



Warning: This story contains graphic descriptions of life in a concentration camp. The story is based on true events; except for two historical persons, the names of all parties are fictitious.

Where hope lingers

A short story by Graham Price

It was April 15, 1945. Hilda stared at the British soldiers swarming out of their steaming tanks and large trucks with flapping canvas sides — their eyes bright and glistening, some of them heavily tanned, others with rosy cheeks as if they were new recruits to the war. There had been an officer in a jeep before, but now there was further activity. None of her fellow prisoners had that same look. All were pale and looked like partially invisible ghosts. She ran an emaciated hand across her forehead. Could it be true? They were liberated at last! Pray that it be.

She'd long dreamed of these cavalier soldiers, coming to rescue her not in armoured vehicles but on prancing horses with long glistening swords down at their side. A First Lieutenant jumped down from the armoured tank that came to halt at the gates, shouldering a light machine gun and offering her a bar of chocolate. She grasped it greedily. Her small brother, Erich, staggered toward the soldier, mouth wide open and thin arms reaching out. The soldier picked him up easily — Erich was all skin and bone, head shaven so that his skull looked similar to the corpses lying around the yard near the gates. The soldier shook his head, tears falling down his cheeks as he smoothed the top of Erich's head.

"You do stink somewhat, little boy, but we'll fix that for you. Chocolate?"

Erich mouthed something that the Lieutenant did not understand. He gently lowered the boy to the ground, fearing the child might break upon touching the surface.

"We all stink here at Bergen-Belsen," said Hilda in reasonably good English. After all, she had been to the Montessori school in years past, before all of this evil transportation and degradation by the Nazis.

A Corporal medic came up. "Sir, you need to keep your distance. This place will be full of typhus and typhoid. Look at all these dead people lying around!"

"Oh, what the hell, soldier. If the war hasn't killed me yet, surely these people won't kill me off. Let's have some compassion around here, aye?"

Hilda shivered. It was cold; early Spring, though the day was clear with only a few grey clouds above. She'd grown used to the cold, the biting winds over the last couple of years. Grown used to the rats running around the open huts, grown used to the lack of food, with family and relatives dying before her eyes. What else could possibly harm her? She licked the chocolate, careful not to bite into it, fearful for a reaction from being starved for so long. She knew that much, at least. Her seven-year-old brother, Erich, still did not speak, but looked sullenly at the crowd of people staggering out of the gates, crying, panting, stumbling in their haste to view their liberators and take from them what they could. Hilda pulled her brother out of the way. More soldiers were handing out rations to the multitude of grasping hands. Hilda stood back. What was the hurry? She hadn't eaten a decent meal in months, nothing given within the past 48 hours, except some watery soup the night before last that made her bowels excrete in a hurry. Like Erich, she was wasted — thin and bony, her ribs if she took off her worn and ragged top, would show clearly. Her hip bones were sharp, almost piercing her thin and translucent skin. At fourteen years of age, she could be taken for an old lady.

The Lieutenant was still standing there. "Well, what's your name, little girl?"

"Hilda Berger. My mother was Esther and my father Hanns. My elder brother, Abraham, was with us until last month, but all are gone now . . . all are gone. They died here in this rubbish dump." There was no emotion on her face as she said that. It was simply a fact and facts had to be dealt with and then dismissed immediately in a concentration camp, otherwise one would go mad.

"Hilda! That's my grandmother's name. What a coincidence. Okay, I have to go now, but I'll return. You look after that brother of yours and we'll see about making you both more comfortable. But there are many such as you . . . there are many . . . far too many." and he turned away trying to hide the swelling within his eyes, and climbed up into his tank. It turned on its caterpillar tracks, making puffs of smoke in the cold air and heavy grooves in the mud, and roared away.

A khaki coloured ambulance stood there, its passenger medics overwhelmed by the sights before them, knowing that by themselves they could do nothing to make things better. It would take hundreds of staff to be flown in with thousands of new clothes for the inmates. Already, the people of Britain with their own suffering and shortages were donating blouses, shirts, dresses, trousers, coats and shoes. Some even added hats, thinking that with the coming spring and summer months, these would be a blessing for the survivors. No one, during the inspection of Bergen-Belsen dared to touch or even think of distributing the piles of clothes and shoes found numerously heaped in the sheds, left behind by diseased and dead inmates. These would stay until photographed and eventually either kept for posterity as a record, or gathered up and burnt.



