

FIRST PLACE HIGH SCHOOL PROSE

Together

Angelina Morosan, Grade 12

Saint Sava National College, Bucharest, Romania

Teacher: Denis Radu

Survivor Testimony: Bluma Goldberg

Dead leaves rustled as the wind sung a sad serenade through the crooked trees. The young girl shuddered. Her heart skipped a beat whenever twigs snapped. If the Germans found them in the woods, they would kill them on the spot.

She tried not to think. Fear and sorrow gnawed at her heart, but her sister's hand was an anchor linking her to a loving past and to a future where they might once again feel the warmth of their parents' embrace. Back then, she didn't know all that would be left of her mother and sisters would be ashes falling like snow on the barren earth. Or that her father and brother would die just before the Americans came.

The girl hung on to those fading memories. They were water for her soul and food for her rumbling stomach. And she had her sister.

They remained together even as the deep dark green of the woods made way for the silver-grey of machines in the ammunition factory. In the labour camp, time seemed to have stopped – there was neither day nor night, only the relentless feeding of the machines, their cavernous jaws always hungry for more. Then came a train wheezing down the track. It swallowed them whole and when it spat them back out, they realised another monster had gobbled them up. All the girls who got off with them watched on as the last traces of their former selves were stripped away – personal keepsakes, jewels, even their clothes, everything was taken away. Striped uniforms, empty barracks, biting cold and creeping maladies were waiting.

But once again, they survived. Together. As others succumbed to disease, or lost their minds, crying, she held fast to her sister's love. They talked about little things, they looked out for each other. Once, in exchange for her only crust of bread, the older sister had acquired an apple for the little one, who was suffering from fever, so that she would eat and get well. As soon as she recovered, it was the little one's turn to nurse her sister with a rag dipped in cold water. By the time the Americans arrived, the girl wasn't little anymore. She had seen and suffered unimaginable things. Yet love - bright, warm, smelling of fresh bread and laughter – had given her heart wings to fly past the nightmares, into the starry skies.

The girl's name is Bluma Goldberg. Listening to her interview, I realised that the answer to the question of what it means to be human is as simple as it is difficult to grasp – it means to love and be loved. It is thanks to this memory of love and its experience during the Holocaust that Bluma survived, as did I, during the COVID-19 'pandemonium' and under the penumbra of war. Survivors of the Holocaust entrusted us with their memories, and it is our responsibility to become their storytellers, recovering their voices and making them immortal.