

Jadzia Stern

Wloszczowa, Poland

The Will to Survive

Into Hiding

Jadzia woke up when she heard movement in the next room. She looked over to see that her four younger siblings still slept before creeping to the doorway. Her father was lugging a bucket of water up a ladder into the attic.

"Papa, what are you doing?" she whispered.

He turned to look over his shoulder. "Go back to bed. You'll see soon enough."

Her mama kept the children away from the ladder during the day, but there was no hiding that preparations were being made. Two men had brought baskets of straw in, and they had disappeared up the ladder. The windows had been boarded over and nailed shut as if they were going on a long journey.

Life had already been so unpredictable in Poland. A year earlier her father had assured her that the rumors of the Nazis killing Jews were rubbish.

Her father had said, "It cannot be. Germany is the most civilized country in the world. Just look at all the musicians it has produced!"

But his face held none of that optimism now. It seemed life in the ghetto at Bedzin, a place the Nazis had forced them live because they were Jews, was about to change again. One evening, after her mother had helped the five children into their pajamas, they climbed the ladder together. There was little light in the attic, but as Jadzia's eyes adjusted, she saw the attic floor covered with straw, muffling their footsteps. There were pails and bowls of water along one wall, and a bin with cabbage and apples. A few large trunks held necessities, and the stove that sat along the back wall stood cold but ready.

"We will stay here until they leave Bedzin," her father said. "I don't think it will be long."

Jadzia fell into an uneasy sleep.

As the next day passed into another and another, Jadzia and her siblings became restless. There were no toys, few books, and Jadzia longed for the outside. They ate little.



Bedzin Ghetto, 1939-1943 (photo ushmm.org)

A few days later, they heard boots in the house beneath them and almost as quickly, a rifle butt banging against the attic door.

A loud, harsh voice penetrated the wood floor, "We know you're in there. Come down."

They stayed silent—unmoving. Jadzia's parents glanced nervously at each other and then they let their eyes wander around at the five of the children.

Her father replied, "I'm coming down."

"How many?" the voice below demanded.

A glance passed between her parents and her papa made a split second decision. "There are six of us up here."

Jadzia didn't know what to think—there were seven of them. Her younger siblings ranged from three to nine years old, and they started crying.

Jadzia's mother turned to her and put a finger to her lips drawing Jadzia to one side. She stood near a large steamer trunk.

"Jadzia, darling, I have to leave you. Crawl into this trunk and hide."

"I'm not staying by myself," Jadzia said.

Mama wrapped her arms around Jadzia and said, "You are the oldest. I'm not taking you with me, but you will survive." Her mother pulled off her ring and

put it in Jadzia's hand.

"Please, Mama, let me go with you!" Jadzia's whispers grew urgent, even as she obeyed and climbed into the trunk.

"You will be alright. I will pray for you." She squeezed Jadzia hard. "I love you so much. You're going to live. You are brave. Survive, Jadzia."

Her mother closed the top of the trunk with Jadzia inside crying silently. Her father was already on the ladder below trying to bargain with the Nazi soldiers, begging them not to hurt his children. The last thing Jadzia heard was her mother's voice calling out a prayer, "Goodbye, dear God," A prayer Jadzia believed was for her.

On the Run

Jadzia stayed in the trunk, long after the commotion died down below her, taking deep breaths and trying to remain calm. She let her hands work at the latch from the inside. Eventually, she heard it click beneath her fingers, and she pushed the lid open a crack.

It was dark.

There were only muffled sounds, too far away to be in the house. Jadzia gently opened the lid of the trunk and went to a tiny window to look out. There were long lines of people below, fires in the distance. Nazi soldiers and dogs barking. But the fires scared Jadzia most.

What if the fires reached their house? What if the Nazis set fire to the house?

She paced the attic silently thinking, fatigue overcoming her senses. She finally sat down trying to imagine what her mother would do and fell asleep.

Jadzia woke when the first rays of light streaked across the room. She'd curled up in the corner. Everything was quiet outside.

There was little water and not much food. Jadzia knew she couldn't stay there. Silently, she descended the ladder into the main rooms where her family had lived just a week earlier.

"Oh Mama. What should I do?" she turned her mother's ring over in her palm thinking and praying.