It would take a massive movement of catering staff to arrive to begin feeding the several thousand of those who were still alive, and that would need to be done slowly. None of them would be used to rich food and would simply vomit it back up or excrete it through a continuing diarrhoea for days on end. A huge medic team was already on the way with field operating surgeries, life giving drugs, and the latest diagnostic machines. Bergen-Belsen was relieved at last.

Hilda woke as dawn was creeping through the camp, its fingers penetrating the huts with an icy feeling. She didn't mind. It was better than the vicious snow they'd had to put up with for several winters. It had even come to the point where some of the inmates ate it, simply for something to fill their empty but bloated bellies. She'd had second thoughts about coming back to the hut to sleep, because the dead were still there. Over two-thirds of the hut's inmates were gone. Typhoid, typhus, tuberculosis? She didn't know. The smell was overpowering, but she had lived with it for so long that it didn't seem to matter. It was everywhere you went, it penetrated the camp like some heavy miasma from the underworld. Despite the rations they had consumed, more had died during the night, but the skeleton of the woman on the bunk next to her shakily moved and uttered some breathless noise. Erich woke on the bunk beside her and blinked. She caressed his face. No adverse reactions during the night. They were still there and now there was hope . . . hope that somehow they might be allowed to go back to their town in the Netherlands and live a normal life again. That is, if it was still there. She'd heard the bombers night after night, not so far away, and then the thunder claps as they released their bombs, over and over. Erich sat up, rubbing his eyes. He smiled at her and she thought it was something so wonderful to see, for he had not smiled in months, or was it years? She could not remember. She gave him a drink from the reconstituted milk she had been given. There was some tinned meat that she thought might have been beef, but she needed to be careful with that. It might be too rich for their stomachs. The British had been good to them, though it was still not enough. She wondered how it would have been if the Russians had got there first, would they have been so kind? She had heard rumours of their savagery when they reached German villages, raping the women and young girls, but of course that was simply the German guards talk just to scare them, wasn't it? There were Russian prisoners of war in another section of the camp, but she had never met any of them. Would they be any better off than her companions? Probably not, and perhaps treated even worse than the Jews.

A British army Captain stood in the doorway with a clipboard and called for those able to move to come outside for an inspection. Hilda shivered. The remembrances of previous inspections in the camp by the SS and some Nazi medical personnel came back to her like a thunderbolt. She froze. But Erich had begun to move, so she caught up with him, took him by the hand and went outside. The sun was shining. Inmates were coming out of the huts, those who could walk, many simply staggering along being as brave as they could be. They had spent years being starved, tortured, kept like pigs in a swill, so what was a broken kind of stagger along the mud to them? Nothing! They could even smile, and from some of them would come a laugh and a song or two. They were living in different times, which hit them like a wave from the sea, washed over them and gave them some cleansing which they had not known for years. And there was a voice somewhere in the crowd reciting passages from the *Torah*, which was taken up by others so that it became a chant. And slowly, some of the stronger ones began to sing and dance.

Hilda and Erich had moved to the front of the crowd where the Captain and several soldiers were situated. They were attempting to record names and dates, but it seemed an impossible task while the crowd was still rejoicing. Eventually the army personnel began to pack up. The Captain held a loudspeaker and addressed the crowd. "I'm sorry that we do not have further rations at the moment. My army has moved on and is penetrating further into Germany. It will not be long before the Nazi regime will surrender and everyone will be free; not only yourselves, but those in Dachau and Auschwitz and all over. We are getting closer to Berlin each day. If you will be patient, we will be bringing you more help, more rations, more medicines. This may take a few days, a week or two, but it will come my friends. It will come."

