

# Remarks by Mr. Shraga Milstein, a Holocaust Survivor

## UN Holocaust Memorial Ceremony, Int'l Day of Commemoration of the Holocaust Victims

Mr. Secretary General of the United Nations,

The President of the General Assembly,

Fellow Survivors,

Your Excellencies, Honorable Delegates and distinguished guests,

On 1 September 1939 I was six years old eager to begin school in the first grade. But on that very date – 1 September 1939 – the German army crossed the Polish border and WW2 began. I never entered the first grade. I was never able to learn in any school until 6 years later when I was 12 years old. I was born in 1933 in Piotrkow in central Poland into a Jewish middle-class family. My father Hillel, a businessman, my mother Rebeka a housewife and I still recall her playing the piano that stood in our living room; and my brother, Mordechai, 3 years younger than I. The Nazis set up the first ghetto on Polish soil in my town on 8 October 1939. An area of houses, including ours, was fenced off.

The ghetto housed 22,000 people in an area that was home to about 6000 before the war. I was confined to my room and strictly warned not to leave it without an adult. This is my earliest memory of the Holocaust: the switch from free and comfortable life to being closed in a room at the age of 6 with constant fear what the next hour will bring. Life in the ghetto was bearable mainly because of the love and protection of our parents, who tried to prevent me from seeing blood or dead bodies, which were common sights in the streets. Then in 4 days beginning 14 October 1942 we were assembled in a big open square and had to walk, four in a row, past a ranking SS officer who stood on a lorry. As we neared him in fear, he was marking with his finger to turn right or left. At the end of the day there were two separate groups. One was told to walk under guard to the railway station and the second to return to our homes. This is my memory of the infamous "selections" conducted by the Nazis.

I still don't understand why and how but mother, father, my brother and me were not separated and ordered to return home. Other members of my family – aunts, uncles and cousins were not so



**Shraga Milstein, a Holocaust Survivor, addressing the UN Gen. Assembly at Holocaust Memorial Ceremony.** Photo: UN Video Generated

lucky. The population of the ghetto was reduced to 3000 and I learned after the War that all the others were taken by cattle trains to Treblinka. From July 1942 through October 1943, 870,000 Jews were murdered there. The Nazis not only murdered Jews but also tried to destroy Jewish culture and rob our private and public property. The struggle to return this property continues to this day. The people that remained in the ghetto were sent to 2 nearby labor camps and we found ourselves in the Bugaj Wood Factory. At the age of 11 I worked 8-10 hours a day as an apprentice to a wood cutter. In Nov. 1944 we were shipped in a cattle wagon to Germany – my father, brother and myself to Buchenwald, my mother to Ravensbrück. When we parted it was the last time, I saw her. A few days after our arrival in Buchenwald my father came back to our barrack in the evening with a stern look in his eyes. He took my brother and me aside and said: "we have to part and we will not see each other anymore. Take care of your younger brother, remember your names and that you have family in Palestine." He gave us a hug and we went to sleep. The next day he was killed at the age of 43.

All my efforts, during the years, to find out what happened and how he knew his fate, were in vain.

A few weeks later I was transferred with a group of friends my age, to Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp. In Bergen Belsen there were no executions, but people died there from severe hunger, cold and ailments. From 1943 until liberation April 15, about 140,000 people were imprisoned in Bergen Belsen and over 50,000 of them, men, women and children died in the camp after prolonged suffering. To those who deny the Holocaust and want to re-write history let me quote Brig. General H. L. Glyn-Hughes, the Chief Medical Officer of the Second British Division, who arrived on site with the advancing British forces: "the British soldiers did not believe their eyes. They were shocked and perplexed by what looked as the sight of hell. Piles of corpses were scattered everywhere. One such heap in the women's camp was very high and about 80 yards long. This sight with all its horror was mild compared with what we found inside the barracks. Living people were lying next to dead corpses, there was no hygiene, there was no water. The

walking skeletons could not get up to take the little food we provided for them..." end of quote. On April 15, 1945 my world changed – from complete neglect and apathy to human compassion and a true effort to help the scarred, hungry and sick. Within days we were taken by the British military commanders from the squalor of the concentration camp to proper housing and a clean bed in a nearby Wehrmacht military facility. The Bergen Belsen camp was burned and on it are today mass graves and a memorial site, museum and seminar center managed by the Lower Saxony Memorials Foundation, keeping the memory of the atrocities alive and presenting to visitors a world of human understanding, tolerance, freedom and democracy based on equality of every human being. I was reunited with my brother and left in June 1945 to Sweden for convalescence as guests of the Swedish Red Cross and the Swedish government. I am grateful to the British forces for freeing us in Bergen Belsen and to the Swedish government and Red Cross for bringing us back to life. I reached Israel just weeks before its Declaration of Independence in 1948 and live there since. Married, raised a family of 3 sons and 9 grandchildren all of whom are present with us today. As you recall I mentioned how I last saw my father so when my second son was born On 15 December 1958 we named him Hillel. 7 years later my brother's daughter was born also on 15 December and she was named Hillela. A few years ago, I was invited to Buchenwald and learned from their archives that my father was shot on 15 December 1944. Makes you think....

Let me conclude by saying that the Holocaust is not only a historical event without proportions but also a guide to personal choices in present day life. Those of us who survived this atrocity and people of good will across the world firmly believe that it is our duty to condemn and prevent any intolerance against people, based on ethnic origin or religion. Thank you for allowing me to share my story with you today and may we never forget the lesson of the Holocaust.

Thank you.