Her gaze stopped on an old school book on the floor. Suddenly, an idea rose in her mind. Jadzia rushed to find her school clothes. Her mother had

always made them beautiful clothes, and she found her favorite school outfit: a navy skirt with a white sailor collar top. She pulled on some long knee socks and boots. She couldn't find any soap or a brush, but she cleaned herself as well as she could, pulling her fingers through her long, thick brown hair. She tied it with a bright ribbon and picked up the school book, scared but determined.

Jadzia stepped out into the street, her head high. She walked with purpose down the block, barely letting her eyes take in the abandoned watch on the sidewalk or the man crumpled across the street. Jadzia hoped he was sleeping, but she noticed the blood and knew he was probably not.

"You there, stop," a voice called in German. "Where are you going?"

Jadzia stopped to see a young Nazi before her. She met his eyes and didn't look away.

"I just came to visit my Jewish friend. I miss her, but I'm afraid to stay here," she began to walk again. He was surprised, but refused to let her pass.

"I need to take you to my superior. This isn't regular. Follow me."

Jadzia followed him another block until they came to a brick building where the Nazis were drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, and making jokes as they saw Jewish people being herded toward box cars in the distance.

Jadzia followed the Nazi inside.

"Wait here," he said. Jadzia looked around and saw a Jewish man sweeping nearby. She caught his eye.

"Please help me," she whispered. "I told the Nazi a lie. Tell me what to do."

He shook his head. "Look around you—lines and chaos everywhere. Where is he going to send you, do you think? This is a ghetto and it's burning. Just run."

Jadzia dropped her book and ran. She zigzagged through the lines and ran until she felt she couldn't breathe. She stopped when she saw a young mother pulled from the line with her baby, both shot mercilessly by the Nazi guard—it was more than she could take. Jadzia tried to blend into the line, her mother's words ringing in her ears, "You will survive. You are brave. Survive."

To Auschwitz

Eventually, Jadzia's line ended up boarding the boxcars and making the two day trip to Auschwitz. It was so loud and crowded, everyone standing up—no bathroom, food, or water. Jadzia held her mother's ring in her pocket and rubbed it, trying to remember better times.

When the train cars finally squealed to a stop and opened, Jadzia blinked against the bright fall sun. It was September 1942. Jadzia should be going to school—not staring down the scene before her.

A line of Nazis sat on tall, towering stools, while others patrolled the lines with dogs, barking orders and hitting anyone who challenged them or moved too slowly. Jadzia saw people being separated with the point of a finger—some to the left, some to the right. It was happening so fast, Jadzia didn't have time to think. When she walked before the line, the Nazi crooked his finger to the left.

Jadzia followed the line left for a moment, but an elderly woman behind her poked her. "Little girl, run to the other side—now! You don't belong on this side."

Jadzia slipped past the guard's notice to join those on the right, unsure what was to come.

Jadzia was the youngest of the women in her line. They were corralled into a large room and forced to undress. All around the edges of the room were piles: one for jewelry, one for shoes, one for clothes, one for glasses. It felt like a terrible dream, so dark, the cool night air threading between the stuffy press of bodies. Jadzia followed the line until it broke, and she was pushed forward, the buzz of a razor immediately pressing against her scalp. Her beautiful hair that just days ago she'd tied with that bright ribbon fell in piles to the floor. Tears clouded her vision, her head suddenly cold, exposed.

They pushed her forward, and someone grabbed her arm. She jumped at the press of a needle, and she cried as they tattooed a number into her arm. Nazis stood and watched, laughing at the scene, and Jadzia grew angry.

A Nazi stopped her and put his gun under her chin, lifting her face to look him in the eye.

"If you're not going to behave, you're going to be dead. Understand?"

Jadzia remembered her mother's words and nodded. She followed the line, and a long blue and white prison dress was stuffed into her hands. She quickly put it on, grateful that it went long past her feet. She was given wooden shoes, a spoon and bowl, and a string to put round her waist. Before long, she was ushered to their sleeping quarters, a cell with three layers of plain wood for beds that she'd share with five other women.

