



TALKING ABOUT GENOCIDE - SURVIVORS OF THE HOLOCAUST

INTRODUCTION

There were survivors, and a small number of them were children. Later, as adults, they started to talk about what happened - though for some it was many years before they could end their silence. Some of them have made a point of going into schools and clubs to talk about their experience of the Holocaust. They do this because they know personal testimony and evidence are important. We human beings need to realise the terrible acts we are capable of, so we can learn to stop them. If we are helped to understand this when still young, there's some hope for the future.

Here are glimpses from the stories of eight lives. All of them offer a way in to talk with children (at what age? - it depends on them) about the Holocaust and its burden of cruelty and grief.

Some aspects that might be discussed have been highlighted, as a starting point. But generally it's desirable that young people hearing/reading all or any of these stories are left to respond, question, and search for more information themselves: supported, but not led.

KRULIK'S STORY

When the Second World War began in September 1939, Krulik was 9 years old. Bombs began falling on his home town in Poland almost at once, and the family hid in the cellar. 'It was horrendous. People were sobbing, praying, calling out...' Schools were closed, and in October the town's Jewish families (24,000 people) were ordered to live, isolated from the rest of the Poles, in a 'ghetto' marked off for them.

Life was hard in the ghetto. For a time Krulik's father had no job. Being small, Krulik learned how to get in and out of the ghetto without being noticed. With some other boys, he smuggled in tobacco and cigarettes and sold them in the streets to make money. Once he was caught by six Gestapo men, who 'kicked me around like a football'.

Every Jew over the age of 12 had to wear an armband with the star of David on it. Krulik's father earned some money by making these armbands. Then in 1941 he was given a job in the local glass factory. This meant he was of use to the Germans as a worker, so when the Jews were rounded up in 1942 to be sent to concentration camps, he was let alone. But Krulik's mother and sister were not; they were taken to the camp at Treblinka to be killed. Now there were only 2,000 Jews left in Krulik's town.

Krulik began to work with his father at the glass factory. At the beginning and end of each shift, everyone had to pass a checkpoint between the factory and the ghetto. One day, the Germans selected 25 of the smallest boys, including Krulik, and shut them up in the synagogue. The boys found 500 Jews already imprisoned there: they were people who'd so far managed to avoid being sent to the camps. Krulik's father went to an official and asked

him to get the Gestapo to release the boys: 'They're skilled workers: they need them,' he said. The official was kind, and the boys were released after three days.

After working at the glass factory for over a year, Krulik and his father were moved to another factory, this time making weapons. But it seemed they couldn't avoid the camps for ever. On Christmas Day 1944, just after Krulik's 16th birthday, he and his father arrived at Buchenwald concentration camp. 'We were stripped completely naked, in the freezing cold,' Krulik remembers, 'and herded into a large shower room. We were afraid that it was a gas chamber, and lots of people were screaming and crying. But it really was a shower room.' The heads of all the prisoners were shaved. After that they were taken to a disinfecting room, and at last given some clothes: a pair of striped trousers and a jacket each.

Krulik now had a strange experience. 'On that first day I became completely paralysed, simply from fear. I couldn't move my arms or legs for 24 hours. I was lucky my father was with me and could look after me.'

He recovered quickly, and got a job in the kitchens - which meant he was able to smuggle food out to his father. But after a few weeks his father was sent to a different camp; Krulik missed him badly. A couple of months later, Krulik noticed a dreadfully thin man lying exhausted on the ground in the prison's main square. 'He looks a bit like Dad,' Krulik thought - and then realised with horror that it was indeed his father, starving and ill. Now it was Krulik who took care of his father, instead of the other way round.

Towards the end of the war, when American soldiers were already getting near to the camp, the prisoners were hurriedly marched out so that they wouldn't be discovered. Krulik took hold of his father's hand to make sure they would march together, but the guards wouldn't let the sick man leave: he could hardly stand. Krulik has never forgotten how he felt, unable in the end to save his father, who died soon afterwards. 'I was so very helpless, and utterly lost. To this day I can't get over it. He came so close to freedom! - but it wasn't his fate to survive.'

Krulik was marched to the nearest city and put on a train going south and full of prisoners like himself. They were finally rescued by Russian troops. Just in time: Krulik was ill with typhoid fever, and was taken to hospital straight away.

