

Isacc (Icek) Gottfried
Polish Displaced
Person and Holocaust
Survivor
General Heinzelman
Fall of 1947



Isacc (Icek) Gottfried

I was 14 years old when, in September 1939, the German army invaded and occupied Poland. Jews had to sew a yellow star on our clothes, and we were not allowed to go to school.

At age 16, I was sent to a slave labour camp in Germany. Later we were transferred to a concentration camp where I worked as a carpenter building barracks for other foreign slave labourers. We were shipped in cattle cars without food, water or toilet facilities and packed like sardines. We arrived in Buchenwald camp, where we were guarded by the SS. We slept 7 or 8 men directly on boards. People died at night and were thrown out of the barracks in the morning. People died from starvation or disease. The camp commander was Dr. Elsa Koch, the Bitch of Buchenwald. She was famous for making lamp shades, parasols and purses out of human skin. She sent these to her relatives and friends as Christmas or birthday presents.

Over the years, I was in nine different camps. I worked in ammunition factories, in highway construction and railway expansions. In the winter of 1945 we were forced to march for 2 months. Those that could not walk anymore lay down beside the road and were shot by the SS guards. I tried to escape 3 times and was successful on the third try, after hiding in the forest. I was liberated by the French Free Forces. I was 19 years old, 5 foot 2 inches, and weighed about 80 pounds. I was starving.

Three months later I found my brother Bernard who also survived the concentration camps. We were the only ones in our family to survive. Two and a half years later our relatives sent us prepaid passage to Canada. We traveled on the S.S. Heinzelman ship for 2 weeks, in the fall of 1947.

We arrived in Halifax at Pier 21. Before boarding the train to Winnipeg, where our relatives lived, we roamed the old port of Halifax near the pier. Three men were working at a manhole, and they spoke English to each other. I could not believe that English speaking people would do manual work. In the windows of grocery stores they had gallons of red and white

vinegar. We thought it was wine and couldn't believe how cheap it was. When we tasted it, we thought that Canadian wine tasted like vinegar.

The train ride to Winnipeg was long and tiresome. Four days later we arrived at the CNR station and were greeted by our relatives and their friends. My brother and I continued to live in Winnipeg and I remember freezing my ears in the winter on my way home from English night school.

I have a good life in Canada. I have had a successful career. I am married, have 4 daughters and 7 wonderful grandchildren. My children now live in Winnipeg, Ontario and Nova Scotia.