

The Long Journey Home

A Sudden Attack and Slow Changes

On September 1, 1939, Renee's seventeenth birthday was disrupted by reports of a German attack on Poland where she lived with her family. It was unsettling, but it didn't feel like the war would reach them in their small town 90 kilometers from Warsaw. They had numerous German Jews move to their community a year earlier when Germany began restrictions.

Her family believed the German Jews were sent to Poland due to their financial status. "The Jews they sent out of Germany earlier were rich—Hitler wanted to take their money to help with the economy," they said. "What would he want with Polish Jews? We're poor compared to our German neighbors!"

Renee's family refused to believe the stories from those who had left Germany. "They mistakenly blame us for the problems in Germany, but they won't hurt us."

News came swiftly that Poland had fallen to Germany. Poland didn't have the military to counter the Blitzkrieg (intense military bombing) that Nazi Germany launched on them. The Polish government refused to surrender and fled the country.

At first, not much changed, except that a Jewish committee was established, called a Judenrat, to centralize the demands of Hitler and Nazi Germany on the small Polish community—no prominent Jews agreed to serve on the committee. Eventually the SS (Schutzstaffel, Hitler's personal military) came to enforce the demands.

By the fall of 1940, three of the fifteen streets in the small community of Kozienice were blocked off as a ghetto for the Jewish population, and guards were placed to restrict movement and keep an eye on them. Renee's grandparents' house was already on one of the streets. It was a small ghetto, but it held people from the surrounding areas too.

The Judenrat or Jewish liaison committee first came for money, giving the Polish Jews a matter of days to round up thousands of zlotys (Polish dollars).

"They shouldn't take our money," her family grumbled.

"We don't have a choice. Just pay them and perhaps they will leave us alone."

"How are our neighbors letting them do this?" Renee asked. "There are a few people who clearly don't like Jews, but the rest? How can they let this go on?"

"They wait and see, Renee. They, too, are afraid of the German Nazis and those Polish who side with the Nazis. Everyone is trying to survive."

Then the SS picked up the young men from the streets of the ghetto and made them work digging ditches, carrying supplies, anything the Germans needed done. Eventually they began to call for all able-bodied people, and Renee would hop on the work trucks, do whatever work she was assigned, and be transported back to her grandparents' house inside the closed off section of the town.

One day, a series of arrests rippled through the ghetto.

"They arrested spies for the underground—people who are trying to resist the German occupation." Fear kept people indoors. They avoided being seen in groups. Part of the fear stemmed from not knowing anything for sure and not knowing who to trust.



Street in Kozienice, circa 1940-42 (photo via ushmm.org)

At one point, Renee's family received a note that someone had asked about her father and he should leave. Renee and her father fled to Warsaw to see if things were any better at his sister's house. While the Jewish people there had a little more freedom to go in and out of the ghetto at certain times of day, the Germans were moving people into smaller and smaller quarters in the city and starting to restrict movement. Renee and her father went back to Kozenice to stay with her mother and brothers.

For nearly two years, Renee and her family lived in the Kozenice ghetto, hungry and anxious for news. When she wasn't required on work crews, Renee spent her days working with a group that mixed formula for the poorest children to try to keep them alive. All around the ghetto, hungry children rummaged through trash cans to find any scrap they could eat—potato peels, onion skins, cabbage cores. Anything to keep the hunger at bay. Food was rationed, meaning there was only a certain amount available each week, and it was never enough to feed everyone.

Some people smuggled food into the ghetto from time to time, but it was dangerous. If they were caught, they were immediately killed. Eventually, word came that the Germans needed more workers to support the war effort.

By 1941, Renee and her family were moved to the Pionki Forced Labor Camp.

To the Camps

The Pionki Labor Camp was next to the railroad, and it was a set of warehouses converted into barracks, kitchens, and an ammunition-making plant. Renee's family were separated when they arrived, her father and older brother taken further away. Within a few months though, Renee, her mother, and younger brother were moved to yet another labor camp called Skarzysko where Renee was given a job making precision ammunitions, while her mother and brother worked in the barracks doing housekeeping and any chores that needed to be done.

Skarzycko was clearly an important part of the Nazi war effort. For one thing, Renee was surprised when she went to work the first day. Everyone was dressed in everyday clothes with their hair combed.

The women worked fast, their hands covered with white gloves, each measuring and marking their munitions precisely.

Renee caught on quickly, and before long, her first shift was over. When the supervisor ushered them back to the barracks to eat, Renee was surprised to find she had only worked for eight hours. As she quickly ate her soup and bread for dinner, she spoke with her mother.

"This job is about precision. They work in three shifts," her mother explained. "You must keep this job, keep yourself clean and healthy like the other women as best you can."

After Renee finished her dinner, she was ordered to sleep. The work required rest and a sharp mind. Sometimes she found herself working on the morning shift from 7 am to 3 pm, other times it was 3 to 11 pm, and sometimes from 11pm to 7 am.

The women working alongside her showed her how to keep her hair well-kept by keeping back her morning coffee which was lukewarm and very weak to wash her hair. The work stations all included a red crayon for marking, and the women would take the small ends with them to color their lips and cheeks.

"Why does it matter how we look if we're just locked up here," Renee asked another worker one day.

"You'll see," one woman told her. "They do inspections. If your hair isn't clean, they'll shave it off to keep it from impacting the ammunition. If you look sickly, they will take you away."

"Away where? To the hospital?"

"If you're lucky. But just as often to the woods."

The woman's tone was warning, and Renee resolved to look her best each day without drawing unwanted attention. After inspections, she tried not to hear the gunshots ringing in the woods behind the barracks.