Then he was offered accommodation in Britain. His first stay was in the Lake District. 'I was given a room to myself with a single bed, and blankets, and other things we'd been deprived of for so long. I went to the cinema a lot, and walked, and rowed boats on Lake Windermere. It was heaven. Never in my life had I known such luxuries.'

Krulik stayed in Britain and became a watchmaker. He has three sons, of whom he is very proud, and grandchildren too. Fifty years after the Holocaust he made the enormous effort that was needed to tell his story. 'My children always wanted to know, and I always found it very difficult to tell them. But now I feel the time is right to try to tell them what happened to me and my family and the Jewish people.'

The enforced isolation of groups of people of the same nationality, race or religion is one of the many steps that can lead to genocide and war. How easily can it happen?

HUGO'S STORY

Hugo was born in Hungary. In 1944, when he was 13, the German army invaded and took over the country. Hugo and his parents and younger brother were immediately forced to live in a Jewish ghetto. After a couple of months all 10,000 of the ghetto's inhabitants were deported to the concentration camp at Auschwitz.

Hugo and his family were tired and frightened as the train pulled into Auschwitz station. On the platform the SS were pushing and shoving people about. There were also some gaunt, strange men in striped uniforms and strange hats; they were carting any bags or cases off the train. One of them caught young Hugo's attention. Hugo noticed that this man kept saying in a low voice to any boys he saw, 'You're 18 and you've got a trade'. Hugo thought the man must be crazy. But his father realised that the man was a prisoner trying to help the children; and he explained this to his son. So when an SS man asked his age, Hugo firmly answered '19', and added, 'I'm a carpenter'. Sadly, his 10-year-old brother couldn't say either of these things. Hugo never saw his little brother, or his mother, again.

Hugo and his father were sent to work on a building site: a holiday town for German officers was being built there, they were told. After that they were marched to another camp. In the mornings, each day of the march, there were always some people too weak or ill to stand; as the fitter marchers set off, they could hear the sound of shooting behind them. At the beginning there were 3,500 people on the forced march ; less than 900 survived. Hugo's father died too, of starvation and typhoid fever.

In the spring of 1945, when the war was over, Hugo ended up in Prague with a crowd of other Jewish orphans like himself. They heard there was a chance for refugees under 16 to go to Britain. So Hugo, already a natural leader, told his young fellow orphans: 'Right: all the boys shave. Girls: no make-up. We are all children'. It worked.

When the plane taking Hugo and his friends to Britain stopped off in Belgium, local Jewish women made a point of welcoming them with refreshments. They were offered milky tea, and the 'children' were appalled: they thought only sick people drank milk. Sick people wouldn't be allowed into the UK. 'Don't drink it!' said Hugo, and told the friendly women 'We're all healthy'. Then they went off to drink tapwater from the lavatory washbasin instead.

Hugo had confidently told his companions that they were going to London, bright lights and an exciting life. In fact they were taken to a farm school near a small village in Scotland. 'The boys were mad at me.' But there were some people who were anything but mad at him: a group of very small children who had somehow survived the Holocaust and needed care and love and comforting. Hugo and other older teenagers spent time with these troubled children, and worked on the summer camps arranged specially for them.

Hugo later became a famous rabbi. In 1990 he went with his daughters to revisit his birthplace in Hungary, one of many villages in the Carpathian mountains where Jews and non-Jews had lived side by side for centuries without quarrelling or hating each other. Hugo began to weep as they wandered through what had once been his father's vineyards. 'It was so beautiful - I had such a beautiful childhood,' he said, half in joy at the memory, half in sorrow at how it had ended.

When groups of people are singled out for persecution, the organisers persuade or force people outside the victim groups to take part in persecuting them. The inflaming of prejudice is also one of the first steps taken by people planning genocide. What examples of it are there in history, and what happened afterwards? What examples of this are happening now? How should it be resisted?

