

Inner Strength, Spirit, and Conviction: Blanka Kronenberg's Story

by Rene Geist

This story is my mother's. She was born Bronche Kadyszewitz in Warsaw Poland, March 1920; one of six children.

A typical teen, she enjoyed high school, belonged to clubs and organizations and went with friends to the theatre, symphony, and movies. However, by 1938 her life began to change. Her family, as well as many other Jews in Poland, were afraid but never imagined the problems could become as bad as they did. Information took time to spread. Communication was poor. There was no internet, no social media.

My mom lived through the changes that occurred in Warsaw: bombings, loss of jobs, confiscation of property, formation of the ghetto. Her family lived on Mila Street which was located in the middle of the ghetto. They didn't need to move; however, they needed to share their apartment with other families.

At first the ghetto was open - jobs were gone, but it was possible to go outside and sell something/buy something. At that time, underground industries existed and a black market commerce was going on.

In mid November 1940 the ghetto was sealed. High walls with glass and barbed wire at the top were installed. And then the situation rapidly deteriorated; people became ill and there was not enough to eat. My mom told me that early on, as dire as the situation became, there were still committees that tried to provide some activities, discussion and learning for the kids. But by 1942 life in the ghetto had become unspeakable. My mom was 22 years old and she wanted to get out. She and a friend

signed up for forced labor that worked outside the ghetto. She told no one.

In the morning she dressed in a few layers of clothing because she couldn't carry anything with her. In her purse she put some food and a few razorblades - because she thought she could sell them if she needed to.

She got to downtown Warsaw, slowly extracted herself from the forced labor group, and said good bye to her friend. She thought she was safe. But she wasn't. She was stopped by a young man who threatened to take her to the police. She bargained with him, offering her razors so he would let her go.

She walked for three or four days to the town of Wierzbnik, where she had family, sleeping in barns along the way. Once she arrived she lived with cousins in the ghetto and worked as forced labor in a woodworking plant. She had several "close calls" when many of the Jews of Wierzbnik were rounded up and taken away in cattle cars. Each time she hid and was saved. As 1944 arrived, her luck ran out. My mom, together with the rest of Wierzbnik's Jews, was forced into cattle cars. She arrived in Auschwitz Concentration Camp at the age of 24 and was taken to Birkenau (a subcamp of the Auschwitz complex).

One day the camp commando asked who could sew - they were looking to form a sewing commando. My mom wanted to get into that group because those chosen would go to Auschwitz where the conditions were better than they were at Birkenau. She was chosen and she managed to meet her sister, Genia there.

Soon after she got to Auschwitz, the SS (Schutzstaffel, or Protection Squads) began evacuating the camp because the Russians were on their heels. They opened the storage warehouses and told everyone to take extra clothes for the long march ahead. This was one of the well-known death marches.

As she marched, my mom noticed that the SS were slowly disappearing. They were running away, throwing their uniforms into ditches because they knew the war was ending and they had lost.

My mom, her sister and three other girls just wandered away from their group. No one tried to stop them. They walked to a little town, found a small empty apartment, and hunted for food. That's what she needed most.

Then the Russians arrived - she was 25 years old when she was liberated. She had survived - but where to go?

She heard that from Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Germany, it was easier and quicker to get papers to go to the United States or Canada. My mom had family in Canada and she hoped they would sponsor her.

She met my father, married him and lived in Berlin to wait out the emigration process. My parents came by ship to Pier 21 in Halifax, Canada in 1948. This was where immigrants were received in Canada - like Ellis Island in New York.

My mom attributed her survival to good luck. But it takes more than good luck. It takes inner strength, spirit, and conviction to go yet another step. My mom's survival and indeed her life is testament to those very qualities.

She never lost hope, never abdicated her sense of humanity, never relinquished her compassion and interest in those around her. At every family occasion she always acknowledged her true riches. With a wave of her hand, and a smile on her face, she commented that we were her revenge - and how she marveled that we were hers.

She felt it very important to share her experiences so the horrors she endured during the Holocaust would never happen again. She was certainly a survivor but she was also much more than that.

She was a story writer, a poet and an autobiographer. She was an eager learner. She was an informed and lively participant in our family discussions. She was the greeter; welcoming guests to every family occasion with her beautiful words. She was an excellent seamstress. She made her new life in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. She worked as a sales woman at Eaton's Department Store and later on was in charge of sales and storefront window display at my parents shop, Blanch Leather Goods. And lastly she was a 25 year volunteer at the Baycrest Gift Shop in Baycrest Hospital.

She has left behind a loving and permanent legacy: two daughters, four grandchildren and 12 great grandchildren.



Chaim, Rene, and Blanka Kronenberg



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