There was a roar of cheering, which surprised some of the inmates themselves in their weakened condition. Men and women, freed from being separated for years, looked at each others ragged and gaunt faces and saw only angelic images before them. Some recognised men or women they had known previously and rushed to embrace. We have survived. We can be re-born. We are not slaves any longer. As Moses led the children out of Egypt under the thumb of Pharaoh, so we too are relieved. Rejoice!

The Captain was speaking again. "Well good luck. I know that some of you have broken into the SS quarters and taken all their food and drink, and that's fine. That's what you had to do, but I implore you all, not to take this too far. We need some form of rule and regulation, so please enjoy the freedom that you have, but be satisfied in the knowledge that further help is coming to you. And, please know that you are free to leave the camp for walks if you wish . . . go to the local villagers . . . talk to the people there, because they were just as trapped and afraid as you have been. That's all for now. I have to join my fellows on the road to Berlin. *Auf Wiedersehen, meine Freunde.*"

The Lance-Corporal interpreter looked at the Captain and shrugged his shoulders. Well, that was it. Better get a move on.



Hilda thought that it would be a good thing to go out and see the farmlands around the camp. She would like to find other children out there who had not been incarcerated and see how they had fared during the war. She now had enough rations to last for almost a week, if she and Erich were careful. Fortunately, she had been given a canvas bag by the Lieutenant which she slung over her shoulder, thus keeping the rations safe from other people. The strap dug into what was left of her shoulder flesh and hurt, but she was determined to have it that way. We might all be Jews, she thought, but desperation makes thieves of all men, and women too. She wasn't about to give up her rations for those who had used all theirs up.

A man, somewhat more fleshy than the others, came up to her. "Are you Anne?" he asked.

She hesitated. His face was dark and pock-marked, his beard grown long and grey, but as most, he had a shaven head. She did not know who he was and clasped the bag to her breast. "No, I am Hilda."

"Ah," he said. Hilda Berger is it? I thought you might have been Anne Frank. You look very much like her, and I think you knew her, didn't you? You were often taken for twins. I've seen you together, with that little brother of yours."

Hilda shrank before the man. "Don't you know?"

"What is it I do not know?"

"Anne and her parents are no longer alive. How is it that you do not know that? Who are you?"

The man crumpled to the ground and began to sob. He rocked back and forth, wailing. Hilda stepped back, confused. If he had known her in the past and also Anne, how come he was so ignorant of what had occurred? She could not stand the noise, took Erich by the hand and walked away. Whoever he was, it would have to wait. I don't need this kind of interruption into my new freedom. Already, she was beginning to dream of a new life for her and Erich, when they would go back to their old town in the Netherlands, and begin their lives again. And Erich could go to the Montessori school.

"What have you got in that bag?" said the thin dark-haired woman as she snatched at Hilda's arm. She was tall, but like all the inmates, clothed in rags, no shoes. Her feet stood splayed in the mud like rotten leaves.

"It's none of your business," said Hilda, tearing herself away from the woman. "Are you a witch? Go away."

"Rations is it? Rations is what you got in that bag, eh? Let me have them little girl. You don't need them, you're half dead already by the looks of you. Won't be long for you and this dirty little kid beside you."

"They're not yours. You're a thief and a stinking one at that. Go away before I hit you."

"Ha ha, a fiery one, are you, indeed? Full of shit. Let's have that bag little girl, because you'll be dead before the night is out."

It was then that Erich launched himself upon the woman's bare ankle and sank his sharp teeth in with all the strength that was left to him. The woman screamed, tried to shake him off but she could not. He drew blood and she kicked against him and backed away, when another woman close by turned and came to help. She was much shorter than the first woman, but her presence was something fierce and foreboding. She smacked the first woman on the face. "Get away, you foul pig, sow or whatever you are. You are filth to think you can take from children. Get away!"

The tall woman slunk away, limping on her right leg. Erich had done a good job with his teeth. Hilda couldn't help herself, she had to laugh. It was a crazy scene and could only happen in a concentration camp.