ROSE K'S STORY

Rose's father had been a prisoner-of-war in Russia during the First World War, and came home ill and depressed. It was Rose's mother who was the strong one. She earned a living making wigs and kept the family (her husband and their six children) together. 'We were very poor,' Rose remembers, 'and we had to wear second-hand clothes and shoes. We lived in just two rooms.' Rose first experienced the widespread hostility to Jews one day when she was admiring a hat in a shop window. A young woman pushed her angrily and called her a 'dirty Jew'. Rose ran off, but the woman followed her. She was now very frightened, and ran blindly into an apartment building she didn't know. Fortunately a Jewish woman who lived there spotted poor Rose, and hid her until the other woman had gone.

Like so many other Jews when war came, Rose and her family were forced to live in a ghetto. Here both her father and one of her brothers died of hunger. Everyone who survived was terrified of being deported to the concentration camps. The family agreed to stick together at all costs - if one was selected for deportation, they told each other, they would all go. One day their mother was selected: but the children found they simply could not move, frozen by fear. On this occasion, however, Rose's mother wasn't deported after all.

In fact it wasn't until 1944 that Rose and her family were taken to Auschwitz. It was a dreadful journey by train - people were crammed in the wagons like cattle, the bad smell was overpowering, and there was no water or food. As soon as they arrived at the station, Rose's brother and two of her sisters, one of them with a baby, were carried off just as Rose was trying to give a bottle of water to the baby. A stranger snatched the bottle away. 'There was such terror and anxiety. Your mind was dazed.' Now only Rose and her sister Hinda were left. Their heads were shaved and they were given clothes that didn't fit. Then they were sent to a slave labour camp.

Rose and Hinda were in the camp at Belsen when the war ended. British troops were on their way to liberate the camp, so the Germans tried hurriedly to kill the prisoners. Hinda was ill, and Rose risked being shot as she tried to get food for her. When she got back, Hinda had disappeared. 'Now I was all alone.' It was a little while before Rose herself was strong enough to try to find her sister. She learned later that Hinda had been rescued by the Red Cross, but had been too ill to recover. Rose was indeed all alone.

Rose came to England, where she married and had children. One of the things that makes her particularly sad is that her children had no grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins on their mother's side: no extended family to love and belong to.

Once their prejudice has been roused, people stop seeing the objects of their hate as human beings with feelings like their own: everyone is lumped together as 'the other' or 'the enemy'. The next step is to dehumanise 'the other' altogether, thinking of them as 'beasts' and treating

them that way. How can we ensure that we don't let ourselves do this? How could we ensure that other people don't do it?

ABRAHAM'S STORY

Abraham was 13 when the war began. He often spent time in the workshop run by his father and uncle. 'Later, in the camps, that helped to save me: I would pretend I was a skilled worker.' But he was only 4 when his aunt and baby cousin said goodbye: they were going to join another uncle abroad, to get away from poverty and anti-Semitism.

Abraham's father was an important man in the community: a local councillor and the Jewish representative in the departments of welfare and trade. There was a Polish army barracks up the road, and 200 of the soldiers there were Jewish; each year Abraham's father negotiated for these men to have leave during the annual religious ceremonies of Passover.

Abraham went to the Jewish school and studied Hebrew and the Jewish religion every day. After classes he played with his friends - Jews and non-Jews together - in the street or on the improvised football ground near the river. Boys from the local Catholic school often threw stones and taunted the Jewish boys. 'We'd try to defend ourselves, but were most often the losers: there were so many more of them.' All the same, 'until 1939 we got on well with our non-Jewish neighbours and they respected us. After the war began I can't truthfully say that this was still the case.'

Like all the Jews in Poland, Abraham and his family were forced to live in separate ghettos, first in their home town and then in another. After two years of struggling to survive in the ghetto, Abraham and his father were sent to a local labour camp: 'I was forced to work producing bullets for the German war effort' - against his own country. His mother was killed at Treblinka.

Then Abraham was transferred to a labour camp in Germany. Several thousand Jews worked here, first building their own barracks to live in and then on the factory line, assembling anti-tank rifles. It was at this camp that Abraham's lessons in his father's workshop came in useful, and he was lucky enough to get work outside the camp, doing repairs to the SS men's living quarters. The Germans treated him well, and once when he fell into wet concrete he was rescued, given 2 days off and extra food. This second camp as a whole was more humane than the first: 'there were no selections, or executions, or crematoriums, but there was still fear from whippings, disease and starvation - and no medicine. I had an infected thumbnail, and it had to be pulled off by a Dutch prisoner who was a doctor, using ordinary pliers.'

