

## The Story of Zysla Tajch (Sophie Klisman)<sup>1</sup>

Lori Klisman Ellis

Zysla Tajch was born on July 6th, 1929 in Piotrków Trybunalski. Her parents were Liba, nee; Rozrazowska, and Berek Tajch. Zysla had two brothers: Moszek and Sruerek, and one sister: Faiga. Another sister, Esteria, died at the age of 9, before my mother was born. The family moved to Łódź when Zysla was 3, and that is where she went to a Jewish school, for a few years, until the German's invaded Poland and shut down the schools.

Her family was put in the Łódź Ghetto. There her mother, father and Moszek died a slow painful death, before her eyes, from starvation and disease. Somehow my mother, Faiga and Sruerek kept going to work, while being starved and exhausted. After surviving in the ghetto for 4 long years it was liquidated.



*Zysla (on the left) and Faiga. After the War, 1945/6.*

Zysla, Faiga and Sruelik were transported, by cattle trains, to Auschwitz. During the selection Zysla thought it was Dr. Mengele who raised his finger to direct people to the right or left. The ones that were too old, pregnant, too young or sick were sent to the gas chamber. Faiga was at

<sup>1</sup> The testimony can be watched in: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B37-tWdtBdr3aTEzVzdabDBCeTA>

the front of Zysla and was waved to the right. When it was Zysla's turn the Dr. shouted in German: "STOP." She was petrified that she did something wrong. He asked her how old she is. At the time she was only 14 but lied and said she is 18. Then he asked her what year she was born. She told him 1925 instead of 1929 and he waved her to the same direction as her sister. They hugged and cried. They did not know if that line was to life or death, but they were thrilled by being together. She felt this was a miracle that she survived the selection. Sruelik was sent to another direction. He looked back at his sisters and they all cried. They never saw him again. The sisters were in Auschwitz approximately 15 days before transported (4 days and nights) to Bergen- Belsen.



*brother Moszek*

They were in Bergen-Belsen for 4-5 weeks, of October 1944. During that period the sisters slept in tents that were cold and wet. My mother got sick with strep throat and a fever. There was no medicine, aspirin or even water. At that point my mother wanted to die. Her sister said to her: "You cannot leave me alone. You are the only family I have." One of the prisoners that used to be a nurse told my mother to gargle with her own urine. This is what saved her life. It was another miracle of her surviving. Zysla and Faiga were not aware that Sruelik had also been sent to Bergen-Belsen, because the men and women were separated. Records indicate that Sruelik presumably perished at Bergen-Belsen shortly before liberation.

Next, the two sisters had a 13 hours cattle train ride to Salzwedel camp, in Germany. They stayed there for 9 months. They worked an evening shift, in a munition factory. A piece of bread and watered down soup was provided for the day. My mother became extremely ill. She could not stand during roll call and her sister tried to lift her up. One SS Nazi woman had a heart and told her to go back to her barrack. She immediately fell asleep. Within a few minutes a terrible SS Nazi soldier started swearing

at Zysla and beating her, to near death, along the forced walk to the munition factory. When Zysla arrived, she was almost dead. Faiga cleaned her up and then figured that Zysla was not on the working list of that day. So, she hid her in a back room and put her in a box to sleep. At the end of the shift Faiga woke her up and they walked back to the barracks. That little amount of sleep helped her survive.

Zysla and Faiga were liberated on April 14th, 1945 by the 9th U.S. Army, 84th Infantry Liberating Unit. Until 1949 they stayed in DP (Displaced Person) camps in Germany. They knew they could not go back to their home in Łódź, due to Anti-Semitism. During that time, they searched for family survivors through the Red Cross, realizing that their whole family perished in the Holocaust. In the DP camp Faiga got married to Roman Shloss and they had a daughter, Loretta. Finally, they were heading, in 2-weeks journey, by boat, to New York, and then to Detroit, Michigan.



*Sophie and Bernard Klisman*

Once in America Zysla, called from now: "Sophie", went to night school and worked during the day. In that school she met her husband Bernard Klisman, also a Holocaust survivor. They fell in love and got married. They had



*Sophie (wearing a blue gown) and Bernard has a red tie with friends at their granddaughter's Bat Mitzvah, 2001.*

Mark and Lori between 1956 and 1959. Sophie was a sales woman at a prestigious woman's clothing store. She was a very dedicated wife to her husband Bernard, and very loving mother to her 2 children. Her children got married and had a family of their own.

Sophie and Bernard never talked with us about the Holocaust because they did not want us feeling sorry for them. They hid the pain from us but had survivor friends who soon became our family.

When our kids were in school, they had to do a project about the Holocaust and that was when my mom shared a little bit of information. Just 3 years ago she was interviewed for the Holocaust Memorial Center. After that the photographer Monnie Must photographed her and included her, my father, and many other survivors in her (together with Sabrina Must) a book called: **Living Witnesses Faces of the Holocaust.**<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Naturally Photography (January 1, 2009).



After that I was on the internet and noticed a colleague of mine posted on Facebook: "The World Memory Project<sup>4</sup>. I was curious if I could find any information on my mother's or father's family. I put in the names and felt like I hit the jack pot. I was able to find out the dates her family perished. This is when my mother put up<sup>4</sup> beautiful plaques at Adat Shalom Synagogue in Farmington Hills, Mi. Finally my mother has a place she can go to say Kaddish, and the family will never be forgotten!

