



CANADA

A TALE OF A BOY WHO LIVED DURING
THE HOLOCAUST

Steven Garth Callaghan Q.P.M.

Introduction

This short story was born from a visit to the Town of Krakow and the Camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau in Poland.

The trip was organised through an organisation called Springboard from Belfast and funded through the North East Peace III Partnership. Its object to break down sectarian division, abolish stereotypes and create peace in Northern Ireland's divided communities.

At the termination of the Course I felt I should have an input to the legacy of the programme, so I put these thoughts on to paper. It's how I think things could have evolved, I am fortunate that I was never forced to live like this but my thoughts linger with those who were murdered, tortured and more so with those who survived and spent the rest of their lives reliving these terrible events, while coming to terms with their losses.

I believe it is only by visiting these sites that you get to grasp the enormity of what took place and the horrors that the Nazi regime inflicted on mankind.

It is easy to read about the Holocaust and even by going to follow in the footsteps of the victims and survivors I cannot understand why this was done or in whose name.

These events should never be forgotten. These events should never be allowed to be repeated.

I fear that for those without knowledge the irony of this tale will be lost on many.

I would like to thank Jen Ashton and all the facilitators of Springboard in Belfast for the invitation onto the course. I am sure that I speak for everyone that the programme was well run and interesting with some of Josie's, 'white elephants' confronted. I would pay tribute to The North East Peace III Partnership for funding the programme.

A big thanks to all the participants who made this a great experience and I hope we will take this programme forward as a group. I look forward to working with you all in the future.

A very special thanks to Mrs Heather Dalzell IIB (Hons) Ba (Hons) Pgd IP, PGCE who took time out of her busy schedule as a teacher to read over this and correct my grammar and layout and support to give me confidence to take this part of the programme forward.

Steven G Callaghan QPM.

The good life in Poland 1940's

As a young Jewish boy growing up in Poland in the early 1940s I had a great life. I spent so many happy days sitting with my grandfather. He was a hero from the Great War. He had been injured fighting for the Germans in France at a place called the Somme. In the battle he had his leg blown off by a shell, it was so badly wounded he had a false leg fitted. He had won three medals that he kept in a chest with his uniform and other treasures, he was so proud of them. He always told me that if I was a good boy and lived by God's teachings, one day the medals would be mine.

Grandfather did not talk much about the war but he told me of a soldier he once met, this soldier was from a land called Canada. It was a place he would have loved to visit, with its snow-capped mountains, clean air, rivers abundant with fish and plenty of work. He said it was a land of milk and honey! He made me promise that someday I would go to Canada, the Promised Land. My father worked in the bank and my mother was a dress maker, we lived in a nice big house at the outskirts of the town.


My two brothers and a sister attended the local school; after school we sat with my grandfather who was a great story teller he would tell us about the persecution of the Jewish people in the bible, all about the teachings and how we should live our lives and give our lives in the service of God. I think he was giving his life to God to make up for all the wrongs he had seen and done during the war. I was terrified that if I did wrong in the sight of God I would be persecuted and punished. If I lived by his laws and dedicated my life to him I would be fine, this was what I planned to do.

Sometimes he would talk about his days travelling and exploring and all about his adventures. I loved to hear about the soldier he had met during the war and was excited to discover what life in Canada would be like. I thought 'when I grow up I will be an explorer and I will visit Canada and come back and tell my family great tales of travel like my grandfather' but most of all I would tell them about Canada. I just hoped my grandfather would still be here so that he could share my stories. Of course, I would love to take him with me, but he said his wounded leg would only slow me down. I knew however, that one day I would go to Canada, I had made a promise to God and it was wrong to break a promise to God.

One day I went into the kitchen when my mother was getting my grandfather ready for his bath, we were always told to go out to play or we were away from the house when mother performed this task. This was the first time I had ever seen his false leg. As an inquisitive child I thought this needed further examination!

My mother was furious and told me to get out of the kitchen. My grandfather was





more sympathetic. He told her to let me stay and that I was old enough to see what the horror of war could do.

He said there was a war raging through Europe and I would see the horror of what man can inflict on mankind. I studied where the flesh had been torn from the limb, the scars, I was horrified by what I had seen, then I had a thought, it was a terrible thought, but I had blurted it out without thinking, 'Can I sign it?' I asked.

