

This Is Not a Story

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Chapter one: where is my daughter?

I

Mala has a memory of life before the war.

She was a child. Very young. Maybe six. She was at home in Piotrkow with her mum and dad, Moshe and Sara Helfgott, her older brother Ben and younger sister, Lusia. They were waiting for news about a baby being born into the family. A cousin to add to their other cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents, all of whom lived in Poland.

Mala was excited. Impatient to hear news about the baby. Was it a girl? Was it a boy? Then – as they sat together in their family room – a small bird landed on the windowsill.

And Ben said: ‘This is a bird that has brought us the news that auntie has had a boy.’

Later that day they learned that a baby had been born. A boy.

Mala thought the world of her brother, Ben.

II

Mala knew that the other children in Piotrkow looked up to Ben. He had lots of friends. He was popular. She remembers one day walking in her home town – Piotrkow – and coming across a group of boys who looked at her.

Then she heard one of them say: ‘Don’t start with her. She’s Ben Helfgott’s sister.’

III

Ben, Mala and Lusia had a happy childhood. They enjoyed Polish school and Jewish school, as well as days out, festivals and holidays.

Ben remembers a family summer holiday, staying with their grandad in Sieradz, a couple of hours from their home in Piotrkow. There had been beautiful sunny weather, but on the Friday morning Mum said they needed to travel home early to be able to celebrate the Shabbat that evening. Also, to be ready to start school on the first day of term on Monday. It was Friday 1st September 1939.

Almost as soon as the bus began its journey Ben heard aeroplanes overhead. He could tell that they were not Polish planes. He told Mala so. And, soon, they heard the sound of bombs exploding.

When they reached Piotrkow, Mum – terrified for her three children – ushered them to take cover in the cellars of their local shop along with some other families.

After they had been hiding in the cellar for a while – hearing the thud of explosions, feeling the ground shaking – a man staggered into the doorway. He was covered in blood. He had been hit by shrapnel, he told them, small fragments of a bomb that had exploded cutting into his skin. He was badly wounded.

Nazi Germany was invading Poland.

IV

After the Germans invaded Piotrkow, life collapsed for her family, Mala remembers. She was eight years old.

Her family were forced to leave the house where she had always lived and – along with hundreds of other Jewish families – were forced into a small part of Piotrkow.

Their home was given to a family that was not Jewish.

This small part of town they were forced to move to was called a ghetto. A place where only hundreds of people used to live was now packed with 28,000 Jews. Three families in each room. Not enough toilets. Not enough food.

And there would be no school. Jews were not allowed to go to school.

German soldiers patrolled the streets, Mala remembers. You could be teased by the soldiers. Or beaten by them. Or killed. For no other reason than you were a Jew.

V

But there was hope. Ben had hope. Standing near the newsstand, he read the headlines on the newspapers. He found out that the French and the British had declared war on Germany because they had invaded Poland. And there were rumours that the Americans might join in the fight too.

Ben told Mala all of this. He had hope the war could send soon. That they would be able to move back into their home, sleep in their bedrooms, have enough food to eat.

VI

But the war went on. Days became weeks became months in the ghetto. And, as hope began to fade, fears began to grow.

Some of the people being held in the ghetto were to be transported away. Some children. Some older people. Those who were not useful to the Nazis. There were stories of bad things happening to Jewish people in concentration camps.

Alarmed, Mala's father quickly arranged for Mala and her cousin, Idzia, to be smuggled out of the ghetto and sent away to stay with a Christian family.

Neither girl knew quite why they were being sent away. They didn't know exactly what the transportations meant. Life was hard. Yes. But the two girls didn't want to be parted from their families and live with strangers.

Ben knew what the transportations meant. The Nazis had a plan. Anyone who did not have a permit to work as a slave in one of the ghetto factories, was being sent to a concentration camp. A place where Jews were taken to be killed.

Knowing this, some people tried to escape and live in the forests, or to hide in the sewers.

A man came to collect Mala and Idzia. Mala remembers the journey by train. The fear. She knew that if anyone around them worked out they were Jews they might report them to the soldiers. She knew that any person successfully reporting an escaping Jew would be given a reward.

Mala did her best to look calm. But she also knew that, however much you try and hide your fear, if you are scared, it shows in your eyes.

