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Never Forget:  
A Story of Hope and Forgiveness



L'olam al tishkach. Never forget. The promise made over and over by people around the world for seventy-six years since the Holocaust ended. The promise sworn to be kept and meant to protect the world from such a tragedy ever happening again. But in order to truly remember, in order to truly "never forget", it is necessary to explore the effects this atrocity had on the lives of individuals. One must understand that six million, the commonly cited number of Jews who perished, is not just a number. Each one of those six million, as well as the millions more who suffered yet survived, is a human being with a story which should not be forgotten. One young Jewish boy out of those millions was fortunate enough to escape death and flee the Nazis to the United States through a combination of kindness from strangers, determination, and hope. His name is Julius.

It is the year 1943 in the small village of Markuszów, Poland. All is well - families live together in peace and a man named Joyna travels to the market to support his wife Faege and their two sons, Julius and the infant Aaron. Julius describes their life as, "very, very fun to live in Markuszów.....my grandparents lived in the same town, I had uncles and aunts there too." But one day, everything comes crashing down around the villagers as Germany begins its invasion. Five year old Julius is scared and confused. He does not understand why the air is suddenly filled with smoke and fire and screaming. His family manages to survive the initial stages of the bombing and attempts to rebuild what is left of their home. However, they soon realize that their situation is unlikely to improve. The family decides they will go to their summer home in Zablocha, where they will be safe, but their plan is thwarted by the arrival of German soldiers, who force the able bodied men, like Joyna, to work in the streets and do their bidding. Life only gets worse when a brown wagon arrives at their front step and soldiers wielding weapons demand they get in. The boys and their petrified mother have no choice but to follow orders at the risk of being shot. The wagon rolls away filled with several terrified villagers.

By some stroke of luck, or perhaps fate, the wagon encounters a problem and has to stop. Faege knows this is her last chance to protect her family and sneaks out the back with her young sons in her arms as Joyna pays the soldiers to look away. Miraculously they escape undiscovered and are able to reunite and flee to a nearby field. The family stays there, trying to keep the baby quiet and figure out what to do. Home is not an option. Their summer residence is no longer an option either.

Joyna takes the family to a farm where he speaks with the farmer for some time. They reach an agreement and he allows the family to reside in a hole beneath his barn. The family stays there with nothing but bread, water, a pail to use the restroom, and a dirt floor to sleep on. There was nothing to do but pray. Julius recounts their experience, saying, "the cave was three feet by six feet wide - we could only kneel, we couldn't stand." Every few months, the farmer demands payment and Joyna must leave to find money. Young Julius worries for his father, but he returns safely each time. Soon, the family begins to feel sick. Each of them is getting weaker, especially Aaron. Joyna suspects something is going on with their food supply and discovers the farmer is using arsenic to poison them slowly. He knows he must do something, so he journeys

out of hiding and returns with his brother who is a part of the resistance. His brother threatens to harm the farmer if he continues to poison his family, and the farmer backs down.

Eventually, after more than two and a half years in a dark and dirty hole, hearing bombings every day, the four are retrieved by Joyna's brother. Julius remembers, "When we got out, I couldn't walk, I could only crawl. It took time to walk again." His uncle informs them that it is safe to travel to a city now because the Nazis are on the retreat, and they may go Lublin for the time being. From there, they go to Posen, then Berlin, then Munich, where they stay in a displaced persons camp for several years trying to get to America. Eventually a synagogue sponsors them and the family is able to take a boat and settle in a town called Joliet in Illinois. Joyna and Faega change their names to John and Fanny, the kids begin school in America, and they are finally able to live in peace.

The infant Aaron grew up to become a lawyer and married a woman named Mae. They had two kids, and those kids had kids. One of those kids is me. Aaron is my grandfather and Julius is my great uncle. They are Holocaust survivors, and it is my responsibility as a young Jew to carry on their legacy and remind people of the horror of their experiences. The details of this story come from my uncle Julius's account, preserved in a recording by the Shoah Foundation. He is still alive today, but does not like to talk about his time in Europe.

Learning this story took on a personal meaning for me not only because it is my family heritage but also because it is important to me to make sure that no other person has to go through what my family went through. Diversity, inclusivity, and acceptance have all become extremely important issues to me as I have grown older because I still see remnants of the hatred that caused the Holocaust to happen. Learning my family's story has made me even more determined to educate people about other cultures and promote acceptance and understanding among different groups. Since first hearing my great uncle's interview about his early childhood, I have made a point to join diversity clubs and committees, to work on projects that seek to educate students about Judaism and other cultures, and to actively oppose antisemitism through teaching and compassion. My great uncle is one of the kindest people I know, and he has always inspired me to spread love to others. Even though he went through terrible things, he is not a bitter person - he forgave the German people and the farmer who tried to poison them hoping that they would realize their mistakes, and that he would not have to live a life filled with hatred. I, too, wish to bring this forgiveness and hopefulness into my own life and the lives of those around me. It is my hope that someday our world will be able to not only tolerate each other, but to celebrate our differences and embrace our identities. However, in order for that to happen, we must remember the calamity that disrupted our ancestors lives so greatly and killed millions. We must vow to never let there be another Holocaust. We must never forget.

## Works Cited

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