The Gift of Memory

The Story of Esther Kanarek

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I. The Dreaded Assignment

As I drove through Princeton, prepped and on my way to my first interview, I remembered how much I dreaded this assignment. Some of my reasons were justified, but most were minor annoyances. These concerns continued to crop up as I sat in the morning rush hour traffic. *How many times would I have to make this trip? Think of the gas prices!* Filling up my tank, with accompanying pain and anguish, I pressed onward. I looked back and forth between the road and the carefully printed directions that I had for if, and when, I got lost. As I made my third U-turn in an attempt to locate the street that I had passed, I tried to reassure myself of my mission. However, it was no use; those annoying questions kept creeping up. *What if she is cranky or irritable? What if she doesn't like the cookies I brought? What if she forgets that I am coming?* Being that I had two older Jewish grandparents, I knew that any of these questions could, and probably would, be answered in the positive.

The name of the survivor that I was on my way to interview was Esther Kanarek. Apart from that name, and a few details that she had mentioned over the phone in setting up our interview, this was the extent of what I knew about her. The professor for the class had assigned each of the students a Holocaust survivor from a list provided by a state Holocaust organization. From our telephone conversation, I found out that Mrs. Kanarek had grown up in Warsaw, Poland, and had survived several concentration camps including Mejdanek, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Ravensbrük. As I passed the entrance to her gated community, I considered this information. *Maybe we would have something in common*, I thought. My father descended from Polish and Russian Jews, and my mother was predominantly Polish. I thought this was quite a coincidence, but, mainly, I hoped

that she would not try to speak to me in Polish or Hebrew because I did not know a word of either.

Little did I know that the next time I would drive through Princeton Mrs. Kanarek and I would have quite a lot in common, namely, her memories. These memories would not be my own, but would be the gift of a survivor of one of the worst genocides in the history of humankind. My mind would fill with different, more meaningful questions. I would ask myself how she could have survived and what I would have done if I were in her place. Of course, I had few answers to these questions. This would become the thrust of my meetings and conversations with Mrs. Kanarek. She would tell me about what she saw and what she felt, and I would return to my normal life, thinking upon her experiences and absorbing them into my own consciousness. My goal became to make her memories my own, so that I would be worthy of retelling her story and passing on her memories to others.

II. The Meeting

I slowly pulled into a parking space in front of Mrs. Kanarek's apartment building. As I turned the key to stop the engine, I saw a small woman polishing a car in the adjacent parking space. I hopped out of the car and stared at the women, wondering if she might be the person I was looking for. Thankfully, she spoke first. "Are you Keith?" she asked. I responded, "Yes! It's so nice to meet you." I walked over to her awkwardly. *Should I shake her hand? Give her a hug?* I decided to stick out a hand, which she grasped kindly and led me up into her apartment. I had the strangest feeling, like a grandson paying a visit alone to his favorite grandmother. In one arm, I carried my

notebook and a digital voice recorder, and in the other, I cradled a small box of hamantashen. All I could think was, *I hope she is not allergic*.

When I entered Mrs. Kanarek's apartment, my mind immediately wandered to memories of my own grandmother's apartment. It had many of the same features: a living area with a television, a small dining area, and a kitchen with a stove. I felt strangely comfortable there, like I had been there before. I offered Mrs. Kanarek the box of cookies, and she stared at them for a moment. *Uh oh*, I thought. *She hates them!* "Thank you!" she said. "I baked for you, though!" I did not expect that response. We sat down at her kitchen table and she reached over and picked up a container of chocolate chip mandel bread. Needless to say, I was in heaven. My mother, although she is not Jewish, had attempted making mandel bread on occasion. Of course, I could not refuse, so I ate as I set up my notebook and recorder to begin the interview. Mrs. Kanarek's mandel bread was the best I had ever had, but do not tell my mother!

III. Childhood

The first several questions that I would ask would have been rather mundane in most interviews. I wanted to ask about her childhood, her parents, if she had any brothers or sisters, and her experiences in school and growing up. However, as this was an interview with a survivor of the Holocaust, I did not expect these questions to be greeted with cheery responses or with smiling nostalgia. I fully expected that Mrs. Kanarek would find answering these questions difficult. I knew that it was quite likely that her parents, brothers and sisters, and most of her family could have been killed or died during the war. I also realized that her childhood could not have been normal. Therefore, I

asked these questions with some hesitation, but with determination that the answers would help set the tone for the rest of the interview.