In their new home Mala and Idzia were treated quite well. They had to hide in a cupboard sometimes when visitors came to call. But sometimes they didn't have to hide.

Still Idzia was not happy. She asked to go home to her family. And Mala was told that Idzia would be taken back to Piotrkow.

VII

Mala lived with the new family for a little longer and then – when the deportations had finished in Piotrkow – she was taken home. After another frightening train journey.

Mala threw her arms round her father when she saw him. Then she noticed Idzia's father was there too and that his face was white.

'Where is my daughter?' Idzia's father said.

The man who had taken Mala and Idzia to safety claimed he had returned Idzia to Piotrkow earlier.

Idzia's father said that this was not true. 'What have you done with my child?' he asked.

Mala watched her uncle pacing up and down, hands behind his back, head down, saying 'What have you done with my child?' over and over.

The man did not answer Idzia's father's question.

Idzia was never seen again.

Chapter two: who will look after my child?

I

There were fewer people in the Piotrkow ghetto after the deportations. A ghetto that once held 28,000 Jews now held 2,200. The vast majority of those 25,800 people who had been deported from Piotrkow had been murdered at a concentration camp called Treblinka.

Because they were Jews.

This was happening in cities and towns across Poland.

Ben was 12 now. Mala was 11. Lucia was 9. It was unusual that the Helfgott family were still together, complete.

That changed in December 1942.

Ben remembers the day they were no longer together.

He had been at the factory. He and his father were slave labourers there, making glass bottles and jars. Mala, Lusia and Mum were in hiding in the ghetto. They did not have permits to work in the factory. This meant that they were classified illegal. They did not have permission to live in the ghetto.

On that day in mid-December, while those with permits were at work, the Jewish police raided the ghetto. The Jewish policemen were Jews who the Nazis used to help control the inhabitants of the ghetto and they were looking for the illegals. Most illegals were women and children under the age of twelve. Those people were not useful to the Nazis. The Nazis wanted to deport them.

Mala was with her sister and mother when the Jewish police came and stormed the building and forced 520 women and children out of their hiding places.

But Mala was in bed. But resting, not ill.

As her mother was being taken away to be deported, she pleaded with the soldiers to spare Mala. Her older daughter was ill. That she could not be moved.

The soldier said Mala could stay.

Before she was taken, Mum spoke to Mala: 'Stay where you are. Tell them that's what happened when they are home from work.'

That is how Mala came not to be taken.

Later, when Ben came home, Mala took him out onto a wooden balcony. Crying loudly she told her brother that their mother and Lusie had been taken away to the synagogue.

Ben shushed his sister. They could not hear her crying, he said. If they heard her crying she might be taken too.

The Nazis kept the 520 women and children in the synagogue for 10 days.

Ben remembers his father and mother were able to correspond with each other during this time.

His dad had managed to get a work permit for Mum. This meant she would be able to leave the synagogue and become a slave labourer too. But not Lusie. Lusie would be deported. Alone.

Mum refused to leave Lusie.

Dad begged her to come out. If she did not she would be deported, he said.

Mum refused again. She said Dad must look after Ben and Mala and that she would look after Lusie.

On 20th December 1942 the 520 women and children were taken from the synagogue and into the woods **where a large hole had been dug in**

the ground. They were ordered to take all their clothes off. They were shot and the injured were buried with the dead in the hole.

News of this catastrophe travelled quickly back into the ghetto. News that Mala and Ben's mother and sister had been murdered reached his father.

'I'll never forget,' Ben said. 'The look on my father's face when he came home. I didn't have to ask.'

II

More round ups for deportations were to come. Not long after Mala's mother and sister were murdered, her aunt Irena was taken suddenly.

Mala remembers her aunt looking back, shouting a question to them as she was dragged out of the ghetto.

'Who will look after my child?'

Who would?

It was Mala who took that responsibility. Her cousin was called Hania. She was just five years old. With her mother gone, Hania became attached to Mala.

Before long there was another rounding up of women and children. Another group of Jewish people standing in columns ready to be taken away, the Jewish police and Nazi soldiers and officers organising their removal.

Mala and Hania found themselves outside the gates of the ghetto with this group. Mala understood what was happening as the long column of women, children and old men was gradually loaded onto a number of lorries. She had to do something to save herself and Hania.