"Are you alright?" asked the shorter woman, who somehow had been given a new pair of overalls by the liberators. Hilda stared at her, delighting in the clean overalls that the woman wore with pride. "I'm Elise, and I see you admiring my new clothes. Oh, I have not had such in three years. Nothing but that ugly striped prison uniform. And I have boots for the first time, can you believe it? I shall treasure all of this until the rest of my days. It is so much better than dresses and dainty shoes, don't you think? And so, my little darling, is this your brother, the very brave one who bites with a vengeance? What are your names, my dear?"

Hilda didn't know what to make of this sudden rescue. Was she simply exchanging one witch for another? But she relaxed, thinking that it might not be so bad if she made friends. One needed friends in a concentration camp.

"I'm Hilda Berger and my brother is Erich. We are the only one's left out of our family, though I think there might be an uncle and aunt of mine still alive somewhere in one of the camps. I hope so."

The woman stepped forward and hugged Hilda. "My name's Elise. Are you alright?" Hilda flinched, then relaxed. Perhaps she needed this person as a friend?

"Oh, you have suffered more than most. They took my husband to Auschwitz. I fear the worst. And it was probably fortunate that I was not pregnant at the time, otherwise . . . well, you know . . ."

Hilda nodded. She did know. She knew very well. Her mother had been six months pregnant.

It took a few days before they had gathered enough strength to leave the camp with permission — almost a week, even. The day began with cool winds and slightly grey skies, but then cleared somewhat. Hilda, Erich and Elise walking down the laneway, looking with wonder at the farmlands around them, marvelling in the bird life that surrounded their vision. It was all too much. They stopped numerous times, simply breathing in the cool Spring air of green trees and neat fields bordered with flowers. They'd seen nothing like it in years. Their exhaustion almost too much for them at times. The lane-ways were



reasonably quiet, the British fighting machine had gone on, ferociously pushing itself closer to Berlin. There had been news in the camp. Some men had procured a short-wave radio, undoubtedly taken from the SS quarters, which when turned into the BBC, gave encouraging reports of the allied progress. It would soon be over . . . a few weeks, no more!

"I think" said Elise, "We had better turn back, otherwise we will not have the strength to get back to camp. We have overstated our ability." They were sitting on a grassy area close to the road, recovering from their walk. It had all been too much for their bodies to cope with so they rose wearily and turned back. They would sleep the night away as no other night before them.

There was some confusion in the camp when they arrived. Hilda stared at the man in the neat SS uniform, snugly wrapped in his military overcoat, who was surrounded by several British soldiers. It was the camp commandant, Herr Kramer. So, they had brought him back to face his tormented people, or had he come willingly? Perhaps, perhaps not. Elise, by her side, hissed and spat into the ground. But the military group ignored them and proceeded down through the huts on their inspection.

Perhaps you will find the bones of Anne, almost shouted Hilda — my dear friend, Anne Frank! But there would be no bones, only ashes. And the tears came, because she knew that no one, even the highest in the land, could never resurrect her little friend or her family. Did Anne ever exist? Was it all a dream, or some nightmare of her own making? Bring her back, and she shouted at the retreating figures: "Bring her back, bring her back! Oh please, bring my Anne back to me!" And she fell to the ground, shuddering and crying. "Oh please, someone, bring her back to me!"

And Elise, almost clean and feeling fresh in her new overalls, knelt in the mud beside Hilda, taking her into her arms and crying with her. Erich stood, staring into the horizon, watching the jackboots of the SS commandant disappearing in the distance and something clicked in his mind. Something dark and dreadful began to emerge and he really didn't know what it was. It was a cloud that seemed to be bursting with some kind of vengeance. Erich turned to look at his sister and Elise there in the mud and he knew that somehow he would help them in their journey to a better life, even if it meant some danger to himself.

The early evening sun cast its lengthening shadows on the poplars in the front garden of the small Federation house in Prahran, Victoria. The slightly silver-haired woman was watching a late afternoon news programme about the 1958 visit by the British Queen Mother to Australia. The black and white television set flickered and the prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies' head warped out of shape on the screen. Other bodies went into a zig-zag fashion. Hilda sighed and rose to turn off the set. She must ask Josef to fix the antenna when he had time. Bare feet padded on the cool linoleum in the hallway behind her and a child appeared holding a colouring book. She ran into the room and sat on the sofa beside the woman. "Mother, look what I have drawn? Do you like it? It's our family."