Her mother and brother stayed in the barracks, her mother cleaning and her brother an errand boy of sorts.

Renee found the ammunition work much easier than the ditch-digging she'd had to do on the work details during her time in the ghetto. For one thing the ammunition work was indoors. She heard whispers about some of the other camps where workers

were out in the harsh cold 15-16 hours a day, many dropping in the snow half-frozen. She had fresh white gloves each week and turned some of the old used ones into collars to freshen her clothes.

Sometimes supervisors were harsh and beat her and her fellow workers. Others, like one guard on the night shift, would sometimes sneak them tiny sandwiches while they worked. But more than anything, Renee stayed busy to keep the fear at bay, trying not to think about her father and brother somewhere far away.



Forced labor at Gustloff Werke II Munitions Plant, Buchenwald Concentration Camp, 1943 (photo via ushmm.org)

The End of Forced Labor

In November 1944, Renee's mother got sick. She went to the hospital where the doctors said she would need an operation. Renee didn't let herself cry, but she knew there would be no operation for her mother. Her mother's illness quickly progressed until one day, Renee showed up at the hospital only to be met with news that her mother had passed. She was buried in a field not far from the camp.

Renee's brother continued to run errands and work in the barracks, while Renee kept at work in the munitions plant. But it wouldn't last for long.

On January 18, 1945, bombs began falling near Skarzysko. The Germans rushed around, clearing people and supplies, opening the hospital doors and the closets of food and supplies. When the supervisors ordered them out of the warehouse, Renee ran to the barracks to find her brother. Guards were yelling at them to get out, even as the bombs shook the

ground beneath them.

Renee grabbed some clothes from an empty bunk area and began dressing her brother in them.

"I don't want to wear a dress!" he complained.

"Hush," she said. "If they think you are a girl, they will let you stay with me. Hide here in the barracks until I come back."

Renee went to see what was happening outside and she saw policemen and soldiers scattered across the camp. She ran back to the barracks and found her brother in the midst of the other workers taking cover.

"Why are we staying here? Won't they kill us?" he asked.

"We're not going anywhere. We don't know who is who out there, and they won't know that we aren't the enemy. We're going to sit here and wait," Renee told him.

Soon, the bombing seemed to slow and a small group of Jewish policemen with guns barged into the barracks.

"The Germans are all gone. You can go now," one said to them.

Renee and her brother fell into line with the other workers and they walked to the edge of the camp, her mind racing. Where would they go?

They walked beyond the gates and into the countryside until they came to a small colony where the Germans had lived. It was deserted. Renee and her brother went inside to get out of the cold and found an abandoned dinner already on the table.

They ate a little, but before long, the Polish militia came in and told them to leave that there was likely going to be bombing to destroy the camp and the outbuildings. The Polish militia were assisting the Russians in defeating the Germans.

Renee and her brother grabbed a blanket and walked further away until they found an abandoned house. They stayed for a few days until the Russians arrived.

"You're liberated," the Russians told them.

Renee just looked at her brother and nearly cried. But where would they go?

Renee remembered the stories her father told about the difficulties people had finding their families after World War I. "Always go back home, Renee," her father had said. "That's where you will find your

people again.”

The trains were running troops and supplies and anyone who wanted to could ride for free in the cattle and transport cars. Renee and Michael took the train back to Kozenice, but none of their family had survived.

Her parents' home was miraculously still standing and empty. They learned it had been used as an office for the Germans. Renee and Michael had nothing though, and stayed in the kitchen where they could heat the stove using floorboards from the other rooms to burn to stay warm.

But the nightmare wasn't over yet.

One evening, a neighbor rushed to their door. “They're killing Jews!” Renee's neighbor said.

“Who? The Germans? Are they back?” Renee asked, fear rising in her throat.

“No, the Poles who moved into the empty houses. They don't want us back. They are killing people.”

Renee could not believe it. They'd survived the labor camps and transport to make it home, only to be threatened by fellow countrymen's hate.

“Michael, we need to go,” Renee said.

“Where?” he asked.

“To a bigger city. Lodz, maybe.”

The siblings traveled to Lodz where they worked for a couple months before learning of a German displacement camp that was helping Jews relocate.

In Germany, Renee and Michael arrived at Stuttgart which was a military base in an American zone. A man came into the barracks where they were staying and said the French had the mail running. Anyone who wanted to mail a letter could do it.

Renee made a plan. “Our uncle is in Charleston, South Carolina, Michael. Let's see if he will help us.”

Her uncle did indeed agree to help Renee and Michael.

Michael turned eleven after they arrived in Charleston. They lived with their aunt and uncle, Michael going to school and Renee working. Within a few years, Renee would meet and marry her husband Pincus Kolender and begin their own family.

In remembering all her family went through, Renee urged others to remember the Holocaust and its lessons. “I pray to God it will never, ever happen again—I don't care where or when or which people. Things like the Holocaust should never be allowed to happen.”

Source:
Kolender, Renee. Interview. SCE-TV and the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1990.

Renee Kolender

Teacher's Guide

If you haven't taught first person survivor testimonies before, we highly recommend reading [this guide](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Before you read:

1. Define the Holocaust.
2. What is a first-person testimony or account?
3. What role do first-person testimonies play in understanding history?

Questions to think about as you read:

1. What was life like for Renee and her family in the Kozenice ghetto?
2. What job did Renee get once she, her mother, and brother were taken to the Skarzycko Labor Camp and why were the conditions better there for prisoners?
3. What happened to Renee's mother before they could be liberated?
4. How did Renee keep her brother safe during the liberation?
5. How did Renee and her brother get to the United States?

Final reflection:

1. What will you remember most from this survivor's story? How does it add to your understanding of the events of the Holocaust?