She also understood that anyone who resisted would be beaten, could be shot. The Nazis created an atmosphere of commotion and terror, forcing panic to intimidate their victims so that they would do what they wanted them to do.

But, even though she was terrified, Mala realised that, if she did not act, she would never see her father and Ben again. Her father had lost one daughter, her brother one sister. Now they would lose another.

And so, identifying the Nazi officer in charge, Mala stepped from the column and walked towards him.

‘I have been separated from my father and brother,’ she told him.

‘Please can I go back into the ghetto?’

The Nazi officer’s face, Mala remembers, showed shock, but amusement too. He looked flabbergasted. Who was this girl, a twelve-year-old, daring to speak to him amid all this chaos and terror? Who was this girl asking to go back?

Mala remembers the officer smiled. That he had a kind face.

‘Yes,’ he said, calling over a Jewish policeman to return her to the ghetto. ‘Return this girl to the ghetto.’

‘I will just get my cousin,’ Mala added.

The Jewish policeman who was now in charge of Mala said that, no, Hania was not allowed to come back. Only Mala had permission.

Mala knew she had a terrible choice. To leave Hania now and be with her father and Ben again. Or to stay and argue that Hania must come too, so risk being deported.

She was terrified. She was taking a huge risk.

Mala asked again if she could take the five-year-old with her. They argued for a long time. The Jewish policeman was as anxious as Mala.

But – after hesitating – he glanced around himself and said ‘Go quickly. Go now. Both of you.’

And so permission was granted for Hania to travel with Mala.

But in the new year, 1943, news came that the ghetto was to be liquidated. Nobody would be allowed to stay.

Chapter three: I cannot hide from you what I know

I

The Piotrkow ghetto was liquidated by the Nazis in 1943. That means that all people still living there were forcibly removed. The 2,200 people who lived in the cramped quarter of Mala and Ben's home town were moved out to the nearby labour camp.

There they would all be slave labourers in two factories. A plywood factory and a glass bottle factory. Mala was 12 now, so old enough to work.

Next to the factories there was basic accommodation for the slave labourers. Wooden huts with bunks piled high where they would sleep and eat while they were not working.

Mala, Ben, Dad and Hania were sent to a plywood factory, helping to build huts to accommodate German soldiers on the front. Mala and Hania lived in the women's barracks. Ben and Dad in the men's barracks. Even though they lived at different ends of the barracks, they were able to see each other sometimes.

II

From the labour camp Ben and Mala would sometimes see allied aircraft high over Poland. There was change in the air. Knowing that someone was fighting back against the Nazis gave the sister and brother hope.

Because the Russians were advancing from the east and the British and Americans from the west, the factories and their slave labourers were

vulnerable. The Germans still needed factories to make their huts and bottles. And they wanted the slaves to work in those factories.

So, Mala, Ben, her father and Hania were moved into Germany to what were called concentration camps where some of the slave labourers continued to work.

Others were died on the journey or because of the terrible conditions.

The women and girls – Mala and Hania – went to a concentration camp called Ravensbruck.

The men and boys – with Ben and his father – went to a concentration camp called Buchenwald.

They travelled in cattle trucks.

Cattle trucks were train carriages originally built for taking animals from one place to another. From their fields to the cattle markets, then from the cattle markets to the slaughterhouse.

III

Mala remembers entering Ravensbruck concentration camp.

After arriving in the cattle trucks she, Hania and the other women and girls were herded into a building where they were ordered to undress. Mala was fourteen. Hania, beside her, was seven. Hania was also ordered to undress.

They were given a striped jacket and striped skirt each.

They had their heads shaved completely.

Now, Mala remembers, they could not recognise each other. Because they all looked the same. Mala felt like she had had her identity taken from her.

Inside the concentration camp Mala experienced and saw the most terrible things human beings have ever had to endure. But those things are too terrible to include in this story.

IV

Ben and his father were transported to another concentration camp after Buchenwald. They managed to stay alive. They managed to stay together.

Ben remembers that, even as they were being processed on arriving at Buchenwald, his dad disappeared then returned with two loaves of bread.

His dad was a resourceful man. A survivor. Always alert to opportunities to find food, escape, make life less intolerable for his son.

But in December 1944 Ben was separated from his father. They had no choice. Ben was forced one way. His father was forced another.

Ben cried for days because of the separation.

