

Jakob Blakinty

I lived in a town called Maków Mazowiecki, about 80 km from Warsaw. The [invasion of Poland](#) brought with it the creation of forced labour camps and ghettos; with tremendous persecution against Jews. Consistent with its past politics, in 1941 Germany broke its pact with Russia.

In two days, the Germans were in my hometown, using the synagogue as a stable, destroying every Jewish symbol that was in their way and demanding that Jews be identified by a Star of David with the inscription, Jew, in the center that would always be easily visible.

From the labour camps, Jews were transported to [ghettos](#) and concentration [camps](#). In the ghettos, typhus, malnutrition and other diseases ravaged the population, which caused many deaths, especially among the elderly and children. It was a miracle that I survived typhus.

After two weeks, we started moving via peasant cart to the Mława ghetto; finding the place empty when we arrived because the previous inhabitants had all been transferred to [Auschwitz](#). In this place, there was a train station. We stayed for 10 days, where they made us work on construction projects until we could be transferred. First, the elderly and women with small children were transported to Treblinka.



(Portrait of Jakob Blakinty, his parents, and his sister, circa 1928.)

After two days, our transfer to Auschwitz began; a terrible voyage under inhumane conditions. Among my most disturbing memories that I will never forget is when my mother gave the German soldiers her favours in exchange for half a glass of water. When we arrived at our tragic fate: Hell, I was only 16 years old and yet, even today, my ears echo the painful cries of the thousands of people there.

Upon our arrival we were separated by women and men. They took the women directly to the gas chambers and afterward to the crematoria - my mother and sister were among them!!! What pain, to see them taken to this place, never to return again. They divided the men into two groups; keeping my father and I united.

Suddenly in the midst of this Dantesque situation, we heard the familiar voice of my uncle shouting and telling us to "come to this side." Amid a whirlwind of German police with packs of angry dogs, we crossed to the other line that took us to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The other group was taken directly to the gas chambers. The crematoria smoke could be seen for kilometres around. Upon our arrival, there were approximately 6,000 people, but only 200 people were left to enter Auschwitz.

Upon entering Auschwitz, we were tattooed with [numbers](#) on our arms, which from that moment forward was our only identification; something which to this day for those who managed to survive, remind us every day of the horror which we had to pass through while the world, unfortunately, was deaf to our cries.

It was winter and the cold burned us; all the camp was flooded and muddy. They took our winter clothes and in exchange, gave us light clothes that looked like striped pajamas. With time you could see through these clothes, the extreme state of malnutrition and weakness of our bodies. They placed us in different barracks, with three-story bunks, placing four people per bed; totalling twelve humans per bunk.

Our life in the camp started at five o'clock in the morning when they gave us coffee and a piece of bread. At the same time, we were counted like animals; making sure that nobody was missing. We were beaten and abused constantly, especially if someone unfortunately fell or moved in place because of the hard beatings. These beatings were executed at that immediate instant; making the vile SS soldiers fill with laughter to see in our faces, the horror to which we were subjected. We worked outside the camp until seven o'clock at night when we returned and they gave us a plate that contained a quarter of a liter of soup. Luckily, I was in the same barracks as my father. One of our first projects was to start digging water canals. Each evening we brought back to camp, four or five cadavers of our friends, who were taken directly to the crematoria. Constantly there were new selections; the sick were directly killed as we became increasingly more like skeletons.

In one of those fateful selections, we were asked what our professions were, and, when it was my turn to answer, I said that I was a carpenter and my father responded that he was a bricklayer. This answer would ultimately result in his demise.

One day, all those who had replied that our profession were carpenters; about ten people; were called up to transfer to another place. I was forced to say goodbye to my father and he said these last words to me: "I will not see you anymore. It may be that you are able to save yourself now that they offered you another place to go, but instead of going to another place, I prefer to stay here and pass as a sick person. Though I am abandoning you, you have an obligation to go and save yourself." This was the last conversation I ever had with my father! I never saw him again.

We were moved about 5 kilometres away, to Auschwitz 1, where there was a large woodworking shop. The commander there; upon seeing me asked, "Who are you? You are too small and weak to be a carpenter," and I responded in surprise: "I am a carpenter's assistant," which immediately resulted in my receiving a hard slap to my face and getting thrown to the ground. I was diverted to work on the railroad, which was one of the worst jobs in existence. We were forced to unload wagons. We had to carry enormous weights on our back. Today, it would be lifted by machines but not so then. ...and thus, ended the year 1943.

During this time, with everything appearing to be a terrible nightmare and not reality, I became sick with a terrible intestinal infection and, as a result of the bitter cold Polish winter, I saw my feet freeze and chunks of flesh and skin fall from my fingers.

Outside the camp, I carved a wooden bathtub and as I was in such bad condition, I ventured to enter it, taking longer than usual to return. Outdoors, the capos had initiated a person count and realized that one was missing. Leaving the bathtub, I received a beating with large logs and I fell to the ground, nearly dead.

