jewish homeland—was but a dream to us. The British blockaded the shores of Palestine, and their patrols either sank or turned back boats full of Holocaust survivors to hopelessly crowded detention camps.

The United States had very strict immigration laws, and few of us could meet the requirements. Proper personal documents, blood relatives to sponsor us, and proof of good health were all impossible to come by. The indifference of the western world dealt the proverbial final blow to the battered psyche of the Jewish remnant, draining us of our last vestiges of energy. Later I learned that the Nazis found it much easier to enter the United States than did the survivors.

In the meantime Dr. Greenspan, my wonderful American doctor, brought me my first pair of new shoes. They were red, low-heeled and beautiful! He decided that it was time for me to go for a walk. The first few steps made me so heady with joy that I promptly passed out. Luckily, Dr. Greenspan caught me before I hit the ground. He carried me back inside, vowing that we would try again the next day. We did, and I succeeded. Soon I was walking daily and gaining weight.

By late summer 1945 it was clear to everyone that I was going to make it. It was then that Norbert decided to go to Poland in search of family and friends. He did find his niece Jadzia, who had been sheltered by a Christian family. But Jadzia’s mother, Norbert’s sister, had perished along with all the other members of Norbert’s family.

While in Poland, Norbert tried to recover some money and jewelry which his family had given to Polish friends for safekeeping. To his horror, he was literally chased out of Kraków. Some time later, the Poles massacred forty-two Jewish survivors in the town of Kielce, Poland. Although the war had ended, Polish antisemitism lived on. Norbert returned to Austria emptyhanded.

For my seventeenth birthday Norbert gave me a small gold ring. The ring had a very special meaning because it once belonged to a young man who kept poison in its hollowed dome. The young man apparently intended to take his own life at the “right moment.” A most defiant gesture at best.

Having a ring was, of course, forbidden in the camps, but this young man had tricked his captors by keeping his finger covered with a bloody bandage. Sadly, he never got the chance to take his own life. The Nazis beat him to it.

After he was killed his body, like those of other victims, was searched for valuables before being thrown into the crematoria. The searchers were prisoners assigned to this gruesome task. One of the *Sondercommandos*, as they were called, found the ring and managed to keep it. After the war was over, he gave the ring to Norbert because none of the victim’s family had survived, and Norbert had been a friend of the victim.

Norbert, in turn, gave this special ring to me because he was concerned that I might not remember, that I might want to forget. Norbert believed that forgetting was dangerous. It was up to us, the survivors, to tell the world.

Norbert was an activist. Besides working for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), he quickly became involved in camp politics. He was always fighting for our community as well as for the rights of its individual members. When occupation forces wanted to return the abandoned farm on which Camp Hart had been built to the Austrian government, Norbert helped organize a protest rally. After a night of careful planning, he led us in a march on military headquarters. We were determined that we would not go back to Mauthausen. And we won! It was a great victory for us. After six years of captivity, after six years of being powerless, we were finally in the land of the living again. We finally had some control over our own fate.

Freedom brought other sensations as well. Having survived so much torment, I began to feel indestructible. In the beginning

this feeling was no more than a nagging thought that I resisted and kept pushing away. Then, over time, the feeling crystallized until I came to believe that nothing would ever hurt me again. I had known every hurt, experienced every torment. I had seen it all and lost it all.

Feeling superhuman may be euphoric, but it doesn't last. As soon as we begin to care about others, we become vulnerable. And I cared. I watched the agony of survivors whose children were killed. I witnessed their grief, and I began to think about the enormity of this tragedy. Once again, I turned my thoughts into poetry.

### **What Else Was Lost?**

---

One and a half million  
Jewish children  
and their children's  
children ...

Unthinkable numbers  
But what hurts the most  
Is the haunting thought  
Of what else was lost  
And how do we ever  
Begin to mourn  
The generations  
Never to be born.

A leader, a hero,  
An heir to a nation.  
A builder. An artist.  
A healer. A clown.

