



SURVIVORS

True Stories
of
Children

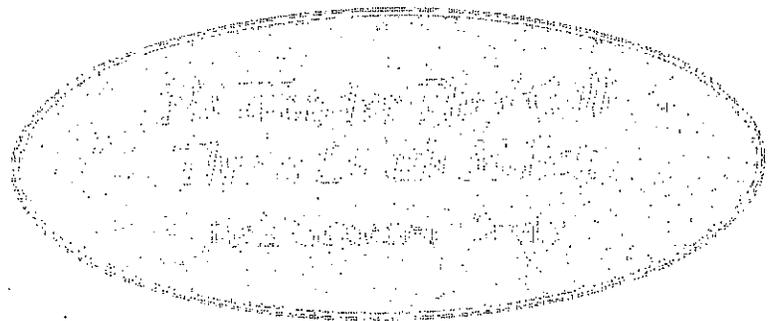
in the

Holocaust

Allan Zullo and Mara Bovsun

SCHOLASTIC

ORY
TARY
2



Jack Gruener tried not to wonder how he and 600 fellow prisoners were going to survive. Under heavy guard, they had just left Auschwitz in freezing weather on a forced march to Germany hundreds of miles away. As if that wasn't bad enough, all that each person had been given for food was one loaf of bread that had to last him the whole length of the two-week journey.

Jack, a seventeen-year-old Polish Jew, made sure his cold hands had a good grip around his two-and-a-half-pound (one-kilogram) loaf. *I must guard this with my life. I must be careful to eat only a little at a time, or I'll never make it. How is anyone supposed to survive? No wonder they call this a death march.*

The prisoners shuffled along in silence in two columns, holding their thin coats against the biting wind and clutching their loaves of bread. Rifle-toting SS guards and

whip-cracking *kapos* walked along on either side, yelling at the prisoners and threatening them for not moving fast enough.

These prisoners had been teachers, doctors, musicians, and shopkeepers. The younger ones, like Jack, had been students. But that was five years and a lifetime ago, before the Nazis had stormed into Poland and made it a crime to be a Jew.

Now all the prisoners looked the same — like filthy, bald skeletons covered in lightweight striped prison uniforms. The lucky ones wore tattered coats or had rags to tie around their heads. The unlucky ones had lost their shoes and were forced to walk barefoot over the icy ground. These marchers were like thousands of other ragged prisoners being moved out of Polish death camps to Germany in the winter of 1945, as the Allied forces closed in on Poland.

I don't know how, but I'm going to survive, Jack promised himself. *I can't think any other way.*

The sound of a gunshot a few yards behind him broke into Jack's thoughts. He turned around to see a straggling prisoner fall dead at the feet of a Nazi, who held a smoking rifle.

"That's what will happen to us if we don't keep up," muttered a prisoner walking next to Jack. The sound of a gunshot was one Jack would hear often during the death march, but soon he didn't even bother to look.

For days, the weary group trudged through the snow on country roads, the winter wind stinging their gaunt

faces. The Nazis wouldn't stop unless they found a place where they could easily guard the large group, so sometimes the prisoners had to walk for twenty hours straight before they were allowed to sleep.

On the fifth day, Jack glanced over at the prisoner staggering next to him. He was a boy younger than Jack. His face was red from fever, and his eyes were half shut.

He's going to die, Jack thought, and walked on a few steps, leaving the sick boy behind. Then Jack slowed down. *I don't want him to die.*

As the boy wobbled to the side, Jack saw a *kapo* coming up behind them. Jack figured that at any moment the boy would stumble and fall and then would be left on the side of the road with a bullet in his head, like so many other victims on this march.

Jack tucked his bread into the waistband of his pants. Turning to the boy, he said, "Come with me." Jack put his right arm around the boy's waist and draped the boy's bony left arm over his shoulders. Even though the boy was rail thin, lugging the extra weight quickly became almost too much to bear for Jack, who was only five feet three inches tall, and frail and weak himself.