My friend at school had broken her arm and it had a plaster cast put on to it, everyone in the class had signed it hoping that it would get better. I thought if I signed my grandfather's leg, it too would get better.

My grandfather laughed, 'Why not. it can't do any harm' he told my mother to fetch a pen, she was aghast and protested, but did as he instructed as it was a Jewish girl's lot that she must obey her father.

I was given the pen. At first I didn't want to touch the shrivelled flesh and the cold surface of the stump of the leg. As I was staring at it my mother shouted at me, 'If you must do this hurry up, your grandfather is getting cold', I plucked up the courage and slowly signed my name and whispered a prayer. I hoped that by my action and signing the leg it would be cured and grow back fixed. I couldn't help but think if more people had signed his leg sooner it would have been better by now, because when they took the cast off my friend's arm, the names and prayers had worked on it and it was back to normal, as good as new.

Within days of the Germans coming into the town, my family life changed, the bank was shut and my father was beaten up by soldiers. The Jewish community were gathered up, issued with papers and given a yellow Star of David to wear. We were told to gather up all our valuables and pack up our things, we were going to a new life.

As we gathered up our belongings, I looked at my grandfather sitting on a chair. Suddenly, before my eyes he had grown old. It was as if he had lost the will to live. My mother spoke gently to him, 'What will we do with the things in your chest father', he said 'Pack the medals for the boy and the silver picture frames, anything of value that you may need to sell. Leave the uniforms, they are no use to me now, just keep the medals safe for the boy!'

One morning as soon as it was light we were all taken to the town square. There was fear yet relief among everyone there. People were speculating about where we were going. What would happen? New lives? New jobs? Others talked about death camps, beatings and murders. What I noticed the most was my grandfather and his friends were praying. Praying together, asking for God to protect us, asking God to look over us, asking God for deliverance, asking God not to forsake us!!




A German soldier shouted and they started to check off all our documents against a list. Everything seemed fine, people shuffled forward as it became their turn, and eventually Josef the shoemaker approached the line. One of the guards was wearing a black uniform with a death skull and crossed bones on his hat and with what seemed to be hate in his eyes, he reminded me of a school bully. He demanded of the old man, yelling so everyone could hear, 'Where is your star? Where is your star?' The old shoemaker looked bewildered, he touched his coat where the star should have been pinned. He looked back at the soldier and started to search the ground around him. As he bowed his head, searching with his eyes a single shot rang out. The blood spurted from his head. He fell to the ground. Silence, then a voice shouted, 'Move to the trains'. Quietly and quickly my mother gathered up our family; we walked to the waiting trucks on the station yard, we walked slowly, robotically. No one spoke. My mind was overflowing, I had never seen any one shot before. Then my thoughts turned to my grandfather;

How many times did he see people shot and killed when he fought in the war? No wonder he didn't talk about it. I thought back to what man could do to mankind, those words seemed real now. What was the big deal if the shoemaker was wearing a yellow star or not? Did he deserve to die in such a manner?

We were crammed into the train. I thought this is the start of an adventure! I didn't care that the others were nervous and chattering, I was going to enjoy this. Like my grandfather I was going to travel. I was going to explore the big wide world! Who knew someday I would fulfil my promise to God.

It was the middle of the night when the train stopped. It was freezing cold with snow on the ground. There was a lot of noise, people shouting orders, dogs barking. People were getting off the train, some of them wailing and crying for relatives who had died on what seemed to be a never-ending journey. I was both frightened and excited all at the same time. Suddenly a group of little men in funny striped clothes appeared; they started to load our luggage bags onto carts. A pleasant German soldier wearing the same uniform as the one who shot the shoemaker asked us gently to get into lines when instructed. I was afraid he would shoot us too but his manner was so calming I thought 'He is a nice man, this place is not too bad and a good place to start an adventure', he laughed out and told us the sooner this was done, the sooner we would all get out of the cold and get some bread and warm soup. I had forgotten the last time I had eaten. That sentence seemed like the best thing I had heard in a long time. I was instantly brought back to the present and my mind became awash with fear. My mother and sisters were told to go into a line; my father, grandfather, my brothers and I were told to go into another line. I couldn't understand why we could not all stay together. That was the last time I ever saw my mother and sister.





