

# The Diary from the Ghetto in Krakow\*

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Halina was born on April 24, 1923 to a very musical, educated family, which she describes beautifully and with pleasure. When she was a baby, her four-year-old brother Felek called her Lilioc and was scared of her. Despite the protestations of the family, Halina remembers that grandma had a violet dress and Felek a velvet suit. Her memory has been remarkable ever since. She was a sickly child, in contradistinction to Felek. He was the pride of the family. Nothing bothered him while she was sensitive to everything, even to the ribbon in her hair. She was afraid to eat, the food got stuck in her mouth. She was called "a green frog" and she spent a lot of time in bed sick with illnesses such as scarlet fever. When she was convalescent, Felek did not annoy her but played with her because he knew that "one had to be careful with the child." She also had a loyal nurse, Jozka. She had been very attached to Krakow. When her mother died, away from her beloved city, in the U.S., Halina took some of the earth from her American grave, and threw it on grandfather's grave in Krakow. She describes her whole family with great sympathy, stressing her own and especially her brother's playing on the piano, which always brought her solace later on. The brother had many socials at home with friends who danced, tolerating the younger sister.

When grandma died, mother lost her interest in social activities. Theater or cafes were all right, but no other entertainments. Mama became serious, but father liked to be entertained and went out with aunt Fela or, oh horror, alone. However, at that time, people were different. They were bound by ties of responsibility, allegiance to, and respect and

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\* Halina Nelken. *Pamiętnik z getta w Krakowie (A Diary From the Krakow Ghetto)*. Polski Fundusz Wydawniczy w Kanadzie. Toronto 1987.

\*\* From the International Study of Organized Persecution of Children, Sands Point, New York.

love for, the family. From far off, there were clouds but their own family life seemed secure.

Halina's diary begins in July 1938, with memories of a good time that summer. She changed schools in the fall, because of an anti-Semitic event, which occurred in a government school and was not directed against her. When father took her to the new school and saw how afraid she was, he smiled and said to her: "Don't be afraid, green frog." Felek was in Lwow and she had no one to quarrel with and had friends in school. Then comes the next vacation and then . . . .

In Krakow, people dug ditches and she participated, but she had a foreboding as if they dug their own graves. She ran to her mother who was worried as well, but daddy was good-natured and hugged her. She knew that her home was secure, but she did not feel good.

*There was chaos everywhere, and she could not stand it.*

"How difficult it must have been for her now that she has overcome the confusion of her prepuberty."

On September 1st, the day the Germans invaded Poland, she woke up without knowing where she was. It was as if the whole world suddenly held its breath. She opened the window and felt better. She suddenly heard an odd sound and then sirens began to shriek and she ran to her parents' bedroom to tell them. She kept repeating that it was only an alarm.

Sitting in the air-raid shelter, she was afraid. People were running away and she was alone, and she could not afford heroism. Her family ran away too, to Lwow and Zolkwia. In Zolkwia, she attended the gymnasium. In the meantime, they had lost mother and when her father heard that she was home and looking for them, they went home too. She remembers Lwow and Zolkwia as if through a mist, because she had the grippe. She longed for her mother and for the Krakow she loved. On coming home, the apartment looked so homey and quiet. She put on her school outfit even though she wouldn't go to school anymore. She could go to the Hebrew gymnasium, and her daddy registered her there, but she was not sufficiently prepared, and she did not know how she would cope there. But soon it was "after school." The Germans closed it. They threw the prayer books and the Torah from the temple into the mud. They pulled the beards of old Jews and shaved them. Jews had to do demeaning work. They would not allow them to study. She was sorry about the school, even though she had felt alien in it.

Here is a 15-year-old who was brought up in an assimilated way, celebrated Christmas and went to the temple once or twice a year. She did not feel Jewish yet she was made to feel that way by the Germans.

Her parents arranged for group tutoring but her friend Stasha did not go, saying she would learn by herself.

On the eighth of December, the Germans introduced a monstrous edict: the Jews had to wear an arm band with a Jewish star, so they could be recognized by everybody. She writes about the star of David: "That was the greatest Jewish king and once the star of Zion was a sign of triumph — now it is a sign of contempt."

One of the girls in their *Komplet* (private lessons during the German Occupation attended by several children) said she was ashamed to wear it and, since she did not look Jewish, she would not. She, Halina, did not look Jewish either. She would wear it: if everyone wore it, then she should. Her father said that one does not know to whom one is born. When mother smiled, he added: "If Jewish descent is a death-sentence, then I will die. I don't want to have a different fate from my nation's."