After the war Abraham was one of the lucky few who managed to make his way home. He also found his father, who had also managed to survive several deportations and concentration camps. But his father urged Abraham to leave and try to get to Britain, maybe find his long-lost aunt. On Abraham's first day in England, 'I thought I was in heaven, there were white sheets on the bed and there was white bread to eat.'

But after six years of horrifying experiences it was hard to acclimatise. 'I found it difficult to eat with a knife and fork: we only had spoons in the camps, or ate with our fingers. We were quite wild, too. We weren't used to proper social behaviour. And we were especially difficult where

food was concerned. We would pass the food along the tables, underneath so that the plates were hidden, and pile several helpings onto one plate. Then we'd complain that some of us hadn't had any food. It was also faster to shovel the food into our mouths with spoons.

'At the local cinema only one or two of us would pay. The rest would sneak in while the cashier wasn't looking. We demanded more pocket money, and bicycles, and we were noisy and badly behaved if we didn't get them at once.

'In fact we were treated very patiently, and began to realise that we had to learn to live in this new society. In the camps we'd been treated like animals, and now we had begun to behave like animals and had to be rehabilitated. In the camps it was a case of the survival of the fittest. But now we started to respect the doctors and people looking after us. So we didn't, after all, turn into criminals or psychopaths.'

Abraham was given help to find his aunt Esther, and in November 1945 he met her at Euston station in London. 'I cannot to this day speak about my emotions - when I saw her running towards me on the platform - but I will never forget it.'

Now Abraham wanted to be within reach both of his new friends and his aunt. He was also 'desperate to learn English'. He managed to persuade the Jewish Refugee Committee to fix all this for him, and moved into a London hostel. 'I always felt very relaxed in England, not always looking over my shoulder for fear of verbal or physical abuse as I did when a child, or fear of beatings or death as a teenager in the camps. For the first time I felt free and unafraid, and gave in to my two new obsessions: food, and learning English.'

Despite his new feelings of safety, Abraham found life difficult. In time he had to leave the hostel to find a permanent home, and he could not adapt to any of the jobs he found. At last he became an apprentice in the fur trade, and later became a furrier himself, with his own business and a partner who was an old friend from the days in the ghetto. In 1951 he married his cousin, the baby girl to whom he'd said goodbye when he was 4 years old. They had two sons. Abraham has no regrets about settling in the UK. 'I was given the opportunity to have a family and make a contribution to this country.'

One of the acknowledged crimes of genocide is inflicting mental as well as physical harm on members of the victimised group. Once someone treats you as less than human, you can find yourself actually becoming less human because of it. People's self-respect is easy to harm. On top of that, the life of a victim is filled with fear. How can self-respect be preserved? How can victimisation (and demonisation) be resisted?

SALEK'S STORY

Salek's early childhood was spent in a busy and religious Jewish community in Poland. He enjoyed his Jewish school and the familiar features of family and community life. But the time came when he also had to go to ordinary primary school. Perhaps because Catholics respected the Bible, and the Old Testament is Jewish scripture and history, Salek was sent to a Catholic school. He didn't find much respect there, however. He says he'll never forget how the Jewish children were tormented. The Jewish religion forbids the eating of meat from pigs, so the Catholic children would sometimes force a piece of pork into a Jewish child's mouth,

'just for a laugh'. The teachers didn't intervene. The Jewish pupils were also attacked on their way to and from school. People threw stones at them and physically bullied them. 'Our preparation for what was to come,' said Salek grimly.

When war began in 1939, Poles and Jews alike were faced with the aggressive invading Germans. Salek, aged 10, and other Jews spent the first Sabbath of the war in an evil-smelling cellar. 'Rats ran across the unmade floor, their red eyes flashing in the light of our candles. My little sister cried.'

