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White Rose Essay

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March 2, 2022

At just thirteen years old, Clara Grossman's life changed in an instant. “[The Germans] were there and I just knew that after that, life [would] never be the same” (Grossman). By the time the anti-Semitic Nazis invaded Hungary on March 19, 1944, a steady flow of Jews across Europe had already been massacred, but the pace was about to escalate in Hungary (Sternberg). Within the first two months of the invasion, over 400,000 Hungarian Jews, including Clara Grossman and her family, would be deported to the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau by the Nazis (Sternberg). Preceding the influx of these thousands of Hungarian Jews, the Nazis made continuous improvements to Auschwitz to maximize the efficiency of its operations to resemble an industrial-scale killing machine. Clara Grossman bore witness to this cold calculus as one of the lucky few survivors of the mass genocide committed during this period.

Antecedent to the deportation of these thousands of Hungarian Jews, the Nazis ameliorated Auschwitz with the intent of aiding their extermination efforts. To oversee the process of killing prisoners, S.S. officers Karl Höcker, Otto Moll, and Rudolf Höss were reassigned to Auschwitz. The three were recognized experts in methodical killing and were asked for input on how (“Gassing Operations”) to improve the procedures within the camp (Berenbaum & Gutman). Moll ordered the prisoners to dig nine pits near the crematoriums, which were used to burn bodies that exceeded the capacity of the crematoriums (Müller). Moll designed the pits to have channels that harvested the fat from the burning bodies (Müller). The crematoriums would then use the extravasated fat as fuel for the fires in the crematorium (Berenbaum & Gutman). Additionally, “the crematoria were renovated: the furnaces were relined, the chimneys were strengthened with iron bands, [and] the loading and unloading ramps were completed with a three-track railway system that provided a direct link to the death factories” (Berenbaum & Gutman). These improvements expedited the killing process by

efficiently funneling the Jewish people immediately to the gas chambers upon arrival at Auschwitz. After visiting the Treblinka concentration camp in 1941, Höss determined the camp's usage of carbon monoxide in the gas chambers was inefficacious, as it did not kill prisoners in a timely enough manner (Linder). He determined the gas Zyklon-B was highly efficient in killing large groups of people quickly and consequently selected it for the gas chambers in Auschwitz ("Gassing Operations"). These various enhancements to Auschwitz were in anticipation of the arrival of the Hungarian Jews, whose mass deportation started on May 14, 1944 and lasted through July 9, 1944 (Sternberg). During this less than two-month period, 12,000 to 14,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz daily where the recent camp enhancements proved to be nefariously effective as seventy-five percent of this group were killed immediately upon arrival (Sternberg). Only 255,000 out of the 850,000 Jews living in Hungary in 1941 survived the Holocaust (Sternberg).

Clara Grossman's life turned into a nightmare immediately upon the Nazi's arrival in her Hungarian hometown on March 19, 1944 (Grossman). Clara came from a very religious family and she recalled her fear of walking the streets in her hometown seven years before the Nazis invaded, because even prewar Jews were assaulted and harassed (Grossman). However, this prewar fear was dwarfed by the terror she felt when the Nazis invaded her town. As Jews, she and her family faced discrimination and prejudice, and she watched with horror as the persecution of Jewish people progressed quickly. First, her right to attend school was taken away and her father's right to own a business was removed. Then, she had to sew the Star of David onto her clothes, marking her as unmistakably Jewish to the public (Grossman). Even more tragically, she was just thirteen years old when she and her family were forced into a ghetto where they stayed for three weeks before their deportation to Auschwitz. They spent three days

in a “boxcar” (a railroad cart intended to transport animals) with seventy-five to eighty other Jews, with inhumane sanitary conditions and without sufficient food (Grossman). Their destination was unbeknownst to them and many thought they would die in the train from the extremely poor conditions, ripe with the constant threat of suffocation and starvation (Grossman). Upon arrival at Auschwitz, they were instantly met by German soldiers yelling instructions at them amid the complete confusion of all the dazed and newly arrived prisoners (Grossman). Clara’s mother, sister, and younger brother were separated from her and sent to the gas chambers to be killed immediately. Clara was sent to work in the camp where she received almost no food and lost thirty pounds in four weeks due to malnutrition (Grossman). In addition, she faced the unavoidable violence from Nazis and the terror of not knowing whether or not she would be sent to the gas chambers that day (Grossman). After five weeks in Auschwitz, Clara was sent to work in two different camps before liberation in 1945 (Grossman).

Clara witnessed the brutality of the Holocaust firsthand as one of the few survivors of a concentration camp. She experienced unfair treatment of her family, watched helplessly as her closest family members were separated from her to be killed, and was traumatized by her time in concentration camps. Because of what she witnessed, she experienced a loss of faith which she relayed to her father in their last interaction before his murder by telling him ““God is not watching and not looking after us”” (Grossman). Out of the fifty-three family members she had, only twelve survived the Holocaust (Grossman). In 1948, she immigrated to the United States, where she expressed relief that “[she would] never have to worry [about being] scared, beaten up, and humiliated. [She] could look up and be proud that [she was] a Jew.” Her nightmare had ended but the emotional scars remained.

Clara's story is part of the larger story of the Nazi's targeting of Hungarian Jews. Hungarian Jews, in particular, experienced a brutally precise extermination effort by the Nazis enabled by the deliberate refinements to Auschwitz. While this tragedy can be viewed through the sterile lens of facts, statistics, and details on facility improvements, the personal narrative of a survivor like Clara reveals the true human cost of what the Nazis perpetrated on the Hungarian Jews.

The preservation of Auschwitz and other concentration camps is crucial in honoring the lives and memory of those who were inhumanely murdered during the Holocaust, and allow a former prisoner like Clara Grossman a physical place to reclaim her story as a survivor. Maintaining these memorials allows those who do not grasp the depravity of what occurred during World War II to see for themselves where and how these crimes against humanity were committed. Seeing where this transpired adds to the realness of grief and loss in World War II and makes it palpable for later generations. Preservation of the camps is also a timeless reminder of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, which has become even more critical as Holocaust deniers have become more vocal in recent years. One cannot deny that the Holocaust happened when standing at its gates.

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