In the summer, Felek returned from German captivity. He was going to work as an assistant in the surgery of the Jewish Hospital. He was close and far from Halina, from the whole family. She loved him most, even though it hurt her when he called her "green frog" or similar names. She would not like to disagree with him, but she saw he did not do everything right. She tried to close her eyes and hold on to her brother. In the meantime, there was a first kiss exchanged with a boy she did not like. She watched the friends who visited Felek and flirted in corners. She was not interested. Maybe she was not fit for love, not that kind of love. Eventually, one of Felek's friends talked to her quite a bit about the history of art. He came to the drug store where she worked, but there was no time to talk. She hated the drug store. She longed for her piano which she called her friend. When Felek came home, she no longer could play, except when she was alone. When requisitioning began, they gave the piano to a former maid to keep for them. When the truck that took it left, her throat tightened.

"We went to visit you. Your sound was dampened and sad . . ." Now it stood in the hospital, in the little room of Felek. One day, when she was sick, she looked at her old writing. She was wrong writing that mother was a stranger to her, because she did not understand her childish worries. Mother was a true mother, available when needed.

*Halina is now beyond prepuberty, very attached to her mother, but longs for her school in which her mother took such an interest. She is growing and trying to find a place for everyone in her family. In October 1943, she adds that it is a terrible feeling to know that her parents are not able to help. They are themselves helpless, lost in this war, which cannot be compared to any other.*

Then began a social descent. They rented out two rooms. They were cold and hungry and nervous. There were frequent arguments. Felek annoyed her, laughed about her writings, and her parents had no time for such things. She wept like a victim, and looked for understanding outside home. She went to see Mietek, and since he was not home she went on to see 26-year-old Lolek, whom she had met before, and they had a good talk. Lately, she had had difficulties with Felek, and disagreeable experiences at home and in the drug store. It was easier to talk to Stacha, but no one understood her like Lolek (with the exception of Stacha).

“Why can strange people understand me better than my own brother?” she asked.

She was trying to disengage herself from the love of her life, her brother. She found solace in Stacha, who was grim, sad, and hopeless. She tried to stay calm. What else could she do? She did not want to be so clever and serious. She turned to another girl friend, Marysia, but she felt empty inside, sad and lacking in self-confidence. “Maryska,” she wrote, “give me courage, because I do not want to lose myself.” She hated her present life and she cursed it, though only in her diary.

*Everything all at once: hunger, no money, cold, hates work, and enemies everywhere.*

She had to apologize to a man from whom she received a *Kennkarte*. This gave her a headache, she was nervous, could not sleep, and her heart beat fast. But she had to go, said her father. However, that should not humiliate her. A few days later she said that the transition from a school girl to an adult came too fast. She could not hold on to it or be equal to it. She was HUNGRY! HUNGRY! She was lonesome and rebelled against this kind of life.

She went through the usual ups and downs of her mid-adolescence, but the circumstances aggravated it. They are the true cause for her depressive episodes. There is an almost sudden growing up, which unsettles her.

On March 8, 1941, she wrote that they had to go to the ghetto. Her girl friend Stacha had been resettled. She was besides herself. She did

not expect to lose her friend. For a while, she forgot her sorrows when they met, and they sang scout songs together. She was very sad. In leaving her apartment, she would leave the better part of her life. God knows whether she would ever return. She would never again have a friend like Stacha. She had learned something. She would not tell everyone about her inner thoughts. She did not trust anyone any more.

*The loss of trust makes her feel more grown up. She is looking for peers to be herself*

She went to visit Janek and put on her navy dress with a lace collar. Felek laughed at her, telling her she looked like a cross between a waitress and Ophelia. But Janek was very happy to see her. He had many books, and he read to her excerpts from his diary. She did not have a good feeling about it, but he was sincere. It was a pity that only his letters would remain between them, because he had to go.

She was left alone and cursed it. Her father had things to do for the Jewish community. Her mother was helping others pack for the ghetto. She was alone in the house. Mother would bring food home very late. On the 18th of March, they had to leave for the ghetto. She felt like the scum of society. She fought her sadness and tears while at the same time she joked with Felek. The only good thing about it was that the piano had returned. She fought her tears while she played Chopin. She writes:

“I don’t want to.

I don’t want my stomach to be crying out loud out of hunger, I don’t want to be cold. I don’t want my daddy to be so thin that his skin folds as if he were a skeleton . . . I don’t want Mama to be so miserable that there should be always hunger, cold, disillusionment, and embitterment in our house.”

Mama protected Felek from all this and he was an egoist. Why didn’t he have to share her burden?

Her heart broke on seeing her not-so-old parents looking like that, sad and dejected. The injustice of the Germans was transferred on her brother, whom mother shielded. Yet, at the same time, she was worried about her parents.