He first saw the German invaders when a rattling tank drove into the market place. 'I had no idea what it was, I had never seen a tank before. A German soldier wearing a black uniform was standing in the turret, swivelling the huge gun around in all directions. The market-place was deserted. I froze to the spot, my hands clasped behind my back. The soldier jumped down and shouted "Was hast du?" I think maybe he was worried I had a gun. Then he demanded "Where's the town centre?" (I could understand some German words) but I was too terrified to answer. I ran home as fast as I could.' That night the German soldiers set fire to a whole street of houses, and then set themselves up in two local schools. 'There was a strict curfew and we were forbidden to store food. If we did either, they said, we would be shot. Then looters came in and gave us hell. They smashed up our shops.'

The Germans seized a hundred Jews for work in the local stone quarry. Salek's brother was one of them, and Salek helped his grandmother in what was left of their shop. But the family decided that Salek's brother would be more useful in the shop, so Salek went to the quarry instead. Salek quickly became known as the best worker in the quarry - helped by the trick of starting next to a pile of stones already cut the day before. 'I certainly developed muscles there, but doctors have told me I was much too young for such hard physical labour, and I'm paying for it now.'

Meanwhile the family had been forced into the town's newly- set-up ghetto. 'It was hell. There was just trodden earth for a floor. My parents slept on a sort of shelf of planks, with no mattress. My brother and I slept on straw-filled sacks.'

When Salek was 13 things got worse. One day the German SS came through the town shouting 'Jews out!' and ordered all the young men and boys into the backs of transport lorries. 'I caught sight of my father standing gazing down in horror from a first-floor window. His hands were clasping his face in despair at the sight of his young son being driven away. That was the last time I saw my father. I did not see my mother again either.'

Salek's crammed lorry took him to a slave labour camp, and he was put under the control of a bunch of ex-convicts and murderers who 'wanted nothing more than food, shelter, and the opportunity to kill Jews. They all carried guns with fixed bayonets.'

One day at the labour camp (most of the work was in an armaments factory) volunteers were called for to go to Palestine. Of course there were plenty of volunteers: that was the place where Jews most wanted to go. The overseers then maliciously picked out the ones who hadn't volunteered, and they were led away. The next day Salek was in a group picked for 'special work duty'. When they got to the workplace, they were staggered to find heaps of clothing, shoes, hats, spectacles - anything people might wear. Salek's unit were told to stuff

everything into sacks and cart it to a warehouse for checking: maybe items of value had been sewn into the clothes or hidden in the heels of shoes. The following morning some Polish machine operators came in to teach the Jews how to work some factory machinery; and they brought news of the 'travellers to Palestine'. 'The Poles told us those Jews had been driven naked to the railway station and packed into cattle wagons.' They had been sent, stripped of all they stood up in, not to Palestine, but to their deaths in Treblinka.

On another occasion, two prisoners went missing. The rest were ordered to the main parade ground and told that for each missing prisoner ten more would be selected and shot. Salek was among the ones selected, but the woman camp commander said "No, this boy had nothing to do with the escapees" - so he escaped death, at least. He heard the shots later on. 'The 20 weak and tottering boys chosen had been ordered to dig their own graves. It was March, the ground was solid with cold, and the graves were so shallow the bodies could hardly be covered.'

It was 1944 and the Russian army was advancing westward into Poland. The slave labour camps there were dismantled and abandoned. The Jews who still survived were now taken to concentration camps in Germany. Salek found himself in the prison camp at Buchenwald, assigned to a children's barrack. It was full of the dead, and their bodies were only just being cleared out into the yard, where they were piled up. Inside, the filth and smell was appalling. 'This,' said Salek, 'was my new home.' More and more prisoners arrived, so that some of the people carted away to make room were still alive, just.

While he was in Buchenwald, Salek had another remarkable escape: one night he was supposed to go to work in the camp factory, but he took the risk of punishment and simply didn't go. That same night the factory was bombed by Allied planes. 'There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.' Almost 400 prisoners were killed.

In February 1945 the Allies also bombed the nearby city of Weimar. Salek and some fellow-prisoners were driven in lorries to Weimar to clear the rubble. 'In the cellars we found dead bodies, but we also found food. We simply grabbed it. We didn't know if it was poisoned or not, we took it anyway. In the 2 or 3 days we were there we got back a lot of strength and energy because of those extra bits of food. I also found a lot of shirts, and smuggled as many as I could back to the camp. I took a couple of tins of sardines, too; as I tried to force them open, the oil leaked away - but I realise now that after years of starvation my body couldn't have coped with the fat: it would probably have killed me.' Yet another lucky escape.