"Oh, I do like that, Elise. I see you have all of us, your mum and dad, and your brother little Nathan. But you've left out Oscar our puppy — he's part of our family too."

"Yes, I wasn't sure how to draw him, but I will and I'll show you soon."

"That's fine, Elise, you can do it."

"And . . . and I can draw his little house, too."

"His kennel, yes that would be lovely."

Elise wandered into the hall. "You know, mum, Oscar should have his own room inside. His little house might be cold at nights."

"I'm sure he's comfortable in his kennel, my darling. It's very sheltered under the verandah."

"But mum, he's so alone out there!"

Hilda heard the child pattering down the hallway. So alone, she thought . . . yes, we'd all been so alone in the old days. So alone with our thoughts of survival! I suppose we could bring Oscar in at nights, what with autumn on the wane. The sun was becoming lower in the sky — its intensity diminishing. Soon the leaves would begin to fall. I could make up a small mattress and blanket by the fire. That would be sensible. He'd like that.

She sighed. The book that had come in the mail the day before was sitting on the mantelpiece above the open fire. She had hesitated from opening it. But now, she knew she must. The package had born the postmark imprint of Israel, and she was quite aware who had sent it. She stared at the book, fingered its cover gently, ran her fingers down the spine and lifted the book to her face, smelling the pungent print and crisp paper and closing her eyes. She saw the face. Anne . . . Anne . . . is it really you? I knew you had written some things, but I was not aware of this. She ran her fingers over the title *The Diary of Anne Frank*, breathing deeply, and she was being taken back, back to those days at Bergen-Belsen before those diseases had taken the Frank family. There was Anne, smiling happily with her sister Margot. "It's not so bad," she had said to Hilda. "We could be in some of those death camps, you know. It's not so bad."



The black telephone rang, its shrill tingling reverberating off the window panes. Hilda walked across to the small occasional table and picked up the receiver. She recognised the voice immediately.

“Erich! Erich!” The line crackled and faded. “Are you there? You’re not very clear.”

“Hello! How . . . how are you? How’s my niece and nephew?”

“I’m fine. We’re all fine. What’s the weather like in Tel Aviv?”

“Very warm, but I didn’t ring to talk about the weather. I have some very good news.” His voice faded, then came back again. There was more crackling on the line. “You remember that SS guard, Geisler?”

“How could I forget her . . . she was the worst.”

“With the help of our para-military group, we’ve managed kidnap her, smuggled her out of Argentina. We’ve got her here in Israel . . . she’ll stand trial for many of those murders.”

Hilda was silent.

“Hilda . . . are you still there?”

“Yes . . . yes . . . that’s good news . . . Josef and I will have a small celebration tonight, just the two of us. When are you getting married?”

“In April. You will both have to come across. Evie’s a real sweetheart. You will be happy with my choice. You knew she is Elise’s niece, didn’t you?”

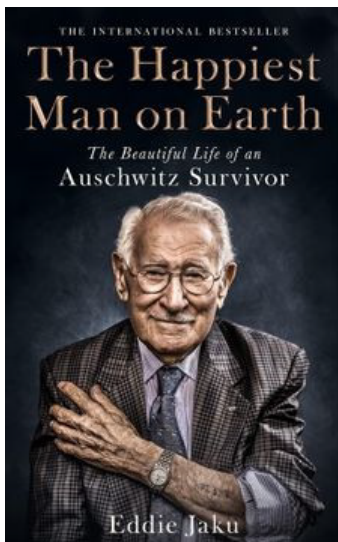
“Ah yes, another lawyer just like you . . . how you have all grown in stature! That’s so perfect. Israel has been good to you. Yes, I think we can manage that; we’ll bring the children over. Please give our love to Evie and Elise.” And she thought. The lives that were destroyed have been re-born.

“I have to go now, Shalom my dearest!”

“Oh, yes . . . Shalom. Love you.” •

Life is beautiful if you make it beautiful

Life can be beautiful if you make it beautiful. It is up to you.



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