The preliminary questions that I asked were answered politely, but with a tinge of sadness. I found that Esther Kanarek grew up in Warsaw, Poland. Her and her parents lived in an apartment on Mila 7, just a few streets away from Mila 18, where the famous group of young Jewish men planned the Warsaw ghetto uprising (Berenbaum, 108). She lived with her mother, Rifka, her father, Jacob, her three sisters, Sally, Pearl, and Frieda, and her grandmother. "My family was basically orthodox," she told me (17 Sept.) They went to synagogue on Saturdays for dinner, and they were very involved in giving to charity. Her father often had guests over for dinners in their apartment. Mrs. Kanarek attended public school as well as Jewish school programs in Warsaw.

The holidays, in particular, were very important occasions for Mrs. Kanarek's family when she was growing up. I was struck by the way her face lit up as she described to me the typical Passover meal. "It was very festive," she said. "If I could paint what the table looked like with my parents as the Seder…" The table for the holiday meal had a fancy white tablecloth accompanied with silver dinnerware. She explained that her parents had a beautiful round Seder plate. Her father would get dressed up in traditional religious garb and he would lead the family as they said the Passover prayers. "I had the utmost respect for my parents," she recalled (17 Sept.).

One of the predominant features of Mrs. Kanarek's childhood was her involvement in her parents' prosperous business. Her father owned a store, handed down from his parents, out of which they sold groceries and other household supplies. Most of the time Mrs. Kanarek was able to spend with her family outside of school was at the

store. Of course, as a result of running a local store, her family was well known and respected in Warsaw. "We were very well off before the war," she told me (17 Sept.). Like many other prosperous German families at the time, Mrs. Kanarek's family even had a governess who helped her parents around the house. Her recollection of her family and her childhood became even more touching to me when I found out that she was the only member of her family to survive the war.

IV. The Early Years

Mrs. Kanarek was lucky enough, if one can even put it that way, to avoid some of the pre-war prejudices that befell the Jews in Warsaw and the rest of Germany. "I was too young," she said, "to have experienced the anti-Semitism of the Germans in the early years of the Holocaust" (17 Sept.). She remembered that her father had mentioned some instances of German hatred, but nothing of importance. Her family had a German-made Phillips radio, from which they listened to the current events throughout Europe. This is how they became aware of Hitler's rise to power, and it was how they heard that the Nazis had invaded Austria in 1938 (Berenbaum, 39). Fortunately, the Kanarek family store survived the horrors of Kristallnacht, and suffered no damage or vandalism.

Otherwise, for Mrs. Kanarek and her family, the effects of the war were immediately apparent. When the Germans invaded Poland, everything began to change. "There was no such thing as a normal life," she told me. The Nazis closed all of the schools and limited the movements of the Jews throughout Warsaw. Although Mrs. Kanarek was only twelve years old at the time, she recalls how the Nazi occupation began to affect her parents' store. "We were not able to get as many groceries and

products as we used to," she said. "My father was not as able to buy and sell as he was before the war" (17 Sept.)

At this point in our conversation, I noticed Mrs. Kanarek's demeanor change. Her voice slowed, and I could see sadness in her eyes. In fact, for much of the rest of our interview, her eyes glossed over with tears, remembering a suffering that few could ever imagine. I felt guilty that I could not relate with this suffering. I desperately wanted to understand it and absorb it, so that I could properly relate her experiences to others. This one deficiency, I thought, with the passing on of memories. I can know, and maybe even appreciate what Mrs. Kanarek had been through, but I could never actually share in that experience with her.

V. The Ghetto

Mrs. Kanarek had told me that she had lived in the Warsaw ghetto, so my next line of questions centered on her experiences there. "We were able to stay in our apartment," she said, "but we had little idea of the horrors that were going on in the death camps outside of the ghetto." While Mrs. Kanarek's family lived in the ghetto, like all Jews, they had to wear the yellow Star of David to signify that they were Jewish. Germans roamed the streets, and the family business was bad. "Sometimes, the German soldiers would come with lists of prominent Jews," she told me (17 Sept.). The Nazis took many away from their homes in the ghetto and transported them to various camps throughout Poland.

"Life was sad," Mrs. Kanarek explained with obvious sorrow. "There was no peace for the Jews." She and her sisters often were confined to their home and did not

venture out into the city. Her family mainly associated with their close neighbors. In the ghetto, there was no electricity, no lights, no power, and little food. "The homeless died in the streets, especially when the weather was cold," she recalled. Even Mrs. Kanarek's father, a prominent businessman, was afraid to go out into the streets of the ghetto. After several questions about ghetto life, Mrs. Kanarek paused for a moment. "Sometimes I ask myself," she remarked earnestly, "Did this really happen? Now I understand what must have been in my mother's heart" (24 Sept.) I did not know whether this was the first time she had thought about this question, but from the tone of her voice, I could tell that this connection with her mother was both deep and meaningful to her.