At the end of March, she felt that some good times were coming. She would live with Stacha and study and work, and Stacha would keep house or do whatever she wanted. If only Stacha knew how much she missed her. She was sad and found solace in playing the piano and listening to others playing.

She went to a coffee house and she was aware how different it was than those coffee houses frequented by her parents before the war. The boys with her pretended they were alive. They had a good time. The musicians (one of them was Felek) were good. Her friend Lonek showed her a photograph with an offensive poem about her. She was furious and ran home. She kept herself from crying out loud. When she went there again, it was not as bad as the first time. She made caricatures of the Viennese who were there. The man who liked her, whom she called the man from the Netherlands, laughed, but he did not understand that she liked but did not love him. When she was kissed again by one of the boys, she was furious. It was an abomination. She hit him in the face.

*The relationship to boys doesn't work out yet. She still needs a girl friend.*

She was afraid. They heard from their janitor that one of the Jews was killed by the Gestapo. He was a heroic figure and she was afraid. She felt empty inside. Ever since the ghetto, since Stacha left, the loss of an occupation and of an education had worked together to make her feel confused, with no future.

She had an amazing capacity to write clearly about her feelings.

On the 20th of April, she addresses herself again to Stacha:

“Stasiu, look at the window! It is gray and sad, the rain pours. It is cold like the cholera, in the room one feels the steam. Gray walls are around us, a gray sky and in the soul it is sad and not good. This is supposed to be spring?”

She returned to Stacha later in the summer, and deplored the fact that she had not even one girl friend. Stacha did not answer her letters (see similarity to Kestenberg, 1994). Her heart ached when she thought of the walks she had taken with her. She spent a lot of money writing to several girl friends, but no one was for her like Stacha. Only in closeness to her could she regain her equilibrium. She repeated Stacha's words: “Fate should not separate us.” She could not prevent her tears. Oh, if only one of them had stayed for consolation, she had no one. She ended by praying to God to see Stacha again. Perhaps she was not such a non-believer after all. Otherwise, where did the prayer come from?

When she finally received a letter from the beloved girl friend, she was not happy because she had severed her contact with the older people around her. Corner games were not for her. Perhaps, it would be better to wait, and in the arms of a beloved man realize that it was worth waiting. However, maybe she was a cold woman and not fitted for love? She

described an attack on Lonek who used to be in love with her and did not expect such an assault.

*This is a defensive feeling towards boys while she can clearly express her love for women. It may be, as subsequent feelings and behavior will show, oedipally connected so that she is unable to enjoy boys.*

*Outbursts of anger and sadness alternate. She is in a growing stage. She does not understand that she blames her parents for their predicament. She runs away to her peers, only to suffer disgust.*

She fantasized about living with Stacha as if they were man and wife, but she could only be “abominable” to her mother. She found it difficult to clean up. She now saw how difficult it was to fetch coal from the cellar, make a fire, and do the laundry. Yesterday, there had been a general cleaning and today her legs felt numb. She felt compassion for her mother, who looked so pale and feeble. And now father and Felek had had a row. She cried and Mama cried too.

Yet she went out with the boys and wrote poetry, mostly about how low she had sunk because of the war. She worked without pay in an organization for children. Once she felt well, she behaved like a small child, full of animus and courage, but, in the evening, she was interested, she said, in world politics. She wanted to live.

*There is a swift alternation between egoism and altruism, which befits her age. Is this such a great egoism? Is this self-defense or the instinct for life?*

Soon she got a job looking after eight-year-old Rutka. At first, she was afraid of the child. In the evening, she washed dishes instead of having fun with the boys and girls in courtyards or at the gate, as servant girls used to have with soldiers.

Accosted by a boy whom her girl friend liked, she rebuked him and did not want to see him again. How else could she behave towards a friend? she asked. She tried to commit suicide because the boys and girls annoyed her greatly. She was not strong, but she regretted nothing except that she would never see Stacha again and it was spring. She found in the cabinet six tablets of Luminal, three aspirins, and a headache pill. She had begun to swallow this concoction when Felek came in with his girl, Fela. Felek ran up to her and began to kiss and embrace her, saying: “Stupid Lilioc, what are you doing?” She asked him not to tell Fela or she would laugh at her. Then he told Halina she was the “unfinished skeleton,” and asked her to play four-handed with him at the piano. He took her for a walk and to a coffee house. He promised not to tell their parents.

That night, father brought lilac home, and she buried her face in it and felt it was good to live in this world despite everything.