Most of Buchenwald's Jews (about 3,000 at that point) and Soviet prisoners-of-war were evacuated in April, a week before the American troops reached the camp. They were marched for four hours to a main railway line, the stragglers and weakest being shot and left by the roadside. There they were put on a train which made a slow and erratic progress towards Czechoslovakia. Sometimes it stopped altogether: 'From time to time we were allowed into the fields while the officers cooked themselves a meal. We scavenged for whatever we could put into our mouths - we even sucked the earth to get some moisture from it, and licked the morning dew from stones.'

Two days after the war ended ('We, of course, were the last to know about it') the train pulled up in some fields near Terezin (called Theresienstadt while it was a ghetto during the German

occupation of this part of Czechoslovakia). A dozen Czech freedom fighters opened the door to arrest the German officers - but there were none: they had furtively alighted while the train was still in Germany.

Salek himself was too weak to get off the train. 'About twenty men and women wearing white coats lifted people off and wheeled them away on trolleys to a hospital camp. They lifted me off the train-wagon, but couldn't put me down anywhere because I had no flesh. I was put into a blanket and carried gently away. They found some string and tied the corners of my blanket to make an improvised hammock. My hearing had almost gone. I wasn't hungry. I wasn't thirsty. I wasn't sleepy. I gazed up at the ceiling, my mind empty. Then a doctor poured some liquid into my mouth, and I realised that I was a human being after all.'

It was over a week before Salek could stand, and longer before he could walk without help. He also began to hear again. One day he walked as far as the nearby town: that was where the other ex-prisoners had been, rifling abandoned German homes, picking up anything of value. 'I was terribly jealous, so as soon as I could I went there too.'

Genocide is merciless bullying on a vast and terrible scale. In genocide, as in war, social laws are abandoned and human rights abused, sometimes out of cruelty, sometimes in the struggle for survival. It takes only a few thousand people sharing such hatred to start a massacre. Can war and genocide be adequately prevented by laws, if laws are hard to keep in the midst of hatred and violence? What else might be needed to prevent them before they get a hold?

ROSE D'S STORY

Like many of the children who survived the Holocaust, Rose had happy memories of family life before the war. She particularly loved her father. 'He had great compassion for humanity, and was busy in all sorts of community organisations. He had a wonderful sense of humour, which helped us in the bad times.'

She remembers clearly the day of deportation, on the railway by cattle wagon, from the ghetto to the camp at Auschwitz. 'We could only take one suitcase each. When we were in the cattle car my father opened his suitcase, which was full of books instead of clothes. Everyone around was weeping, but my father managed to cheer them up by reading aloud from a humorous book. That was the last time I heard his voice. When the train stopped they took the men to one side, the women to the other. Soon after that a German hooked his cane around my mother's neck and pulled her away. When my sisters and I began to cry hysterically, the Germans told us that we would meet in heaven soon.

'We were stripped of our belongings and had our heads shaved. Then we were marched into the barracks of Auschwitz-Birkenau. There was a woman in command, and she had a whip in her hand. We were told to lie down on the cold ground, one on top of another, and that we'd better do as we were told or we'd be taken to the crematoriums where the smoke was coming out. I managed to sleep, and when I woke up I thought I had died and gone to hell.

'After three terrible weeks, one of my sisters fell ill. When Doctor Mengele made the selection, he pulled my sick sister one way, my other sister Zisi and me the other. Zisi then made an

extraordinary sacrifice. She told me to stay alive and tell the world what had happened in Auschwitz. Then she leapt across to my other sister, and they were led to the crematorium.

'One minute I was standing in line with my two sisters, feeling protected by their presence. Then suddenly I was alone. I can still feel the cold dirt floor on which I lay crying, feeling helpless and lonely. There were many others like me crying for their lost loved ones. One girl held out her hand to me and we hugged each other. For a moment I felt comforted by someone else sharing the same tragedy.

'We became good friends, and were both sent to an ammunition factory to work. We looked out for one another. We were like sisters, and managed to stay together, even up to and after liberation in 1945.'