One story that Mrs. Kanarek told be about the ghetto was particularly moving. She mentioned an instance where a man came to her apartment to speak with her father. "Nobody knew about the gas chambers in Treblinka," she said. "One day, a man returned from the camp and told my parents about the horrors that were going on there. People told him that he was crazy! He must have survived the gas chambers by playing dead. It was not until a second man and then a third man came back from the camps with the same story that the people began to believe what was going on" (17 Sept.) I cannot imagine what it must have felt like to hear this news and to try to make sense of the reality of the message relayed to my own family. These moments in our conversations, when I could not properly absorb her experiences, bothered me most of all.

Mrs. Kanarek was living the ghetto during the famous Warsaw ghetto uprisings. She recalled that everything about the uprisings was kept a secret from the Jewish community, even though she lived within a few streets of the headquarters of the leaders of the revolt. Young men were responsible for most of the panning and the fighting

during the uprisings. "They had nothing to lose," Mrs. Kanarek claimed. "The Germans came with tanks and the young men, led by Mordechai Anielewicz, responded with a few guns and some Molotov cocktails. [In response, the Germans] completely bombed the ghetto. All of the buildings were burned out shells" (24 Sept.) Within a short period of time, the Nazis managed to kill many of the people involved in the uprisings. The rest of the Jews who remained were transported right away to concentration camps in Treblinka and Mejdanek.

VI. The Camps

After the bombings of the Warsaw ghetto, the Nazis sent Mrs. Kanarek, her family, and the remaining Jews to concentration camps in small, cramped cattle cars. "They treated us like dogs," she said. "I think the animals should be taken better care of. There was no food, no water, and no air. People were dying on the trains" (24 Sept.). When they got to Mejdanek, the Nazis separated Mrs. Kanarek from her parents and sisters. This was the last she saw or heard of her family and friends from home. However, she was able to stay with one of her friends, Fela, who lived in her apartment building. Mrs. Kanarek later mentioned that her relationship with her friend helped her though some of the struggles that she faced while traveling from camp to camp. They are still friends at the time of this interview.

Up to this point in our conversation, I had noticed the tattoo on Mrs. Kanarek's left arm, but I had not really thought much about it. "So, I suppose this was when they gave you your number?" I asked. I looked at the faded greenish numerals etched in her skin, the numbers 46987 above a poorly drawn Star of David. "Yes," she replied. "This

children. "My children know nothing of what I just said," she remarked. "I wanted them to grow up and be happy, and to have a life of their own" (24 Sept.).

VIII. The Memorable Assignment

I thanked Mrs. Kanarek for allowing me to visit with her. "I appreciate your willingness to talk to me," I told her. "I know how hard it must be for you." She smiled. "I hope I did not make you too sad," she replied. She packed me some cookies and fruit for my drive home against my insistence that I would not go hungry by the time I got back to campus. I was amazed by the kindness with which Mrs. Kanarek treated me, a stranger. *She should be bitter*, I thought. With all that Mrs. Kanarek had been through, her care and generosity proved to me that although people could commit evil acts and treat one another with utter hatred, they could also practice unconditional love. I waived to her as I stepped back into my car and turned the key in the ignition.

As I drove back through Princeton, I realized that many of my original questions had been answered, with or without my knowledge. The "dreaded project" had become the most meaningful project of my college years. I knew, even as I sat in my car, that I would never forget my conversations with Mrs. Kanarek. Our interview allowed for a special connection that I never would have made apart from this project. I came to consider Mrs. Kanarek almost like an adopted grandmother, even though I had only spent several hours with her. Not only will our conversations strengthen Mrs. Kanarek's links with her relatives who read this story, but they will provide me with a message to share with my children and loved ones.

One of the most common statements from survivors of the Holocaust is that we should never forget the horrific events that happened to the Jews. The idea behind this statement is that, if we always remember the errors of the past, they will never happen again in the future. This concept of memory became pervasive throughout my conversations with Mrs. Kanarek. I considered the passage of her memories of the Holocaust a precious gift that she had given me, and that I had the responsibility to pass on to others. My goal was to internalize her experiences, and to make her memories a part of my own. I hope that those who read her story will find it as touching as I did, and keep future generations from ever forgetting the events of the Holocaust.

Works Cited

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