V

Three hundred miles away at a new concentration camp called Bergen-Belsen, Ben's sister Mala – with Hania – was gravely ill suffering a high fever with Typhus. Typhus was a disease that killed 17,000 people in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp alone.

VI

Five months later – when Ben arrived at Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia – a man overheard his name.

Helfgott.

The man approached Ben. Was Helfgott his name? Was his father Moshe Helfgott?

Ben confirmed he was the son of Moshe Helfgott.

Then the man said: 'I can't hide from you what I know.'

Ben listened carefully to what the man had to say.

He had been on a death march with Ben's father. When the Nazis would force their victims to walk hundreds of miles from one concentration camp or labour camp to another. Called death marches because so many died on the march.

'Your father,' the man said, 'and a few other people ran away and were shot.'

Ben was alone.

Hundreds of miles away his sister, Mala, was alone.

Chapter four: what are you doing here?

I

Mala has a strong memory. She was lying on her top bunk in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, fighting her illness and looking through the window to see people running.

She was mystified.

How had they got these people strength to run? she wondered. What was happening?

It was the 5th April 1945. The British Army had arrived. The Nazis had abandoned Bergen-Belsen.

They were free.

The liberators were the most wonderful people, Mala remembers. Their kindness, after suffering all those years of cruelty. It was like going out of hell into heaven.

Though for some in Bergen-Belsen it was too late. They were too ill, too malnourished. Many still died.

II

Hundreds of miles away, three weeks later, on 9th May 1945, Ben was sleeping in Theresienstadt concentration camp, sharing a bunk with another boy.

The boy woke Ben up and told him: 'We are free.'

The Russians had arrived and liberated Theresienstadt.

Ben would learn that Germans had surrendered the day before.
Tuesday 8th May 1945.

His father had been killed days before the end of the war.

III

After being liberated by the British, Mala was nursed back to health.
Ben too.

They would survive.

Twenty-seven members of Mala and Ben's close family had been
murdered.

Six million Jewish people from across Europe had been murdered.

One and a half million Jewish children had been murdered.

Because they were Jews.

IV

Once he was stronger, Ben was keen to go home. To Piotrkow. To see
who was still alive. Perhaps he could find news of Mala? To see what
was left of his home. So, with his cousin, Ben returned to Poland.

He was fifteen now, his cousin twelve. They both looked terribly thin and
still had hair so short it was clear they had been in the concentration
camps. But they were treated with only kindness in Czechoslovakia by
the locals and the Russian liberators where they had ended up. Given
food. Shown help.

Ben was coming to think that the brutality was gone with the collapse
of Nazi Germany.

So, when they arrived at the Polish border, he was surprised when two officers stopped them.

‘Who are you? What are you doing here?’

The officers told Ben and his cousin that they needed to take them to the police station. The two boys were led through the dark border town that had no street lighting. It was after midnight now.

Ben became unsure what was happening.

‘Where is the police station?’ he asked, trying to sound casual.

‘Shut your mouth, Jew,’ the officer snarled back.

Ben had thought he was free. Thought that, with the Nazis gone, these things would no longer happen.

He was wrong.

The officers took out their pistols and ordered Ben and his cousin to stand up against a wall.

This was beyond belief. After all they had been through, this again.

Ben was desperate.

‘Haven’t we suffered enough?’ he pleaded, a pistol aimed at him.

‘Haven’t the Nazis caused enough destruction and devastation to all of us? Don’t we speak the same language?’

There was a silence. One of the officers turned to the other. ‘Let’s leave them,’ he said. ‘They are, after all, young boys.’

Ben and his cousin returned to Czechoslovakia and to Theresienstadt. For survivors there were no homes to return to. Many stayed to be looked after in the camps where they were once imprisoned. They began to recover.

V

Sweden had already taken thousands of Jewish refugees during the war. That did not stop after the war. The children from Bergen-Belsen were taken from Germany to Sweden in July 1945.

Mala and Hania were among them.

Mala remembers they were taken to a lovely place in Sweden. A summer resort. They lived in holiday chalets and swam in the lakes. It was a happy time. She thought that no-one else had survived from her family. Most people thought that.

But still, they played together, ate together. They were happy.

Mala remembers one dish in particular. Cubes of potato and sausage sauteed in butter. 'So delicious. So tasty. It won my heart.' And there was no limit on how much you could eat. No rations. No shortages.