Through the nightmare of Auschwitz, Jadzia worked and tried to remember her mother's prayer for her to survive, for her to be brave. The days became weeks and years as she tested ammunition, planted and harvested potatoes, carried buckets and anything else the Nazi guards demanded.

Jadzia gobbled up her daily small ration of food, a piece of bread and a little warm water with potato peels. She tried not to look at the horror around her. She thought of her family and wondered where they were. She survived fever and rashes and beatings—her main sustenance was the hope that this would be over and she would see her family again.

One day someone called her name.

"Jadzia Sklarz?" a woman asked.

"Yes?"

"Do you have a sister named Sabina?"

"Yes, do you know her? Where is she?" Jadzia asked, eager for news.

"She's in the hospital here. She was burned carrying a large stock pot of tea."

Jadzia found the hospital and began to wander through the beds, gently calling her sister's name. "Sabina! Sabina Sklarz!"

A frail girl raised her head on a bed and Jadzia fell next to her, tears of joy streaming down her face.

"Where are the rest?" Jadzia asked.

Sabina shook her head. "Mama made me run to the right. They all went left."

Jadzia embraced her sister and wept as Sabina told her about how their Mama worried over Jadzia, how she talked of Jadzia surviving—making it out of this nightmare.

"I'm staying with you," Jadzia said.

No sooner had she said it than a Nazi woman pulled her off of the bed, hitting her over the head. "Back to your barracks," she said.

Jadzia cried and begged, but it was no use. She was dragged away, Sabina's voice rising over the din.

"Good bye, Jadzia. Don't cry!"

Jadzia went through the next week in a blur, missing her family more than she could bear, but she kept waking up, putting one foot in front of the other.



Auschwitz At Liberation, 1945 (photo via ushmm.org)

Liberated at Last

In December of 1944, word came that the prisoners were all going to be moved. One evening, the Nazi guard called them all out to the trains which were standing ready, smoke rising from the tracks. The train cars were open and cold. Jadzia huddled next to the other women from her block.

Overhead, they could see planes whizzing past, bombs dropping in the distance. Before long, the trains stopped and they were ordered to walk. They walked until they reached another camp where they were held and worked until the Russian army liberated them in May 1945.

A fellow prisoner helped her take the trains back to her hometown of Wloszczow. She wandered the park, reveling in her freedom. She made her way to the place where her family had lived and stared at the balcony, but it was so different and someone else had moved in. Everything had changed in the time she'd been gone. She wandered the town, speaking to various agencies, eager for any news of her fami-

ly. One afternoon, a young man heard her name and said he knew her brother Ben Sklar, and he'd survived. Jadzia was able to connect with him and he helped her find work. Her brother introduced her to Ben Stern, who had also survived the camps. He eventually became her husband.

It was Ben's uncle Gabe Stern who sponsored them and brought them to Columbia, South Carolina on June 8, 1949 when their oldest daughter Lily was still young. Her brother Ben Sklar immigrated to the U.S. in 1951. Jadzia did not learn the fate of any other siblings except for her sister Witka. The Red Cross informed Jadzia in 1953 that Witka had survived and immigrated to Israel. They were finally able to see each other again in 1961.

The Sterns were committed community members who spent their lives raising their four children, valuing education and service, and shared their experiences generously with the community.

Jadzia's grandfather taught her to remember that, "What's hateful to you, don't do to other people." In a 1991 interview, she shared her wisdom: "Human beings are imperfect, and there will always be evil, but we must stand up when injustice is done to the Jewish people or any minority— believe in justice and brotherhood for all people."

Source:

Stern, Jadzia. Interview. SCE-TV and the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1991.

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Teacher's Guide

If you haven't taught first person survivor testimonies before, we highly recommend reading [this guide](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Before you read:

1. Define the Holocaust.
2. What is a first-person testimony or account?
3. What role do first-person testimonies play in understanding history?

Questions to think about as you read:

1. How did Jadzia's father prepare for them to go into hiding?
2. Why did Jadzia's mother hide her in a trunk?
3. What did Jadzia experience while imprisoned at Auschwitz?
4. Who did Jadzia discover was in the hospital and what did she learn when she visited?
5. What did Jadzia find when she returned to her home town?

Final reflection:

1. What will you remember most from this survivor's story? How does it add to your understanding of the events of the Holocaust?