

*Sharing What We Know*  
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Mary Kress remembers the windowless 7'x10' compartment where she spent 16 months hiding with nine adults and one remarkable three-year-old. On rare occasions, Mary and the little girl ascended to the attic. Through small slats, they watched animals wandering free in the sunlight. Bewildered, the child asked: "Why can the horses be outside? The cows, the dog, the cat, but I can't?" Before Mary could explain, the child answered herself: "No, I know. Because I'm Jewish."

Mary was just a teenager then, but likewise "knew exactly what was happening." Mary knew. The three-year-old knew. God willing, none of us will personally know the horrors of a Holocaust. Yet we share the stories of those who knew it firsthand because those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it.

Mary grew up in 1930s Poland, with kids lobbing rock-laced snowballs and vicious verbal jabs at her ("Dirty Jew!"). Schoolyard taunting, discrimination, and scapegoating are relatively easy to understand. But how such small things — literal snowballs — could have figuratively snowballed into the systematic, state-sponsored slaughter of six million Jews is much harder to understand. Only when I listened to Mary tell her story with its steady progression of degradations, each one leading to the next, did I understand.

The Nazis arrived in Mary's town in September 1939, stationed guns in streets, forbade Jews to attend school, and confined them to designated ghettos. But at least Mary's family was still together, able to gather for Shabbat. Then came ghetto liquidations. Hiding places. Imprisonment. Endless selections. And so much death. Remember Mary's brave three-year-old companion? The gestapo shot her. They divided Mary's family, carting them to separate camps. At one camp, Auschwitz, Mary was forced to kneel in the snow naked until many around her keeled over, dead. Even after Auschwitz was liberated, savage death marches claimed many more lives.

This was what the Nazis wanted: the extermination of the Jews. They wanted them eliminated, erased. Each time we tell Mary's story, we directly fight what the Nazis wanted: in the act of remembering, we prevent those who endured the Holocaust from being erased, forgotten.

So we tell Mary's story: the incomprehensible evil and brutality she knew, but also the amazing goodness: a sandwich shared when she was starving, a coat when she was freezing, a woman who helped her escape Mengele when he became momentarily distracted, an S.S. man who lifted her onto a train when she couldn't take another step. Such compassionate, courageous actions are sunlight through attic slats, illuminating the best of humanity.

This is why we who know what the Holocaust was must never stop telling its stories. These stories inspire us to stop prejudice lest it go unchecked and snowball, to protect the vulnerable (especially little children) that they may live free in the sunlight rather than shut up in hiding, to treasure family togetherness, to fight evil, to endure dark and difficult times, to look forward to better days, and to actively put goodness in the world through our actions.