She felt like going down on her knees before her mother. Instead, she quarreled with Felek and behaved brusquely. Why was it, she asked, that one behaved so badly in front of people one loved? When her father found her a job which she disliked, she was furious and she felt like crying. Mama finally said: "You have to find her another occupation."

*The changeability in mood belongs to a stage of growth in adolescence. Soon she turns to poetry as a way out.*

She read poetry. When her friends drank liquor, she refused it and instead wrote many poems.

On the 13th of July, she had a noise in her ears, and vertigo, and felt immoral. Her father caught them drinking in her house; there was a row and she cried.

A few days later, she wrote that she would like to get rid of what was worrying her but could not. She could not stop writing but her excessive melancholy persisted.

*The melancholy also belongs to her stage of development, in which mood changes prevail.*

On the 20th of September 1941, she wrote that she was now 17. She deplored the fact that she had wasted the most beautiful part of her life, from 15 to 17.

On returning to her little ward, Rita, she was told that her mother had been illegally trading and had run away together with the aunt. They had imprisoned the grandfather, and she was under house arrest together with her grandmother. Then Rita leaned out of the window, calling to the children in the street: "My grandfather is in jail, yours is not, ha ha!" What the child said was true except that her mother had not been trading at all, she was politically incorrect. Even those who cooperated with Germans were treated that way.

Halina was wondering whether she would be able to leave. After playing with the child and reading stories, they stood in sunshine by the window. Passers-by looked up, because the whole ghetto knew about what had happened. Finally, an official told a policeman to shut the window. Father made frantic signs to her that he would intervene with the Jewish community and police. Hours passed, and she felt bitterly that this was her birthday. When she came home, the neighbors opened their windows and greeted her as a heroine. She concluded this entry in these words:



“I am 17 years old; I am young and I want to live, and not only look and swallow without control, lost, closed in this cage to be destroyed...”

She did not want to do physical work because the war would last another two years and what would become of her. She began to have odd attacks of dizziness. Even though she cried for several days and people called her crazy, she hated the new job. She thought all this a nightmare. Her cheeks were flushed, she cried when she got home from the factory. For the first time, she wept bitterly about herself

On the 25th of October, two weeks after she had begun her new job, she made the following comment on herself. She felt like an old mare, she had become ugly. In the spring, she had looked different. But now she looked apathetic and washed out. She had put on more weight and grown taller in the way an adolescent should but now she felt heavy and awkward. Maybe because she was so cold, and wore many sweaters and jackets. Yet she still felt cold. There were two more people sleeping in the house. They tried to forget their worries in the evening. There was an unwritten law that they should not talk about their humiliations. They would just have to bear them. She had been looking forward to the visit of some girls and boys, but no, she did not enjoy the visit.

*Just as she turns 17, she enters the stage of adolescent differentiation, and begins to feel ugly and awkward. She looks forward to meeting her peers and then doesn't like them. She has contradictory feelings.*

“That is our life — torn shoes, no bread, and this little bounded world!”

She wrote that she wanted to live, learn, work, and love. She stood in the street and felt cold, and observed people going into a coffee house. They were the new, well-dressed aristocracy, who could afford to indulge themselves. The Nazis had made them into this low type. She would like to take walks in her beloved city, but she was Jewish and could not.

*A feeling of helplessness overcomes her. She cannot fight the Germans by herself.*

She caught a cold and some friends visited her. What do women talk about? About love. They were so experienced. One of them said the three most important things were: 1) love 2) health 3) money. She would have liked to change the order to health first, then money, and then love. It is true that life was empty without love but one could fill it with health and money. If she were wealthy, she would travel, look at the wonders of

nature, and of the human brain. However, till the war was over, could she be “someone who can travel?”

On the 27th of November, she wrote that she did not feel young but old, heavy, sad, and embittered. Yet she felt full of desire. Dreams combined with a great longing.

*Here we have a combination of adolescent despair and a reaction to the persecution. She feels old and embittered.*

She would never be more than a dilettante. She would like to go away with Jozek, who would fight for human dignity, but he did not want to take her.

She had been ordered by her boss to go to an engineer called Alexander Weissberg and they took a liking to each other. He could be her father, he was a man of forty. He was constantly at the store. He invited her to a coffee house, and she went. She noted details of their conversation. She blushed when he told her about Dorian Grey, who did not hurt the pure girl he met under the apple tree. She felt he was handsome and secure. She felt so sure of herself when she walked arm in arm with him on the way home. She began to long for him but only allowed him a light kiss.

She went for a visit on New Year's Eve, and the engineer was there. She drank and laughed and danced. She felt so good with him; when he kissed her gently, she fell asleep leaning on his arm. This was all untrue, this was what she wanted, but her own stupidity prevented it. He asked her to come to his place for a party, but she did not. She felt all alone.