In war and genocide acts of great courage and generosity are recorded - and there must be many more that remain untold. But Rose's sisters should never have needed to die like this. This was not a natural catastrophe in which acts of bravery save lives, but a man-made act of mass brutality in which people lose them. Shouldn't this be something to be deeply ashamed of? When we're caught up in quarrels, hatred, violence and war, what happens to our capacity to feel shame?

ROMAN'S STORY

Roman was 12 when the Germans came to his town. The killing began at once, and the dead included the chief of police, the two doctors and both Polish and Jewish leaders.

Late in 1941 Roman was deported to the ghetto in Lodz. 'My mother and I, the youngest of her seven children, were the only ones left. Most of my family had been taken to the death camp at Chelmno. My mother and I looked like living skeletons. Those black-edged notices that used to be posted on walls and printed in the papers when somebody had died, they were called 'Klapsedras'. In the ghetto, Klapsedras were what thin and frail people like us were called. It wasn't easy for a Klapsedra to talk. Talking needed energy. So I wrote down my thoughts and feelings instead, and only the few people I could trust were allowed to read them.

'My mother's health was worse than mine. She began to find it hard to walk to her work (repairing German soldiers' uniforms) and could only manage to get there with help. In the spring of 1942 the SS ordered us to be put on the cart, which meant being taken away to be killed. My mother told me to jump off the cart and run. Be brave, she told me, Save your life. I did as I was told, and managed to get back unnoticed to the room where we'd been living. I crawled under the single eiderdown and slept for a long time. When I woke up, one of our neighbours gave me hot water to drink and a piece of bread.'

Roman, who worked in the ghetto's metal factory, was now 'adopted' by an adult fellow-worker and his family, though Roman was expected to share his meagre ration of food with them and do the housework before going to the factory. 'Instinct told me to agree to it: it would help me to survive.' But the day came when the metalworkers were put on the train to Auschwitz - one of the last deportations from the Lodz ghetto. 'Only 500 of us - Jewish men, women and boys - escaped the gas chambers. Our metalworking skills made us useful in a munitions factory.'

Roman ended up working in a labour camp in Dresden. The workers manufactured bullets in an airless basement, and slept in a dormitory above. When the Allies bombed Dresden, the building was hit, but the dormitories remained intact. The workers were sent off to collect people who had died in the bombing; they came back smelling bad, and the smell stayed with them and hung about the dormitory. 'It was suffocating,' Roman remembers.

He also remembers friction between the slave labourers themselves. One of them, a man called Josef, had been in Auschwitz for 2 years and was so marked by the experience that he seemed frightening. One day another inmate tried to take Roman's bread ration from him. Josef knocked the inmate down; then he took a bite out of the rescued bread himself, handed the remainder back to Roman, and walked away without a word.

When the Allied forces were advancing through Germany liberating the camps, the SS marched the prisoners out of Dresden. At one point, as they approached the outskirts of the city, 'they made us sit down in a little square paved with cobblestones. The Germans came out of the houses to stare at us. The SS wanted to entertain these onlookers, so they threw bits of carrot and turnip among us, hoping that we would fight and claw for the food. But we didn't. Hungry though we were, we passed the word round: Behave with dignity. The SS were furious, and began kicking us to make us move.'

Roman and two others from the Dresden factory, including Josef, escaped the 'death marches' and found refuge with a German couple on a farm outside the city. When the Soviet army liberated the region, Roman was determined to get back to his home in Poland somehow, scavenged some food supplies from a bombed shop, and set off. On the way he met a Russian soldier on a motor bike. The Russian threw Roman's precious food supply on the ground, made him strip, and then fired a revolver at him. The barrel was empty, and the Russian rode away. 'I knew that the Nazis and the SS hated us Jews and wanted to murder us all. But the Russians were the liberators. They fought and defeated the Nazis, Hitler and the SS. I, a Jew, expected to be treated like a friend by the Russian soldiers. Why did this Russian soldier do what he did?'

Home-coming, after five terrible years, was a shock, too. A Polish family was living in his old home. 'I had the feeling they were going to kill me. They certainly weren't going to give up the house.' For the next two months Roman travelled, 'mostly on the tops of trains', to get back to the German couple who'd been kind to him. He took gifts of soap, coffee and sugar which he'd got from the black market: 'I wanted to thank them for hiding me'. But when he reached the farm, he found the woman looking haggard and dressed in black. She refused to speak to Roman. A neighbour told him why: Nazis in the village had found out that Jews were being sheltered at the farm. The man had been shot; and so had Josef, who had once saved Roman's bread for him.