The cures undiscovered  
The music unwritten  
All the dreams undreamt  
Or shattered ... or broken ...  
Unimagined treasure  
The losses unmeasured  
Unwept for  
Unspoken.

---

In retrospect, I must have been mentally unbalanced. I cried a lot. I laughed a lot. I craved people, noise, and action. I was falling in and out of love at least once a week. I wanted only to live and enjoy life. But Norbert and Blanca had other plans for me. They insisted that I catch up on my education. And so with the help of tutors I studied a wide range of subjects, including English, French, math, art, philosophy, and music. I also worked with Norbert for the HIAS and joined the camp's theater group. There were not enough hours in the day for all I wanted to do.

But late at night, memories of the horrors I had lived through would come to me in nightmares. It was then that I would light some candles and write poetry to soothe myself back to sleep.

### **Stones Don't Weep**

---

there was a time I knew for sure  
that hell could be no worse  
... a cesspool of humanity  
my soul to immerse

but when the fog began to clear  
I was bereft of pain and fear  
and quite convinced that stones don't weep  
I rocked myself to sleep

---

My nights were filled with horror, but my days were filled with surprises. I always looked forward to packages distributed by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Once I found an evening gown in one of the packages. I wore it to my first New Year's Eve party.

We also found more useful clothing in the packages. And what we did not find, we made. We removed draperies from the windows of the nearby farmhouse and artfully transformed them into clothing. We sewed shirts, underwear, and even bathing suits from remnants of soft, silky parachutes which lay in the fields.

Someone gave me a piece of blue taffeta fabric just in time to make a dress for a very special occasion—a concert to which Dr. Greenspan had invited Blanca, Norbert and me. I had never been

to a concert before! The anticipation was almost as delicious as the event itself.

Dr. Greenspan picked us up in a chauffeur-driven jeep. The ride was delightful and soon we arrived at a military installation. The concert was to be held outdoors, and the weather was fantastic. As far as the eye could see, the entire area was covered with soldiers sitting on the grass, laughing and relaxing. There were many flags and other decorations. The atmosphere was so festive that I became intoxicated with joy.

I could see the grandstand and hear the orchestra tuning up. Just a few feet from the orchestra, three high-ranking American officers sat in chairs. Everyone else was sitting on the ground. As we approached, the officers stood up, and Dr. Greenspan introduced us.

Then a most marvelous thing happened. The general smiled and with a grand gesture bowed to us. He said something to his companions and invited us to take their special seats. As the concert began, everyone settled down on the grass, except for the three survivors who sat in chairs. I felt reborn ... worthy...human.

At some point I was reunited with Rena, my close friend from the Kraków Ghetto. Oh, what joy in finding her alive and near me! But even this happy occasion was marred. I learned that her father, whom I deeply loved, had been killed in Auschwitz.

It did not take long for Rena and me to resume our old friendship. Once more we laughed and cried together. We went to parties and dances. To the casual observer, we must have looked like two normal teenagers. When we heard that the Organization for Rehabilitation and Training (ORT) was offering courses on *How To Become A Cosmetician*, we immediately enrolled.

What a time we had making each other beautiful! Rena would spread a thick paste over my face and neck, and it would promptly harden. She would then go off in search of some concoction to remove the paste while I waited like a frozen mummy vowing to get even with her.

Also, in true teenage fashion, Rena covered for me when I got into trouble. For instance, there was that one afternoon when I went for a motorcycle ride with an American lieutenant. How I loved the excitement, the speed, the wind in my hair. But then disaster struck. As we neared a rather dangerous intersection in



Linz, we swerved to avoid an oncoming streetcar. We both spilled into the road, flying in different directions.

The young man later told me that, at first, he thought I was dead. Well, I was not dead. I was alive—bruised and bleeding but alive. I think that at that moment I feared Blanca more than death. She would have grounded me for a month had she found out what I had been up to. So Rena sneaked me into her room, cleaned me up, and gave me a change of clothes. Then she filed away this secret with my other misadventures.