VI

Ben returned from Poland to Theresienstadt feeling lucky to be alive. His friends who he had left behind in the now-liberated concentration camp met him with news.

'Do you know, we are going to England?'

It had all been arranged. The Jewish community in England – supported by the Central British Fund, now known as World Jewish Relief – had arranged to rescue and support 1000 Jewish children. To bring them to Britain.

Ben was delighted.

So, in August 1945 Ben was flown by the RAF to the North of England.

Ben, like Mala, would live beside a lake, among mountains in the English Lakes. There he was encouraged to play sport. Go hiking. Go swimming. To the cinema. He was taught English.

During the day, Ben remembers feeling and behaving normal. So normal and happy that nobody would not believe what he had been through.

Ben also remembers the night. When they went to sleep. It was at night when the trauma they had been through returned. The memories of the things that had happened to him and his father and mother and sister, Lusia.

VII

The Red Cross offered to help Ben and the others to search for family members who might still be alive, scattered anywhere around the world.

Most of the children he was with had seen or heard of the deaths of most of those they loved. But there were survivors out there. They were told.

So Ben began to write letters to see if he could find surviving family members. He knew his father was dead. His mother and Lusia, too. But he had heard nothing about Mala since they had been separated as slave labourers.

Chapter five: I've got a letter from my brother

I

At the beginning of 1946 Mala received a letter from England.

She was living in a large Swedish boarding school by then along with many of the other children who had been liberated from Bergen-Belsen. The school was in was an old stately home with enormous grounds where the children were encouraged to play when they were not having lessons.

Mala remembers opening the letter from England.

Next she remembers being so excited that she did not even finish reading it before she ran outside into the grounds of the school, holding Ben's letter up in her hand, above her head.

'I've got a letter. I've got a letter from my brother!'

II

Ben and Mala wrote to each other for months. They asked each other what they knew of the fate of family and friends from Piotrkow.

And Mala heard the news about her father.

After sending letters and photographs for months, Ben and Mala decided that it would be best they should both live in England.

Ben began to make arrangements.

At first it seemed like it would be difficult. In 1946 there were no rules, like there are now, that refugees have a right to move to a safe country.

But Ben spoke to the Central British Fund, the committee of people who had brought the 732 children over from Theresienstadt, including himself.

Mala would need a visa, the committee said. A visa is a special document from the British government that would allow her to come to England.

But visas were very hard to get after a war that had displaced millions.

Then one of Ben's friends said that when the 732 children had been brought over from Theresienstadt that they had originally been offered 1000 visas. But they could only find 732 children to bring to safety.

We must not forget that 1,500,000 Jewish children had been murdered by the Nazis.

The Central British Fund put in a request and Mala was given a visa. She could come to live in England.

III

The day came for Mala to leave the boarding school in Sweden and travel to England to be with her brother. Mala's friends were excited for her.

Hania was no longer with Mala. She was much younger, so had gone to a different school. And she was no longer terrified to be away from her cousin.

Mala travelled alone. By sea. She arrived at the port of Tilbury, near London, on 24th March 1947.

If you have ever driven over the Dartford Crossing on the M25 you can see the docks to the east where Mala arrived. Seventy-seven years ago.

Walking down from the ship, Mala recognised Ben immediately. They had shared so many photographs of each other that it was easy to pick Ben out.

They've waved, then embraced. It was, Mala remembers, emotional.

IV

After all they had been through, Mala and Ben were reunited. Together.

Both became British citizens.

Both, too, went on to have children. And therefore grandchildren to their parents, Moshe and Sara. Grandparents those children would never meet.

Ben and Mala are grandparents themselves, now.

As well as studying, working and raising their families, both have spent many years telling their story to help raise awareness of what happened during the Holocaust.

Ben became very good at weightlifting and went on to represent Team GB in the Olympic Games. Ben was knighted.

Mala studied sociology at university and was given an MBE for her work in Holocaust Education.

This story is part of that process.

Telling Mala and Ben's story.

Educating young people, like you, about the Holocaust.

The author – Tom – has had the great privilege of meeting Ben and Mala. He wrote his story based on what they have told him, as well as other interviews both have given.

As a result this story is not a story. It is the truth. Based on the testimony of Mala and Ben Helfgott.

Thank you for reading it.