Then I found a website called Jewishgen.org. This site had

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Living-Witnesses-Faces-Holocaust-Monni/dp/061530813>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ushmm.org/online/world-memory-project/>

a wealth of information about people from Poland, and other locations. I found the exact spot where Liba and Moszek Tajch were buried. I contacted the staff at the New Łódź Jewish Cemetery and asked if there were any markers or tombstones on those spots. Staff emailed me the exact spots they were buried however there were no markers or tombstones, but empty land where they were buried. In their books the exact spot where they were buried was documented. I asked my mother if she would ever want to go back to Poland and she said: "never". I said: "what if I told you I know the exact spot where your mom and brother were buried?" and she said: "you have to be certain". I told her I was. I asked if she would like a tomb stone erected in memory of the Tajch family and she said: "yes". We had the stone made in Poland and it was put in the Ghetto Field of the cemetery. Our next goal was to book a trip to Poland.

Sophie, my brother Mark, his wife Anne, my husband Jeff and I decided we were going with my mom to Poland. On July 7, 2016, at the age of 86 my mom and all of us got to say Kaddish, at Łódź cemetery, in memory of her beautiful family that perished in the Holocaust.



It was the most emotional and moving experience. After that we went to Radegast Museum<sup>5</sup> to see the spot where she was transported to Auschwitz. We also went to Piotrków and found her synagogue. It is now a library. When we arrived there something magical happened. We met a Rabbi and a group of young Jewish Professionals from New York on the J. Roots Mission. They asked my mother to speak to their group about her life story. We were amazed at her courage to do this. She is a brave survivor. The next day the group went to the Tajch grave at <sup>5</sup> <https://muzeumtradycji.pl/oddzial-stacja-radegast>

Piotrków Jewish cemetery, said prayers and placed stones on the Tombstone. It meant the world to my mom.

Then our family visited my father's home town on Sosnowiec. We went to the resort town of Zakopane. As a young girl my mother dreamt of going there, so, I wanted to make her dream finally come true. We also visited Auschwitz-Birkenau and then Krakow.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A blog was also written about our journey in Poland: <https://ellispoland2016.blogspot.com>



*At the Holocaust Memorial Center 2018*

Presently Sophie speaks at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills, MI. She is still active, youthful and in good health. In May 2019 Sophie was selected to be the survivor to speak at the FIDF in Poland and Israel. She will speak at Auschwitz and be escorted into the concentration camp with 50 Israeli soldiers. This is such an honor to be selected. She was also asked to speak in Hamburg, Germany, at Salzwedel camp, for the 75th anniversary of the International Holocaust Remembrance Day and the liberation of Auschwitz. Unfortunately, she was unable to attend because she was speaking in Poland at that time.

In 2019 Sophie was selected to be a Holocaust survivor speaker for the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces. Her daughter in law, Anne Klisman accompanied her to Krakow, Auschwitz and then to Jerusalem in May 2019. She, along with 45 Israeli soldiers, another holocaust survivor, and 30 additional people on the FIDF mission marched into Auschwitz where Sophie shared her story of being imprisoned in the Łódź ghetto, Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Salzwedel. She talked about the loss of most of her family, the starvation, disease, exhaustion and yet still having hope!

She went from the darkest period of her life, in Poland, to the light in arriving to Israel. She celebrated the Holocaust Memorial Day at Auschwitz and then celebrated Independence Day in Israel. In Jerusalem she danced with the Israeli soldiers, and they helped her to celebrate her life. Major General Klifi, from the FIDF, called her a hero. This mission helped her feel safe and experience closure from the War. The soldiers stated Sophie impacted their lives. They now have a clearer picture of why they need to fight for their country. They know what can happen when Jews don't have a state of their own.



*Sophie is on the far left at her grandson's wedding. June 2018*

Upon her arrival back in Michigan, an Army Veteran, who served in the 84th infantry, read Sophie's article in the Detroit News and contacted her. He stated he was one of the liberators of Salzwedel. They reunited for the first time since the liberation of Salzwedel camp in 1945. Doug Harvey, 95 years old, was one of the brave liberators who is still alive. He is an active, intelligent and independent man who helped to free 3,000 prisoners of war. He is a very humble and modest man. Sophie, a youthful 89-year-old, stated: "You gave me my life back. I can never thank you enough." Sophie tells: "It was like watching angels jump off the trucks and tanks when they came to open the gates of Salzwedel."

They hugged and embraced during this sentimental meeting. It was captured by the national and local news and several newspapers, as well as radio stations.



*Doug Harvey and Sophie Klisman*



In addition, David Spohn, the son of James Spohn, came to meet Sophie all the way from Colorado. James Spohn also served on the 84th Infantry and helped liberate Salzwedel. Although James is no longer alive, his son, David, felt the need to meet Sophie. James wrote up his memoirs about the liberation of Salzwedel and David read this emotional letter to Sophie and to the news reporters:

"In a small German town called Salzwedel we came upon a women's concentration camp. We learned later that this group of prisoners included about 2,700 Jewish women from Eastern Europe and 300 non-Jewish political women prisoners from Western Europe. They burst out of their camp when the gates were opened and straggled in masse down the main street of the town - clad in dark blue or striped uniforms, each uniform with a large yellow "X" on its back, a few inches below the shoulder blades. The yellow "X" on the uniforms provided the German guards with a target, should a prisoner try to escape. The women broke windows in the bakeries and shops and grabbed loaves of bread and other food. They didn't seem to have any individuality - just a horde of desperate people. They looked

gaunt, if not starved. We knew they were women, but they had little appearances of femininity. Our American soldiers literally backed away from them - almost horrified by what they saw. The last I saw of these wretched women, they were slowly filtering off into the shops and alleys as they ran out of steam. It was an awesome sight - and caused our crew to wonder again what kind of people the Germans really were."

It was an honor for my mother to meet David Spohn and David was honored to meet my Sophie Klisman!



James Spohn