Members of the work detail transported me by stretcher to the camp; leaving me thrown against the wall of my block. I couldn't even move. I thought that it was the end for me. It was nightfall when my friends arrived and helped me into the bunk. The following morning, they transported me to the camp hospital where I was helped by the same prisoners, who then bandaged my feet.

I was left to recover for three days. Josef [Mengele](#) arrived at the hospital for an inspection; dividing some of the sick to the left and some to the right. Once again, I was lucky and was able to stay with a group of psychiatric patients. The other group was told that they were to be transferred to another hospital, and were sent directly to Birkenau, where they were put to death. Those still in the hospital felt that if a second selection came, they would not be as lucky. Then I found the son of the Rabbi of my city. I almost could not recognize him but he managed to stammer a few words and said, "You were a student of my father; you're young and you are going to survive. If you see my family, tell them I did not make it." That same day he died.

After talking with one of the doctors, I managed to convince him to release me and he, knowing a new selection was coming, agreed. Still very weak from malnutrition and limping, I managed to reach my block, where my fellow workers did not seem to recognize me at all.

The first few days after my return, I worked in the same camp. One day an order was issued that called for people who could carve wood. Having learned some of these skills at school, I dared to go and presented myself at seven in the morning at the meeting point, that was at the front of the main watchtower of the camp.

We were taken to a camp called D.A.V. where they had big carpentry and locksmithing workshops. Some two hundred prisoners worked there. In the furnace heat, I saw the opportunity to recover and heal my feet. My job was to make wooden spoons that were to be sent to the Russian camps. They did not permit these spoons to be made of metal, so that they could not be used as weapons. We had to meet a large quota every two weeks and I could not do it. Thus I was expelled from the factory and sent to the camp where we had to carry heavy wooden planks and transport them to various workshops, and then return with boxes of sawdust; which were very hard to carry because of their excessive weight. The entire time we needed to keep in mind that we would be brutally punished by caning if we did not work fast enough.

From the place where the woodworking machinery was located, they took all the Polish workers and reassigned them to other camps. Thus the factory had no workers to run the machines. The capo of the factory, a young Pole, suddenly looked at me and said, "Come here! What's your name?" to which I replied, "Jakob Blankitny." He took me to the wood-saw, showing me only one time how it functioned and then said to me that, if I worked the saw well enough, I could stay working there. I was able to stay there until 1945; I am still convinced that this was my salvation.

On January 18, 1945, the Russians began to close in on Auschwitz, and the Germans [made us walk](#) about 90 km to the Leslau Station. Upon leaving the camp, there were a few thousand people but upon arriving at the station, only half had survived. Many were killed on the road; others did not make it because they could not keep up with the pace of marching in the snow.

Upon reaching the station, the Germans put us in open wagons bound for Mauthausen. Half the people traveling in these railcars could not withstand the cold and died freezing. All of us who managed to survive were again transported and this time to Melk, where we worked in mines for the munitions factories until March 1945 when we were clandestinely informed that the Americans were closing in on us. For this reason, the Germans decided to move us to Upper Austria, into a camp called Ebensee. Along the way some prisoners managed to escape. When we arrived, our small group consisted of about twenty people. We were taken to the camp and lined up to be shot. At that time, a German commander approached and said, "It's not worth killing these people; they are not even worth the bullet. No matter - they will die in the camp."

We ate one meal a day and it consisted of a soup with potato peels; scraps of food from the SS. Every day we watched as between 400 to 500 prisoners died in the camp.

On May 4, 1945, the Americans were very close to the camp. It was possible to hear gunshots in the distance. All of the survivors were gathered and it was announced that the following day, we would go into the mines where we worked for protection because the Americans were nearby. Someone informed us that there was a massive scheme to burn us in masse, as the mine was filled with explosives.

At that time, there were about 10,000 people left in the camp. People rose up and decided not to comply, so the SS, rushed for time and trying to escape, decided to lock the camp with the prisoners inside and they, themselves, left. Civilian guards arrived to take care of us and, finally, the next morning, American soldiers and tanks arrived and [liberated](#) us.

To be able to describe all the facets of horror and pain that I lived through would take me many hours of remembrance and bitterness. Of all the people in my city, Maków Mazowiecki, where 4,000 Jews originally lived before the start of [World War II](#), only 42 survived. Of all my family in Poland, I was the only survivor.

From the daughter of Jakob Blankitny:

Fifty-four years after our father's liberation, my sister and I joined him, as we returned to every one of those places where the horror, tragedy, and fateful destiny that happened to millions of people occurred. Even after so many years of feeling the negative, indescribable feelings, it simply cannot be expressed in words what my father and his daughters felt. In passing through the concentration camps or in that far away stetl, Maków; nowhere can you find today any of the vestiges that at a moment in the not too distant past, there existed a vigorous Jewish life, formed by customs and warm traditions.