After several months at Camp Hart we moved to Camp Bindermichel. Although, we now lived in a group of apartment houses, the accommodations were still very crowded and far from the freedom and normalcy we longed for. It was about this time that Rena met a young survivor named Marc. They fell in love and were soon married.

Of course, we all behaved and reacted differently. Just as Blanca worried about my recklessness, I worried about her sadness. Day after day I watched her sitting quietly for hours, listening to music with her eyes closed. Blanca needed quiet and solitude as much as I craved noise and action.

Then there was Henryk, a friend from the Kraków ghetto. Eighteen years old, the Holocaust had left him totally alone in the world except for Blanca, Norbert, and me. His experimentation with life took the form of exchanging goods on the black market. Needless to say, his activities were illegal and carefully watched. The military police or the Austrian authorities caught up with him at least once a week.

I had a soft spot in my heart for Henryk, first because I remembered him from the ghetto, but also because he had smuggled wonderful drinks to me when I had been at the hospital in Mauthausen. Now, at Camp Hart, he declared his eternal love for me.

Blanca and Norbert tried to protect and reform Henryk. But Henryk rarely used his charm and wit constructively. And so every time he got arrested, Norbert would bail him out and vouch for him. All the while I played the *femme fatale*, visiting him in jail and feeling very noble.

Just when I would begin to feel good about myself, even happy, something would pull at my gut and I would become sad, moody, and angry. Then came the doubts. I tried to fight them off, to ignore them. But the questions persisted. Why me? Why

am I alive? Why not the others? Should I not feel guilty? Poetry provided a temporary escape.

### **My Western Wall**

---

I built myself a Western Wall  
Within the corner of my soul  
And quite apart, deep in my heart  
I lean against it to recall  
Another time, another age  
Another world of tears and rage  
And there I often lay to rest  
The agony within my breast.

---

Working for the HIAS, we were painfully aware of the many obstacles that displaced persons faced in trying to obtain visas to the outside world. Whenever we learned that a western country would issue entry permits to people with specific trades such as tailoring or farming, we became frustrated because few of us qualified.

Orphans—those eighteen and younger—usually qualified for adoption by Americans, Canadians, and others. Strange how birth dates came to haunt us again. In the ghettos and camps, the magic age for young people had been fourteen. Children under that age were killed. As a result, in the ghettos and camps, it was important to look older. Now eighteen became the magic number, and it was important to look younger. Although I qualified as an orphan, I would not leave without Norbert and Blanca.

Soon I became consumed with world news, especially news of Palestine. Day and night I dreamed of going there, where I could have a home among my own people. I wrote poetry to express my longing to live in Palestine.

## **Birthright**

---

Was Jacob not my father's name  
Did he not perish in the flame  
Of prejudice—so that I might  
Go home and claim my own birthright.

Did not his brothers share his fate  
While nations fiddled in debate ...  
Did not their blood down rivers flow  
Because they had no place to go. . .

There must not ever come to pass  
Another time when those of us,  
Whose children dwell in many lands.  
Would face destruction at the hands  
Of some demented “super” power;  
There must not ever come an hour  
When once again we'd stand alone ...  
Without a home to call our own.

I paint the sunset pink and gray,  
A touch of blue ... but when the day  
Is done—I lie awake and stare  
And cannot breathe for lack of air ...

My hunger and my thirst to sate  
I walk along the Zion-Gate ...  
And spread my wings in tender haste  
The freedom of my soul to taste ...