When she saw him, she said she would have to talk to him. He was so nice, her self-esteem rose. But when she arrived at the meeting place, he was not there. She did not know what to say or do when he came in the afternoon. He began to kiss her, something she had wanted badly, but she became confused and said: that's not why she wanted to see him. The afternoon ended in a discussion about German literature. He left her with dreams and desires, and angry at herself because she did so much want to have a talk with him but when she met him she could not. She longed for him. She began to think a lot about Stacha.

*Here, positive Oedipal feelings come to the foreground. Her father lost his authority and his superior position, and the engineer rose to heights formerly occupied by her father. When she becomes too afraid of her Oedipal desires, she turns to her girl friend.*

When called on to remove snow, she and her school friends walked through the streets laughing and kissing like children. She wondered

why she could not be like that with the man she longed for. She also felt good at home, though a year ago she had felt strange there. She wrote a eulogy on her mother. Mama was svelte and energetic. She loved her very much, but sometimes could not bear her malicious and despotic orders. She loved looking at her when she lay in bed reading with father's spectacles. She especially loved her mother's hands, which worked so hard, making fires, cooking, mending, making brushes, and doing the communal accounts in her beautiful handwriting.

She then returned to her beloved Alex Weisberg, who was expected to be deported. She called herself stupid, as the earlier adolescent did (see preceding chapter), when she did not receive a boy's attentions. She reported a long conversation with Alexander, who asked her why she herself did not look for a young man. She was waiting for love to arrive, she answered, although she knew very well she was in love with him. She admired him when he recited and said laughingly that he was a genius, like her, then caressed her cheek. That was a good, fatherly caress. He hinted that he loved her, but she wanted only the proximity of a father. Again, like the girl in *A Diary From the Holocaust* (Kestenberg, 1994), she wrote that when she was upset, she concealed it with jokes and gaiety. She felt his kisses on her cheek. Her mother remarked that she was safer with this ladies' man than with a contemporary.

She missed him when she did not see him, and her brother poisoned her life by his rows. He had changed completely since he had begun going out with Genia. Genia's parents were simple, honest people. The father was an upholsterer. Genia stayed in the same class for two years, till her parents took her out of school to help at home.

One day, her brother swore at her and provoked her into asking him whether he talked that way to his "sprat." He threw rude words at her. She fell on him and hit him, her teeth closed on his cheek so fiercely that he could not remove them. Finally, father separated them. She could not breathe, she had a ringing in her ears. Father fell on his bed, and wept, and said his children were hitting each other just because of a stupid girl. Her mother came running in with a glass of water, and said to her she should not make a drama of it. She always defended Felek. Father asked them to shake hands, and admonished Felek to look after his only sister. Turning to her, he said that she fell on her brother like a wild cat. They shook hands, but for the time being they had lost their affection for one another.

She waited for Alexander, but, when he did not come, she ate all the cookies and then went out. On her return home, she found a note from him that he had arrived late. She wondered why this man could so confuse her. She became stupid and sad. On subsequent visits, he made several attempts at physical contact, but she always detached herself.

She arrived late for another meeting with Alex, and found out from her parents that he had been at a concert with a woman. It hurt her though it did not surprise her. She never again mentioned him. She forbade herself to think of him.

*Such was the outcome of her first innocent love affair, during which she called herself a frigid woman.*

She went to work with other girls at an air field, where the young pilots were nice to them. One of them told her she had a head, youth and humor. They treated the Jewish girls like ladies and the Aryan kitchen help like servants. One of them fell in love with her and wanted to get engaged to her. She said: "Verboten." They exchanged addresses.

She no longer worked at the air field where she had had fun and did not work too hard. She felt like a wilted flower. It was a year since she had seen Stacha. She felt sorry for the French prisoners, and for her German admirer who wrote to her from the Eastern front. She felt *Weltschmerz*. Tears came, and she had no hope. What would happen to her?

*Halina has reached the differentiation stage, but is beset by doubts, and lacks the humor of a girl who can overcome separation. She still longs for Stacha, because she feels that her mother, whom she loves very much, does not understand her. She is ashamed that she has compassion for her enemies.*

People were being deported. They would lament: I have lost my wife, my sister, my brother. She was waiting to be deported with a group of people. She felt she was tall and calm, but that she would break down if she allowed herself one tear. Then someone said her parents were in the community center and wanted her there. She ran out of the room. She had to abandon the piano though she needed it to calm herself. The piano at the air field attracted her but was forbidden. She hated the ghetto at this time. The next day, it would be closed down. She would be on her own, her family life was ended. She would be alone among strangers. She deplored and longed for her mother's ministrations.

