Robert Geminder

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Holocaust through the Eyes of a Child

A child does not see the world through the same eyes as an adult. He absorbs the world around as a giant playground: forever expanding, always changing and full of excitement. A child cannot perceive war and death. He cannot understand murdering people for their ethnicity; he does not even know the meaning of the word 'ethnicity.' He knows that he is a Jew because his parents, his neighbors and his friends tell him, but he does not know that it is his ethnicity that makes him different from others.

Robert Geminder was only four years old when World War II began. He was born on August 3, 1935, in Wroclaw, Poland. He and his older brother, George, were growing up in a wonderful family, surrounded with love and attention of many relatives and friends. And then came the year 1939. Most likely, George and Robert did not notice any changes. Being young boys, they could not read the signs "Jews and dogs not allowed" on the doors of cafes and restaurants and did not know that their mother could not buy food anywhere because nobody would sell her, a Jew, anything. They did not understand why one day their parents packed in a hurry, and they all had to leave their house, filled with toys, memories and familiar colors and smells. But they certainly saw that the adults were scared and it made the kids scared, too. It was then that they first heard the words "war" and "Nazi" - but those were just words for them, just empty shells. Those shells became filled with meaning later: when their family was running from the Germans; when their grandfather was taken by Gestapo; and when their father, Mano Geminder, died a day before the German army occupied Stanislawow. In that very city of Stanislawow, on October 12, 1941 the empty shells of the words "Nazi" and "death" must have turned into horrible monsters for two young boys.

On that day, twelve thousand Jews were murdered in the city cemetery by the order of the Gestapo. In the early morning, the Germans burst into the houses where Jewish families lived and kicked them out to the streets. As Robert's mother remembered later: "thousands and thousands of people. Sick and young, the very old and babies…" Families with children were put on the trucks, others walked behind. Very soon people began to realize that the road they followed was the road to the cemetery. What were they thinking then? Who can tell now? The enormity of the genocide – mass murder of people just for the reason of their ethnicity – can not be comprehended by normal human beings. Most likely, till the very last moment those men, women, children – did not believe the reality of what was happening. Bertl Geminder remembered: "They took the people all day. The people in the front, who came last, were first to die. When it got dark….We heard that whoever is left can go home… All of a sudden we felt that we were squeezed together. The Germans were holding hands around us, what was left …about 3,000 people were left, and they were squeezing us until one fell on top of the other, like a pyramid. I saw both of the boys falling to the ground… but I could not move a finger out of my position. I was falling to the ground on a heap of people…"

Miraculously, the Geminder family survived that horror. The boys lost consciousness, and their mother could not find them under the bodies. She was forced away by her brother from that awful place and left, almost sure that her mother and two sons were dead. But her boys survived: Robert's grandmother found them and brought them home and it was, truly, a miracle. The Jews, who lived through the massacre, were locked in the Stanislawow ghetto. Two little boys now lived a very different life - in a tiny, crowded, filthy apartment, in the room that they had to share with several other families, with no food to eat and very few clothes to wear. George was eight years old, and Robert was six. Children in ghetto were a hindrance. They could not work; they were of no use. Periodically, Germans would raid the ghetto with dogs, looking for children and killing those they found right on the spot. The brothers had to learn a lot of new things: how to stay motionless for

hours and how to hold their breath - when their grandmother hid them in the pantry during such "purges," how to eat little crumbles of food that their mother managed to bring from her work outside the ghetto, and how to walk in the ghetto and stay invisible from the Germans. During such short walks they could see the bodies of Gestapo victims, hanging from lamp posts and scattered on the streets.

Realizing that the ghetto would be terminated soon, the boys' mother, Bertl, took a giant risk and managed to take her children outside of the ghetto. Her girlfriends hid them under their skirts and they passed the checkpoint, unnoticed. Bertl brought the boys to her work place and hid them in the closet where Robert and George had to stand silent and still for hours, with no food or water. After work, Bertl retrieved her boys and they fled to Warsaw, where they had to live as gentiles. However, both Robert and George still were under a constant threat, because with their dark hair and eyes they looked Jewish to many people. Bertl, striving to ensure the survival of her two boys, found a couple who lived on a farm outside of Krakow. She made a deal with them: after the war they would receive two apartment buildings that she owned in Germany, for the guaranteed safety of her children. The couple agreed, and the children were once again separated from their mother, and forced to live with a family they did not know and adapt to customs they did not understand, including going to the catholic mass every Sunday. They must have felt so alone, only having each other in the whole world. But even that was to be taken away from them.

Once, when Robert and George attended mass on Sunday, George forgot to remove his hat, and instantly, rumors began to spread that the boy was Jewish. The scared farmers now wanted to send the boys back. Their mother, however, could not take both. She came and picked up only George, leaving Robert behind. At the peak of the war, in 1942, a seven year old Robert was left all alone, forced to hide in a cramped attic, forbidden to come out for the fear of people would recognize him as a Jewish boy.

Robert remained trapped in that attic for two and a half months, often left without food or water for days. At nighttime he sneaked out of the attic window and picked fruit from nearby trees and took eggs from the chicken coop. Finally, Robert's mother returned for him. The boy was filthy, with lice in his hair, and the dirt and grime crusted onto his skin, but - alive. She took Robert back with her, to a town just outside of Warsaw. From then on, the family was forced to move from town to town, from city to city, always too afraid to stay in one place too long, because at any moment somebody could recognize them as Jews. In 1944, the Russian army was approaching Poland. Bertl and her second husband, Emil, decided that the family would be safer in a large city, so they moved to Warsaw. At this point, the Polish underground in Warsaw rose up against the Germans. The Poles could not hold out and eventually Germans took over the city. Robert and his family were caught up in the rebellion and Germans sent them to Auschwitz along with thousands of others.

Bertl knew that Auschwitz meant certain death for any Jew. When they were brought to the train station, she noticed that one car of the train did not have a roof. She rushed to that car with her family and they managed to squeeze in, hoping for a miracle. And the miracle happened. Not reaching Auschwitz, the train made a sudden stop. Robert's step-father helped him out over the wall of the roofless car, and told him to open the door, locked from the outside. Little Robert managed to do just that and the family ran, never looking back. They found refuge in a farmhouse belonging to a Polish gentile family. Later, they went to yet another town and found a place to live there. In 1944, the Russian army liberated that town. Soon after that, the Geminder family moved to Czechoslovakia, and from there – to Germany, to the American territory. They stayed in the American camp for refugees for awhile and then, in 1945, immigrated to the United States. Their new life began. In this new life there were many events and many people and also – there were memories. And yes, it's true that a child sees the world through the different eyes than an adult, but these children – survivors of the Holocaust – were not children anymore. After all they had been through, after all the horrors they had seen – their eyes were not children's eyes anymore. And their memories were not children's memories. For many years Robert Geminder kept these memories and shared them with people. He prepared for publication interviews with his mother, in which she tells

her story of survival, day by day. He accepted invitations to speak about Holocaust at schools, libraries, colleges and other venues. He spoke – and continues to speak - of his childhood that never was and in his story, through the years, we hear the voices of millions of little boys and girls who wanted so little – just to be children – but whose lives were destroyed by the Holocaust. And we must keep these voices in our memories and tell our children about them.

Visitors of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. can not miss the plaque with the words on it: “Thou shalt not be a victim. Thou shalt not be a perpetrator. Above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.” Nobody’s eyes – no adult’s and no children’s – must see another Holocaust. But history does not happen by itself. We make it happen.