

HSE8

A Beginning with No End

Before the war was unpleasant.

But that was before we knew what Hell was.

We were treated unequal.

Separated into Shtetls¹,

Far apart from everyone else.

We were disapproved of by the Russians and Polish¹

Who were strong antisemitists,

Who held prejudices against the Jewish.

Claiming we were the ones who caused them to lose the First World War¹,

Even though they were the ones responsible for the second.

We lived in close-knit communities

Could employ as business workers and attend university,

And we could practice our religion for the time being.

But then they came for us, for our families, for our homes.

They began to attack us, saying our beliefs were wrong.

They murdered our friends and our families and took away our rights.

We were scared; we feared them.

But we hadn't experienced a morsel of what was coming our way.

When the Nazis came for us

We weren't expecting the horrors that came with them

Or the wretched places awaiting our arrival.

The shouting, the orders, the fear;

The gunshots, the screams, the pain;

¹

The Holocaust Explained. "Pre-War Jewish Life." *The Holocaust Explained*, London Jewish Cultural Centre, www.theholocaustexplained.org/life-before-the-holocaust/pre-war-jewish-life/. Accessed 22 Feb. 2024.

The gas, the bodies, the end.

We didn't know of the violence that came with the onset of the war.

We didn't know how few survivors there would be.

They took us one by one.

Before we even knew what was happening.

The Star of David no longer protected us.

The Soviet Union was coming

And there was nothing we could do to stop it.

Shiny boots and uniforms knocked on our homes

And grabbed us by the arms and out the door,

Sometimes as a group, and sometimes just alone.

Some of us were forced into ghettos and some into camps

Where we spent the worst of our lives as slaves to the war.

In the ghettos, people suffering from starvation and disease dotted the streets

But there were dead bodies too;

Bodies that the Nazis were too careless to dispose of themselves.

Others were transported by cargo boxes to camps

Where we were sometimes forced to work

And were sometimes killed on the spot.

They branded us with numbers that replaced our former names

Stripped us of our clothes, our pride, and left us in shame.

They shattered our hope and sent us into darkness

We were no longer people living in a world

We were prisoners dying in the midst of the war.

They continued their shouting, their orders, spreading fear;

The gunshots still echoed with the screams, instilling pain;

And the gas, the bodies; the end was very near.

We didn't know the violence would ever stop.

We didn't know how few survivors there would be.

Day by day and hour by hour

We worked in the fields and did the Nazi's labor.

We slept very little and ate even less.

Our bodies were tired,

Or at least the ones that were left.

We were malnourished and suffering

Of both disease and heartache.

We were tired of having no hope.

We were tired of the constant course of fear.

But most of all we were tired of living in what appeared to be a world no longer here.

But then came the spark hidden in the darkness.

That set on fire and caught ablaze.

Four long, unimaginable years of torture

And there was hope

The Soviet Union was starting to crumble.

The Allies were coming

They were coming to wake us from our nightmare

They were coming to set us free.

Except freedom didn't set us free of the horrors faced because of the Nazis

It didn't give us back our jobs, our homes, or our families².

It didn't give us back the four most agonizing years in history.

We no longer heard their shouting, their orders, or felt fear;

But the gunshots still echoed with the screams, reminding us of the pain;

And the gas, the bodies; the end of six million lives.

We didn't know that the violence could ever stop.

We didn't know that even the survivors would continue to live on in their memories.