Roman was full of grief. 'I was totally lost. I was totally alone.' But he kept going. He found his way to the ghetto at Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia, and managed to get on one of the airlifts taking children from there to England.

In 1947, a sport and social club was founded, the Primrose Club, for the boys and young men in Britain struggling to make it on their own after such terrible experiences. (There were a few girls, too - but only a few: the number of women and girls who survived the Nazi camps was

small.) The club's founder was a sports instructor who'd been a Jewish youth leader in pre-war Germany. Now he devoted himself to helping these damaged young men to become physically strong and fit, and to restore their minds as well. The club, he said, offered 'a substitute for a lost family'.

Roman (who later became an architect and stained-glass worker) was one of the Primrose Club family. He became so good a swimmer that by 1950 he was able to take part in the Jewish Olympics. 'The boys were free of hate and of desire for revenge. They didn't speak of a collective guilt of the German people, but said they hoped that they, in their own lives, could show the way to a better world for themselves and their children.'

War and genocide don't end with a ceasefire: the violence takes time to disappear, and people are scarred, mentally, emotionally, as well as physically by what has happened. They have to choose, often without help, how they deal with inner and outer desolation. Whether we go to war or commit genocide is a choice, too. Should we really have to make a choice like that? How might we try to arrange things (first at home and where we live, then in school, college and workplace, and finally in our country and the whole world) so that such a choice never arises? Big questions, big answers - but even the biggest issues start with individual people right where they happen to be.

PINCHAS' STORY

Pinchas was only 7 when the war began. He was a Hasidic Jew, which meant that he wore his hair in long curls at the sides. His mother was often assumed to be a Polish Christian, which made life complicated. Pinchas has never forgotten hearing a well-dressed man say to his mother, 'How can a beautiful Polish woman like you be a servant to rotten Jews!' The man thought that she was Pinchas' nanny.

Pinchas and his family lived in the ghetto in Warsaw. The Jews in the ghetto arranged a revolt against the Germans. While the uprising was happening Pinchas and his family hid underground in specially made bunkers. The rebellion was brutally stopped - there were few Jewish survivors. It was at that point that a Jewish informer gave Pinchas and his family away. The Germans threatened to drive them out of the bunker with gas, and they crept out to be met by German soldiers shouting 'Hands up! Don't shoot!' The soldiers had thought they were dealing with gun-carrying rebels.

They were attacked and chased into an apartment block so crowded that people couldn't even sit down. 'Water was being sold by the bottle,' Pinchas remembered, 'but only for gold or diamonds'. After a few days they were loaded on to cattle trucks and taken to the concentration camp at Majdanek. On the journey they were crowded together so closely that 'one had to fight for every breath of air. It was even more difficult for the children. My parents had kept a sock full of sugar, and fed my sister and me with regular spoonfuls throughout the journey.'

At Majdanek Pinchas and his father were separated from his mother and sister. Pinchas was quite tall, so he was put with the men. They were stripped and sorted out, some for death straight away, others for slave labour if they looked fit enough for it. Pinchas was one of the fit ones. He was only 12 years old.

At the end of the war, Pinchas remembers how he watched a road down which not Jews but German refugees were being driven or were trying to escape. There were whole families with children and baggage, pushing wheelbarrows and bicycles or in wagons drawn by horses. As they went they were attacked. Pinchas and a crowd of children watched this unhappy procession. 'I remember clearly my feelings of pity and sympathy for these people, because they reminded me of how I had suffered myself. Instead of the intense hatred I might have had for these Germans, all I felt was sadness and sympathy. I still wonder about that.'

Here's an example of how even the biggest issues start with individual people right where they happen to be. This boy, watching the refugees (mostly old men, women, and children like himself) was able to see both sides of the tragedy. Might he have felt differently about a procession of defeated soldiers? The place to get to is where there's a view of (and a chance to understand) what makes an oppressor want to oppress, and what makes it possible for him or her to do it.