SURVIVORS

True Stories of Children in the Holocaust

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SCHOLASTIC
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 drapped 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.
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. It's alive! And it looks much better. Still, it didn't feel right, Jack thought. It was still a sin, even if the boy was still alive.

"Hey, what are you doing?" he said. "I just wanted to see if you were still alive, if you're okay," replied Jack. "The boy grunted and fell back asleep."

Later in the morning, when the gruelling march began again, the boy was already walking on his own. Jack stayed alongside him for a while but eventually lost sight of him. In fact, he had been feeling a bit foolish ever since he had cheated death, and now he was an aching coward.

But the three moved on in silence. The only sounds were the crunching of footsteps on the frozen mud, the cracking of the ice, and the occasional loud bang of a gun as another stranger fell dead on the side of the road.

Finally, after the march reached the top of steep hill, the guards ordered the prisoners to stop for the night. Jack and the older man gently dropped the boy, and then the guards ordered the prisoners to take the bread and divide it among them. The boy's eyes opened wide at the sight of the bread. He got up and tried retreating for the half-eaten loaf. He realized that he must have lost his bread while sleeping.

The sly boy moaned. Jack crept over to see how he was doing and noticed a big piece of bread in his coat pocket. He flipped over on the ground and tried to sleep, but he couldn't stop thinking about the bread in the boy's pocket. He had to at least try to save him, but he was going to die anyway, so it wouldn't matter to him. It's the only bread he has left.