

The Guard - a Time-out

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This story is sad, and a little peculiar, as it turned out. Its importance lies in showing how the good in life balances the bad - how events even out. This happened in my life, and I was able to regain my peace and trust in mankind.

After Mom and Dad had been taken away from us, my brother and I were on our own in the apartment in Bromberg, Poland. I was not yet 15, and my brother was 8 years old. We had to meet all kinds of difficulties to stay alive. It was winter, and very cold. We severely rationed the small supply of food that was in the apartment. We had no one that we could rely on to help us. Although the Polish people in our apartment complex did not report us, for a time they were afraid to help us since we were Germans.

After being on our own for a month or so, a Polish policeman came to our apartment and took us away. I was aware that this would eventually happen, and had prepared myself for it. I had packed a backpack and two carrying bags with clothes, half a loaf of bread and some documents - whatever I thought we would need. The policeman who came to take us away was quiet and said little. He took me and my brother to a compound about 10 minutes away from our apartment. I recognized the place that once housed circus animals. We had often played on this large field near the canal - it was our playground! But now the buildings had been made into a prison for German women, children and old men, and it was fenced in with four strands of barbed wire - more was not needed. Where could one go? If anyone tried to escape, he or she was shot on the spot - no hesitation!

We soon learned that this place had been made into a prison about a month before we got there. The buildings were already packed with German refugees caught in the war - mostly women and children. It was in a populated area of Bromberg, with apartment buildings close by that overlooked the area, including a tree-lined walkway that followed the canal.

The policeman turned us over to a guard who took us to a stable where the circus animals used to be. The place was packed with women and crying, hungry children. We barely found a spot to lay down. A kind old man moved over to make room for me, and my brother got a spot close by beside a lady with two kids. The floor was thickly covered with straw that made a comfortable bed. The shouting of the guards and the crying of the children went on all day and night. It was a frightening place.

I soon realized that I had forgotten to bring blankets with me. Nor were we supplied with dishes or utensils. This was not a hotel! The old man shared his blanket with me, and the woman shared her blanket with my brother Oskar. The next day when it was time to go to the soup-line for lunch, we had no bowls or spoons. So the old man went first, and then I took my turn with the old man's bowl and spoon. The lady and Oskar used the same arrangement. It wasn't all that bad. Besides, going at the end of the line meant that we got the thicker soup from the bottom of the pot.

About the second or third day, I met a chap that was my age. Being 14 years old, we were the oldest males in the camp besides the frail and the very old. Boys 16 years and older were already conscripted into the military. The guy I met had been in the prison camp for a while and was starving. When I told him that I lived around the corner and we still had a few potatoes in our apartment, he jumped at the chance to go there. At the time I didn't realize that as soon as we left the place we would be shot.

One night after we checked everything out, we went under the barbed wire. The guards were having a good time playing cards, all was quiet, and it looked safe. We had barely left the camp when someone shouted HALT. Now what? We slowly walked toward him, expecting to get a beating, be shot, or thrown into a hole. Nothing happened. The guard took us to our place without punishing us, not even a slap in the face, or even saying a word. Nothing happened the next morning either. By then I was scared stiff and in a cold sweat.

The next day, early in the afternoon, he came with the other boy to see me. He had his rifle with him. He signaled us to walk over to the sand pile. I can't remember much of what he did. Oskar and the other inmates were watching, and so were some of the people in the nearby apartments. Once we were standing on the sand pile, he started making moves with his rifle. Then he told us to stay put. Then more maneuvers. While that was going on, I noticed a man in a black suit and a white-collar walking on the path along the canal. The guard also noticed, and he and the man in the black suit waived at each other, very friendly-like. Again the guard told us to wait, then he walked over to talk to the man. By then I was frozen in mind and soul - it seemed as though my blood stopped flowing. I was motionless, with all feelings gone. No sound came out of my mouth, nor from the guy standing next to me.

After a while the guard came back and signaled us to move on back to the compound. He did nothing to us - no hit, no kick in the butt, nothing except to motion us to get back to our place. My little brother understood what was going on and calmly stood by me. That night and the next I didn't sleep. I couldn't eat or even talk. I just stared at the wall.

The day after that a farmer came looking for a farm worker. It was that same guard that called me over and told me I was going to work for the farmer, but that the farmer did not need my brother. At that point, I was not afraid anymore. I firmly said that I was not going without Oskar. If I got beaten or shot, I couldn't care less - let's get it over with. Then the farmer changed his mind and said he could use my brother too.

Before we left for the farm, the guard called me into his office and ordered me to take off my boots. He then gave me shoes that were badly worn. The boots he took from me were in good shape. We then left with the farmer for the train station. Before I left Poland, I had to tie those shoes onto my feet because the soles were falling off.

At the farm one night, I woke up with nightmares. It was then that I cried out loud - I couldn't stop it. I felt abandoned and was so discouraged. But again I had to regroup my inner strength and pick up the pieces to save my brother.

How does one get over such a thing? I had to learn to forgive. I have forgiven the guard, and I'm so glad I could. I

try to remember* *that it was the guard who chose me to leave that camp with the farmer and let my brother come with me without a fuss. Living with the farmer was hard work, but at least we got food to eat. We were out of danger and our lives were safe for the time being.

Perhaps the guard saw in us a symbol of the German occupation of Poland. He decided to punish us with raw fear without laying a hand on us. But who was the man in the black suit with the white collar? He looked like a priest. Perhaps that priest, or another one, had taught forgiveness to the guard, and so he let us go. A hand reached us from somewhere*. * I am convinced of that In my heart. I know that my Guard and I walked away with the feeling of peace. That is exactly why I have forgiven my tormenter. It didn't come overnight - it took me years to learn the goodness of God's doing. But I could not live my life having no trust in humanity - I would have failed. Fear and unforgiveness were like a cage to me. Thanks to God, I got out of the cage.