With each step he took — each one harder than the one before — Jack questioned his own act of compassion. *What am I doing? Why am I carrying him along? I didn't think this through, and now I don't know how much longer I can do this. Maybe I should just let him go and save myself. But what if it was the other way around? What if he was dragging me? Would I want him to let me go?*

Prisoners were slogging past Jack because the extra

burden had slowed his pace. "Help me," Jack pleaded to the others. "Take his other arm. Please, please help."

But no one offered a hand.

"Leave him," grumbled a prisoner. "He's going to die anyway."

"Don't be a fool," another told Jack. "Let him go, or else he'll take you down with him."

At first Jack became angry, but part of him understood why no one wanted to help. It would take every ounce of strength to survive this brutal death march. A person had to think only of himself if he wanted to live. For a moment, he again considered slipping the boy's arm from around his shoulders, but a strong feeling deep inside Jack's soul kept him from doing it.

Although it was getting dark, the guards still hadn't found a safe place to stop, so the weary prisoners plodded on. Jack's shoulders ached and his legs quivered. But the worst agony was coming from his stomach. He was starving.

I wish I could get to my bread. Just one bite and then I'll be okay. But he couldn't free his hands to reach for the bread without dropping the boy. *If we stop, they'll shoot us. Maybe I should let him go. Then I could have a bite of bread. I'm so hungry, I can't stand it. How much longer can I go on like this?*

Then, all of sudden, Jack felt his load get lighter.

"I can't walk so well myself, but I'll help you," came a raspy voice from the darkening dusk. Jack glanced over and saw a middle-aged man with bloodshot eyes, deep lines in his face, and a grizzled beard. The man had grabbed the boy's other arm.

Together, the three moved on in silence. The only sounds were the crunching of footsteps on the frozen mud, the cracking of the *kapos'* whips, and the occasional loud bang of a gun as another straggler fell dead on the side of the road.

Finally, after the march reached the top of a steep hill, the guards ordered the prisoners to stop for the night. Jack and the older man gently dropped the boy, and then collapsed next to him. As soon as Jack's hand was free, he reached in his waistband for his bread: "My bread! It's gone!" he gasped, each word coming out in short, panicked bursts. Frantically, he felt all over his clothes for the half-eaten loaf. He got up and tried retracing his steps. *Where is it? If I've lost it, I'm a dead man.* His knees buckled, and he fell to the ground. He realized that he must have lost the bread along the way. *What am I going to do now?* Jack thought in despair.

The sick boy moaned. Jack crept over to see how he was doing and noticed a big piece of bread in his coat pocket. Jack slowly reached out to take it. *No, it's not right,* he told himself. Jack pulled his hand back and crawled away.

He flopped on the ground and tried to sleep, but he couldn't stop thinking about the bread in the boy's pocket. *He's so sick that he can't survive. If I take his bread, then at least I'll have a chance to live. Face it, he won't be able to walk anymore. He'll probably be dead by morning.* For three hours, Jack lay awake in the dark and cold, wrestling with his conscience. *I tried my best to save him, but he's going to die anyway, so I should take his bread. It's the only way I can survive. But can I really do that?*

By the first light of dawn, Jack had made his decision. He sneaked over to the boy, all the while hoping that he hadn't made it through the night so it wouldn't be a sin to steal his bread.

But the boy was breathing, and the redness in his face had gone. *He's alive! And he looks much better. Still, if it hadn't been for me . . .* Inch by inch, Jack slipped his hand into the boy's pocket and touched the bread. At that moment, the boy's eyes opened wide.

"Hey, what are you doing?" he said.

Jack jerked back his hand. "I just wanted to see if you were still alive, if you're okay," replied Jack. The boy grunted and fell back asleep.

I can't do it, Jack said to himself. *I can't take his bread.*

Later in the morning, when the grueling march began again, the boy was able to walk on his own. Jack stayed alongside him for a while but eventually lost sight of him when the boy slowed down. By now, Jack wasn't thinking about the boy anymore. All that was on his mind was how stupid he had been, and how hard he had struggled to stay alive ever since the Germans invaded Poland. For more than five years he had cheated death, and now he was angry with himself for being so foolish on this death march. *After everything I've gone through, I'm going to die now because I lost my bread.*

Jack was twelve when the Germans raised the Nazi flag over Krakow, Poland, on September 6, 1939. He watched in horror as some of his neighbors rushed out into the