

Remarks by Ms. Irene Shashar, a Holocaust survivor

Holocaust Memorial Ceremony marking the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust

United Nations Headquarters, New York, Monday, 27 January 20

I stand here today in front of you to tell you, Hitler did not win.

I was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1937. My name when I was born was Ruth Lewkowicz Kirszenberg. We had a comfortable home, and I felt safe and secure. One of my fondest memories were days when I refused to eat, only opening my mouth to squeal with delight when my beloved grandmother would open her colorful umbrella. In retrospect, I would have been much more willing to eat had I known what was coming. By the time I was two years old, I would be starving in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The year was 1939. The seeds of genocide had been planted and the poison of Nazism invaded Poland. As we were forcibly moved into the ghetto, survival was the only thing that mattered. But some part of me hoped and believed it was all temporary. A fluke, that it was all a big mistake, and we would go back to our rightful homes and lives. Of course, that was not the case. The move to the ghetto was only the beginning of our suffering.

One afternoon, when my mother and I were out searching for food in the streets, we heard bloodcurdling screams over the usual clamor of the ghetto. Mother yanked my little arm and took off in the direction of our cramped living quarters that we knew as “our home.” She dashed up the stairway, pushing through the crowd, with me, a toddler, clinging to her arm. Once we reached the landing, the crowd was even thicker. Our door was open. Lying in the kitchen was my father. I could see his clothes, ratty dress shirt, trousers, and shlaikes, his suspenders. He was limp, bleeding from a gash on the side of his throat. My mother threw herself on top of him. She let out a wail that could be heard on the other side of the planet. Her iron grip on my arm was unceasing – I was trapped, listening to her cries and feeling her wracking sobs against my tiny body. As we stayed in that huddle, my left elbow had nowhere else to sit except in a pool of my father’s blood.

The abysmal conditions of the ghetto had already ruined my pretty dress, but now it was soaked through with the harsh red liquid seeping from my father’s fatal wound. We laid there for what felt like an eternity, until someone pulled me off of my parents and took me out of the room. I was relieved to be away from the scene, but that was the last time I ever saw my father.

We were now on our own. Our survival became even more desperate. I felt the change in my mother’s mood and mannerisms, but I could not pinpoint a reason for this change.

One day during our hunt for scraps of food, our pace was even more brisk than usual. My Mother was weighed down by a large bag, and I had my precious doll, my Laleczka, who was not typically a companion for those expeditions for sustenance.

Suddenly I was tossed down a sewer. I waited in fear for Mother to join me. As I waited, my eyes adjusted to the darkness of the grimy, pestilent tunnel.

Where are we now? What is this? All I could see, all I could feel, was the stream of water rushing past me. It was wet, dirty...awful. The relentless stream of water kept splashing on my face. My mother pushed me to move through the foul gutter. It was soggy, there was a tremendous stench – we were crossing the sewer for the whole ghetto area. All these years later, I can still smell the stench of that seemingly endless passage. Rats skittered past me. My only companion among those vermin was my beloved doll Laleczka. As I crawled along holding her, she became soaked through with the foul water and scent. She was my stunning little doll and even SHE was not safe in this Hell on earth.

As quickly and as forcefully as it had begun, the pushing from behind suddenly stopped. My mother threw me above ground and clambered up after me. To this day, I still wonder how she knew how far we had to crawl in order to emerge outside of the ghetto walls. How did she calculate the distance? How were we able to climb into the sewer and emerge undetected?

For the remainder of the War, I was a Hidden Child. My mother would say to me, “If you don’t cry and are a good girl, this will soon be over.” It all lasted an eternity.

My mother died in 1948, leaving me as an orphan in the care of her beloved niece’s family in Peru, Fela and Michal Topilsky. They gave me a new life, a new beginning, for which I am eternally grateful. I was thereby blessed with my brother Marcel and, later, with my little sister Sonia.

I was victorious over Hitler. Thanks to my mother’s overwhelming sacrifice, a priceless, selfless act of courage. I was blessed with the chance to survive -- and to thrive in adulthood. Thanks to her -- I was blessed with the opportunity to have children and grandchildren. Because I sowed my family tree. Hitler did not win. I did the very thing he tried so hard to prevent.

Allow me for a bit to share with you the branches of MY family tree: my son David works as a doctor in Israel. His wife, Rotem, is an intensive care nurse and they brought me three grandchildren. Nevó, eight, is a very gifted child. Omer, six, is a blue-eyed dancer and painter. Doron, three, is a sweet doll with blond hair and blue eyes.

My daughter Ilana is a social worker in the Shoham municipality. She is married to Assaf, a lawyer. They gave me four grandchildren. Yarden, sixteen, was my first grandchild – his birth

marked my victory over Hitler. It provided me with a reinvigorated purpose I could never have imagined. Yarden is active in sports, Scouts and an excellent student. Yahel, twelve, is going to be Bat-Mitzva this year. She looks like I did at her age. She is very gifted in math and science and is a graceful dancer. Shirah, nine, is an outstandingly talented skater. She enjoys being the family spokesperson and is amazingly articulate and easygoing. Ivri, seven, is lovable and curious. He enjoys sports and the Internet.

Last year, I moved to Palace Modi'in, Israel, to be near them and to delight in their growth and success.

This is a tribute to my mother, as is my whole life – along with the lives of my children and grandchildren.

I need your voice. The voice of the United Nations. The United Nations that arose out of the ashes of WWII. I need your voice because without it, silence is indifference.

Throughout the course of my life, I realized that it is not only my responsibility, but it is my obligation to the one-and-a-half million children who were not as fortunate as myself, to remind humanity that good can indeed triumph over evil.

Diversity is legitimate. Not all people need to be the same, or even alike, nor do they need to have the same beliefs. But everyone needs to have tolerance for the beliefs of others, and minority views need to be protected.

I have emerged from the Shoah with hope and courage and with a dream for the world. But I implore you. Don't let my dream turn into a nightmare. Don't let my mother's triumph go for naught. Life is a gift not to be taken for granted.

Hitler did not win.

Don't let Hitler ever, ever, win.

Thank you.

Irene Shashar 27.1.20