The next thing I knew we were being marched up into a block. There was a log burning stove in the room. I remember thinking that it smelt of damp and decay. Most of the people in there were tired. Two men brought in terrines of soup, only it was not the kind of soup I was expecting, it was not like the soup my mother made, no chunks of meat, no big slices of vegetables, just coloured water. It dawned on me that I would never again taste my mother's soup. Despite this, that warm liquid and stale bread were at that moment a welcome meal. I was exhausted now, but could not see where we could get a bed; we ended up having to fight to find a sleeping bunk. I didn't need much rocking, soon I was in a deep sleep.

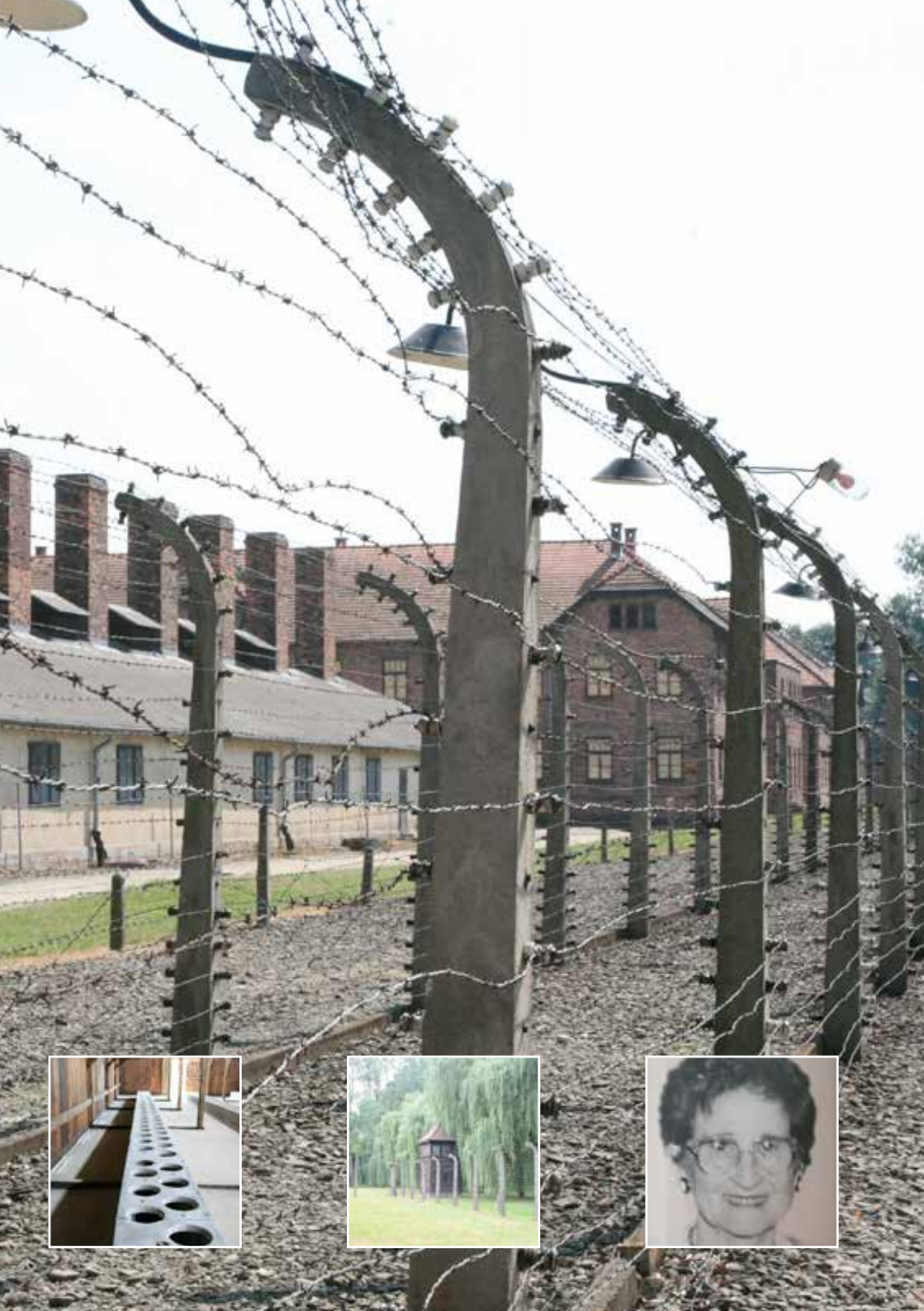
The next morning we were woken and taken outside the block; the place was different in daylight. At night the camp lights glowing in the dark and the fog had given it a magical comforting effect. In the daylight the reality struck home. The place was covered in mud, ice and pools of water.