She was afraid to be without her mother and father, but she had gone to the air field where they had six beds, which they arranged as best they

could. She was hit by an angry corporal and her work was not satisfactory. She had never been hit before and she was humiliated. The next day she asked to be transferred to another type of work but heard that the corporal had broken a bone. When she passed him, he clenched his fist and threatened her. She went away laughing. Now she was in a camp and life there passed quickly. She went to visit the ghetto, and her father accompanied her on her return, then went back to work. On the 13th of March, the ghetto was liquidated. Her parents were still there. She still worked at the air field.

A German by the name of Paul Mueller saved the diaries. He gave her note-books, and obtained a *Kennkarte*, which saved her. Her things were passed on to her old Polish friend, Hanka. She was to go to Mueller's mother in Germany, but worried about her parents who had been sent to Plaszow concentration camp.

Now she was separated from her parents for the first time in her life, and she dreamt about freedom. She was stranded, and could not get out because the walls were guarded by soldiers.

She too ended up in Camp Plaszow. She was told about an execution and asked: "What did they do?" Everybody started laughing. They saw she had had a fine time at the air field and laughed at her ignorance.

She could not get used to working in the latrines, and a great anger took hold of her, but she was helpless. She began to write poetry. She swore when her mother laid out her dinner on the bed. Her mother objected to the curses, she should not lower herself to the level of the oppressors. She began to cry loudly. She would kill herself. She could not stand the barracks — so many people, so much noise, endless roll-calls, smelly soup and frozen feet. She would kill herself. A woman told her she should be ashamed of herself. Her mother had made her a meal and she complained. She was ashamed, to be sure. When she went to sleep, her mother whispered to her that it was true they stood at roll-call but they had to stand too, and it was not clear whose slave was whose.

Her courageous mother sustained them all with her cleverness, her realism and her strength of spirit. Halina could not run away. The goodness of a woman who had helped Halina, and told her to quieten down, made her stay. A spiritual tiredness overcame her. "As long as you do not have to think." When she got up again, a guard threw some soup at her but missed. She could not help smiling. Then he screamed, and threw all the plates of soup at her but missed. He told her to report to him the next

day. Sleep would not come. She was weary during the roll-call. The next day she reported to him, and he screamed at her in an accent she did not understand. He tried to strike her in the face but missed and struck her arm instead. He kicked her into a corner of the office, and told her to stay there. He came back and, standing on a chair, hit her till her head whirled. She was in great physical pain but had to smile about this small man who had to hold on to the lapel of her coat not to fall from the chair. Then he left. On her return to the barrack, she lost consciousness, but her friend gave her cold compresses and said it would be better by the time she married.

Her father was gassed in Auschwitz, and this gave her great pain. There were more humiliations, especially after they got clothing made out of crude bags and cut and stitched it till it looked chic. She was beaten up by the female guard, and frightened by a vicious dog. She met good SS men as well. One gave her enough to buy a lump of sugar.

She met a humorous young man with whom she had a date after work, and wrote a poem about him. A man called Buettner helped survivors. When her mother was to be deported, Halina wanted to join her and Buettner helped. She felt responsible for her mother, in a reversal of roles. But it turned out that her mother was waiting for her in the barrack. When her mother had been about to be deported, she heard a voice calling her. Halina had rescued her mother from Auschwitz. The transport, intended for Gdansk, was sunk.

Halina described the female guards' sadism and lack of compassion. They beat all the prisoners except for the Dutch and two others. When her mother once more figured on the list, together with Genia, Felik's wife, Halina asked Buettner to put her on the list as well. He sighed and did so, saying: "Now the three Nelkens will be together." They took leave of Felek, and of her mother's girl friends, and left. On arrival at Auschwitz, she realized it was true they were burning people. They were left under the naked sky at night. There was nothing to wash with. They lay there, yellowish-gray, dusty, wrinkled, and in physical and mental pain. The forest, covered with smoke, looked very sad. They had to undress and parade in front of Mengele. Thousands of naked bodies could not be beautiful. She received two pairs of men's pajamas and a napkin. She loathed herself because of her dirtiness. When she went to sleep, she dreamt about Krakow, and home, then the morning brought reality. After a few days, the border between those two became hazy.

Reality was a nightmare, and the dream about freedom became the real world. Whoever would look at them, now, would feel aversion at first, and then, perhaps, compassion.