Yes, Jacob was my father's name  
And he did perish in the flame  
Of prejudice—so that I might  
Go home and claim my own birthright

---

Christian and family name: <u>Sonia Schreiber</u>	Nom et Prénom: <u>Sonia Schreiber</u>
Place and date of birth: <u>27.8.1928</u> <u>Krakow</u>	Lieu et date de naissance: <u>27.8.1928</u> <u>Krakow</u>
Citizenship: <u>stateless</u>	Nationalité: <u>apatride</u>
Unmarried, married divorced, widowed: <u>unmarried</u>	État (célibataire, marié, divorcé, veuf[ve]): <u>fille</u>
Profession: <u>officer</u>	Profession: <u>fonctionnaire</u>
Address: <u>Linz-Rausauerstrat 59</u>	Domicile: <u>Linz-Rue de Rausauer 59</u>
Size: <u>1.65 cm</u>	Taille: <u>1.65 cm</u>
Countenance: <u>round</u>	Visage: <u>ronde</u>
Eyes: <u>brown</u>	Couleur des yeux: <u>brune</u>
Hair: <u>fair</u>	Couleur des cheveux: <u>blonde</u>
Distinguishing marks: <u>none</u>	Signés particuliers: <u>pas</u>
<u>Linz the 10.9.46</u> Place and date of issue	<u>Linz 10.9.46</u> Lieu et date de la délivrance
<u>i.v. Vimmilly</u> Signature of officer in charge Officer of the passp. office	<u>i.v. Vimmilly</u> Signature du Service compétent Bureau de passeports.

One of Sonia's documents declaring her a "stateless" person.

While events in Palestine were making world news, events in Europe were also capturing world attention. In 1945 and 1946 the Allies put what was left of the Nazi leadership on trial in the city of Nuremberg, Germany. The former Nazi leaders were accused of crimes against humanity—murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against civilians before or during the war.

Norbert went to some of the Nuremberg trials and described them to us. To our disbelief, the Nazis pleaded innocent. They defended themselves by saying that they had only obeyed orders. The judges in Nuremberg sentenced twenty-five of the defendants to death by hanging; ninety-seven received prison terms of up to twenty-five years; and twenty were sentenced to life terms. Thirty-five were declared not guilty. Many top-ranking Nazi officials never stood trial. As the war ended Hitler committed suicide and others changed their identities and built new lives in Argentina, Australia, Canada, Germany, and the United States.

“And what of the other murderers?” we wondered. Thousands of SS men and women never stood trial. It seemed to us that the scales of justice collapsed under the weight of these crimes against humanity.

And they looked so normal, these murderers. Wouldn't it have been easier if they had looked like killers? But how does a killer look? How does a victim look? How does a survivor look?

### **Scars (and Stereotyping)**

---

some of us carry visible scars  
some bear the other kind,  
both wrought to challenge sanity  
and vanquish peace of mind

---

All during the time we were in the DP camps, Norbert had searched for Harry White, his uncle. Harry had left Poland before the war and settled somewhere near Boston, Massachusetts. Finally, in late 1947, Norbert met someone who told him that Uncle Harry and his family lived in Peabody, Massachusetts. Norbert wrote to Uncle Harry, who immediately agreed to sponsor us. Finally we qualified for entry into the United States.

Harry White was a kind and generous man. From the time Norbert first contacted him, he sent us caring letters which became our lifeline to the outside world. Uncle Harry worked quickly to sign the required affidavits which promised that Blanca, Norbert and I would not “become a burden to the United States government.”

As we waited for our visas, I continued to have my own private battle with God. The following poem illustrates, in a most intimate way, this inner conflict and confirms the bargain I ultimately made with my faith.

## Where Was Man?

---

You know I hated You oh Lord  
I cursed Your blessed name  
I needed help a sign a word  
And there was no one else to blame

Because Your silence drove me mad  
I climbed the walls and tore my hair  
My lungs were spitting blood and yet  
You wouldn't listen to my prayer

I called on You in torment wild  
And desperately cursed Your name  
Then I was nothing but a child  
And there was no one else to blame

But now I feel God wasn't dead  
And *where was man* I ask instead

---

On May 4, 1948, three years after the gates of Mauthausen had been opened by its inmates, Blanca, Norbert, and I arrived in New York. A few days later, Uncle Harry and his wonderful family welcomed us to Peabody. There, they helped us find an apartment as well as jobs in local factories. We were about to begin life again.



*Blanca and Norbert in a D.P.  
Camp*