Dead bodies lay where they had fallen the night before. There was a strong stench of burning meat. I thought back to the stories my grandfather had told me from the Bible when the Jews would make burnt offerings of lambs to God.

Around me everyone was praying and I assumed the Rabbi must have built an altar to God at the rear of the camp. I started to pray to God as I did not want to be forgotten or forsaken when he was handing out his mercy.

My prayers were broken by the shouting: we were told to strip off our clothes and run round the yard. We were then put into groups. That was the last time I saw my father or brothers. I managed a brief conversation with my grandfather, he told me I had been a good boy and followed Gods Commandments. He said that when I next saw my mother I was to instruct her to give me his medals. He asked me to take care of them, said goodbye and hobbled off to stand in a line; he had been excused from running due to his war wounds.

Whilst I was sad at being separated from the rest of my family my sadness was tinged with happiness that I was now an explorer and starting a new adventure! The group I was in were marched to the back of the camp; this was the first time I had seen the flaming chimneys with the dense black smoke. I thought we must be near the altar as the smell of burning flesh was stronger. We were taken into a block, there were lots of people running about, then I noticed the strange men wearing striped uniforms pushing carts and undoing the luggage cases. I asked one of the guards at the block 'Where are we?' He replied, 'You are in Auschwitz Camp, you are one of the lucky ones, you are in Canada' I was dumb struck I was in Canada I had fulfilled my promise to God and my grandfather, I was in Canada. It was not what I was expecting, where were the snow-capped mountains? Where was the clean air? All I could smell was the stench of burning flesh. Where were the running rivers? All I saw was mud!



I was sent to work going through suitcases and sorting things out. Shoes, gold jewels, clothes, even gold teeth. Everything was sorted into piles

The guards were vicious: they were drunk and gave out beatings for any reason, no reason. They raped the women working in the blocks. They told us we were in a position of trust and anyone found stealing would be shot. As I worked I prayed to God, thanking him for sending me to Canada. He had answered my prayers.

After some days working in the block another of my prayers appeared to have been answered. I was put to work sorting out a batch of artificial limbs. As I lifted a leg, all the memories of my past came flooding back. I was holding the leg of my grandfather. The leg I had signed. No longer was it scarred, it seemed the pain had gone. Had my signing the leg worked? Was it a sign from God? Had he been cured? My eyes started to fill with tears. I fell to the ground sobbing uncontrollably, they were not tears of pain but tears of joy.

I realised that my grandfather and I had travelled to Canada together, he had lived his dream and I had kept my promise to God.

As I worked sorting items into batches I wondered if my grandfather had made up the stories about Canada. Had the soldier ever existed? Had he made up the Promised Land to raise morale in the trenches of the Somme? I now knew the land of milk and honey that the soldier talked about, was not the Promised Land that God had delivered me and my family into. There was nothing here but misery and death, was God testing him? Was there something better waiting for those who passed the test? I could only pray for a better day and to be reunited with my family.

At some point one of the men in the striped uniform gave me a batch of cases to search. As I looked at the pile my heart sank. I reached for the handle. Even before I opened it I knew this was the case my mother was carrying when we left our house. The contents would reveal memories of a past life, of happier times, of hope when I had a future. I opened the case and lifted out my mother's silk scarf. It was heavy, as I unfolded it I saw my grandfather's war medals. I stroked them gently, my hands trembling. As I held the medals in my hands, grandfather's face appeared to me. I remembered his parting words to me, 'You have followed God's Commandments and you are a good boy, the medals are yours'. I was to take care of them. I would take care of them. Without thinking I slipped them into my shirt pocket. I heard a guard shout, 'Thieving scum', I did not hear the noise from the shot that smashed my skull, but I died knowing that I had been to Canada.