*At this point, Halina becomes an adult. She skips some of the preadult consolidation (Kestenberg, 1975). Cool and collected, she saves her mother repeatedly. She admires her mother's strength of character and identifies with her.*

Mother made them wash every day, even in dirty snow, or else they would have become *mussulmen*. When mother was again placed in a barrack preceding the death-transport, Halina went to the guard, and told him that her mother had been selected to live and she had been left in the barrack by mistake. He asked her name and said he would correct it. When she told her mother, she was stupefied. Didn't Halina know that talking to SS men was *verboten*? A miracle saved her mother. Halina was like a pawn directed by a higher force. She had not thought it out, it was blind instinct and a lightning reaction.

*Once more, it is she who has saved her mother because of her courage and determination. Once more she writes poems, which she reads to three other women prisoners.*

She worked in an office while her poor mother worked building a road in front of their barrack. Halina saw how she was breaking stones. She went up to the guard and asked that her mother be transferred to the office. She used the same method as before to save her mother.

The word *Kochany* (the male beloved) had been adopted in every camp language, perhaps because the Poles were the first in Auschwitz. These were male prisoners who obtained food for their beloved. They also sent smuggled letters. One of them gave her a little notebook, so that she could keep her diary and write poems. He brought her a gift of bacon from a gentile prisoner whom she never met. She does not know whether he survived. However, their correspondence introduced a personal note which helped them survive dreary reality. When she was invited to the men's barracks for a concert, she remembered the face of her father during a concert in Krakow. His face shone with concentration. Each note tore at her heart. He was not there any more. His murderers were there instead, and sacrilegiously listened to divine music.

At the end of November, a German came by, accompanied by Buettner from Plaszow. She did not let anybody see that she knew him. He brought letters from Plaszow. Felek wrote he was being transferred from Plaszow to Gross Rosen. When Sell (a work group leader) came in

he asked Buettner what he was doing there, and Buettner replied without a change of expression that he had been looking for him.

At the beginning of January, there were two air-raids. They did not go to the shelter. The Germans began to think about liquidating Auschwitz. In the women's camp, they started to erect gallows. Her mother felt defeated for the first time.

When the Germans began to transport them from the camp, Genia did not want to run away. She wanted to go to Gross Rosen with them. She was afraid. Halina got some milk from a peasant woman and brought it to her mother. More and more she was beginning to take care of her mother. When the time came to go, Genia started screaming: "They left me alone. Halina, where did you run away to?" This reminded Halina of the time when another girl's cry had given her away, and she could not escape from Plaszow. Her conscience did not allow her to abandon Genia. She joined Genia and the others being sent from the camp. She felt sorry for her. And so they went through the hardest times together until they got to Krakow. However, they left mother hidden, hoping for the best.

On the way, she met Buettner, who looked as wrinkled as they did. She did not know whether he would recognize her. When he asked her about her mother, she cried. He told her to continue running as long as Polish soil was under her feet. She did not know what to do, she felt responsible for the inadequate Genia, who lost some bread and a blanket. All they had left was her toothbrush, a comb, a spoon, and a cup.

There was no Mama, no Felek, she was all alone and had moreover to take care of Genia. Buettner brought her some conserves and bread, and told her to hold her head high. She never saw him again. (Later, he was shielded by survivors who testified on his behalf. He spent only a short time in the jail for SS men.) Finally, they arrived at Ravensbruck.

Hunger prevailed there. They talked about food obsessively. They entertained each other with verses, songs and telling stories. At one point, she wrote a long poem on a piece of wood, and rallied her wits to read it to the group. Then she fainted from hunger. She awoke with a piece of bread in her mouth. Her friend said: "Only a few more days. Hang on."

Then she contracted typhus, and her women-friends had to support her at roll-call. She does not know how she managed to get to a train to Malchow. She travelled together with other Polish women from Krakow. She felt better right away. There was no question that the war was coming to its end. They tried to survive by force of spirit.



Bombs fell and she was covered with a blanket. She was holding Genia, and her head was on another girl's knees. That girl was saying: "If I am to die, then better at the hands of friends." When the bombs stopped, a Polish woman from Warsaw called out to them, and told the Jews to come and learn to work. Why were these women, who were prisoners like themselves, laughing at the way they worked? They could hardly stand on their feet. However, when Halina began to recite Polish poetry, she was invited to an evening of entertainment.

They were constantly trying to avoid the front. They marched in pouring rain, exhausted and egged on by the guards. Worse, however, was hunger, from which prisoners fainted. She supported Genia as they walked, but Genia wanted to give up.

The Germans disappeared, and then there was *freedom*. Three former prisoners decided to work for a peasant who gave them clothing and good food. When Genia came to visit, she found an SS uniform in a box. Whose was it? The man who had tortured Halina's father? Or harried them in Plaszow? A Russian soldier finally arrived, and Halina fell into his arms, and told him she was from Poland. He assembled the German ex-prisoners in the yard. When the peasant invited the ex-prisoners in for coffee, fury overcame Halina. Yet she understood that revenge could not be commensurate with the offense. She could not avenge herself on the Germans. She did not want to be their judge. They could live with their bad conscience. Halina had had enough blood, corpses, and hate.

Halina was *free*. She survived the war; she survived Hitler; she was born again; she was young; she was free. Before her was the world.

Her world was Krakow. That is where he Mama and her house were. The free would return to Krakow.

They went home pushing a cart which held a quantity of linen Genia had stolen from the Germans. They were two among many who were going home — Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, Czechoslovakians, and Hungarians. When they reached the train, they were helped to put their belongings on it. They were never again to be more happy than they were on that train. There was a full moon, the air smelt sweet. The world was beautiful, but more beautiful was the consciousness of freedom.

When they reached Krakow, her house on Dlugosza Street was still there, but there was no Mama. The neighbors were helpful, and she slept at their houses because her family's apartment was occupied by people who refused to move out. They registered at the Jewish Committee, which

had a kitchen, a clinic, and a commission to examine the crimes of the Nazis. They gave her 100 zlotys and a ration card. She met a girl who took her to her apartment, for Genia had jaundice. They went to the clinic, and then began the search for Mama. She looked for her at the peasant's house but she was no longer there. What had become of her? She felt it was useless to be saved if she hadn't a brother and a mother and father.

She heard from a newcomer that her mother was at Mauthausen. Later, a miserable-looking woman knocked at the door. She did not recognize her until she heard the voice. It was Mama! The war was over at last, and they began a normal life. Mother found work at the Historical Institute, and Halina went to school half the day and the other half worked as a stenographer.

In an epilogue, Halina writes that it is a mistake to think survival in the camps was possible without cooperation with others. The inhuman conditions revealed a person's character. The bad became worse, the good became saints. The survivors have a responsibility to testify for the many dead. It was Halina's unyielding faith in humankind that made her persist and left her unembittered.

### **Discussion**

Halina's diary records everyday life in the ghetto, in the camps, and on the death marches. We observe an adolescent transformed into an adult in inhuman circumstances. She had her adolescent quirks — she tried to kill herself, she fell in love with an older man. However, she went through mid- and late-adolescence, through the stages of growth, differentiation, and preadult consolidation in dreadful circumstances, and eventually grew up more quickly. She remained attached throughout to her mother, whom she admired. However, during the period when she first began to protect her mother, she was at the stage of preadult consolidation. In a way, she became the mother and Mama became her child. She was hungry a great deal of the time but never lost her youthful vigor. She was always resourceful. Being on her own, she acquired adult experience before she could form deep object relationships.

After I had finished this paper about Halina's diary, I went to Boston to interview her. She received me in a cosy apartment, where she told me what she did after the war. She had studied art and had researched the work of Humboldt, on whom she lectured at German universities. She had married a man with whom she was not in love and had a son, and

a grandson. Her husband had not much feeling for her child, and eventually she divorced him. His mother was anti-Semitic and hard to get along with.

She had heard about Alex through a friend, who told her he had fought the Nazis, and ended up in Russia, where he had been imprisoned. After his release, he had settled in Paris with his Polish wife.

At a certain time, she left because her brother and his wife lived in Texas and he wanted her to come. He did not want anyone to know he was Jewish. His wife wore a cross. He had three children, all musical. She had worked in Texas as a curator, but later gave up her work there because she could not bear her brother's concealment of his Jewishness, and his later use of the Polish name which had saved him in Mauthausen.

She has had a man-friend for the last ten years, and has done all she could to let her brother's children know about their family background. However, she cannot get along with her sister-in-law, who married again after Felek's death. She is not in love with anyone, but her friend cares for her, and she appreciates it. She has done much to save his life against his children's wishes.

One wonders whether she has changed much from the time when she kept her diary. She had been infatuated with Alex, but then had stopped thinking about him. She had been too hurt. She had been hurt also by her brother and her husband. She was now translating her diary into English. She was proud of her accomplishments as an art historian. She showed me her work on Humboldt.

This very worthwhile person has missed out in life because of early persecution. She had been attached to her parents and to her brother, and her brother's actions had hurt her a good deal. She could not grasp that her brother and sister-in-law were still in hiding, or why their children were not brought up Jewish. Her strong Jewish identity persisted. She still had a strong superego and great ambition, and had accomplished much in bringing up her son without a father. He was a remarkable young man.

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