

**The Address by Hana Sternlicht,
survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp,
On the Occasion of
The Day of Holocaust Remembrance and Prevention of Crimes against Humanity
Spanish Hall, Prague Castle,
28th January 2025**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have been approached to share my memories today as we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, where I, too, was a prisoner.

They are painful and traumatic memories for me, but in honor of those who were murdered there, I revisit them to ensure the memory endures.

I was 14 years old when I arrived at Auschwitz, after nearly two years in Terezín. It was far from easy—hunger, illness, fear, and filth were constant—but compared to what followed, we almost remembered it as a paradise. In Terezín, I lived in a girls' home with peers, cared for by governesses. I performed in *Brundibár* performance and even had my first date there. But then came the transport order in October 1944.

My mother and I were on that transport together. My father had been taken earlier, and we never saw him again. The memories of arriving at Auschwitz are the most painful for me—that was when I lost my mother. It was one of the final transports, less than four months before the camp was liberated. But what did it matter? Thousands were still murdered during that time. My mother was 48 years old, small in stature, with greying hair. I was 14, frail from scarlet fever, and had barely grown.

We stood in a line of women, and I saw Mengele pointing—one to the left, one to the right. I thought there was a pattern, so I switched places with the woman next to me, hoping my mother and I would stay on the same side. But it didn't work that way. Someone in line whispered to me, "Say you're 16." How could anyone believe me? I hadn't been raised to lie. But I did as they said.

That lie saved my life, along with a twist of fate. Mengele glanced at the papers, not at me, heard my answer, and pointed to the left. But when he looked at my mother, he pointed to the right. We didn't even have the chance to say goodbye.

The next days were a blur, consumed by the trauma of loss and the horrors around me. But I was fortunate again—I didn't remain in Auschwitz for long. One day, they drove us out of the barracks, claiming we had to go to the bathrooms. Panic set in; we all knew what "bathrooms" meant here. But luck was with us—the showers ran with water. We were given civilian clothes and told we were going to work in Germany.

On the pile of clothing were thin summer dresses, though it was already cold October. Perhaps out of pity, or by mistake, an SS guard tossed me two of those dresses. What could I do? I put them on, one over the other. As we lined up for the train carriage, another SS woman noticed. She unbuckled her leather belt, turned it in her hand, and beat me with the metal buckle until I remembered nothing more.

I woke up on the train, where my cellmates had kindly placed me. Fortunately, I was left with only bruises.

They sent 500 of us, women and girls, to Freiberg in Saxony to work in an aircraft factory. Thanks to that, I escaped the hell of Auschwitz after a very short time.

At the factory, we could hardly believe our eyes, a building with a washroom, and they even heated it. For the first time in so long, I almost felt like a human being again.

In February 1945, the bombing of Dresden began, less than 30 kilometers away. We could hear the roar of cannons, the front was closing in.

One night in mid-April, the order came to leave. They loaded us into open wagons, each given a blanket, a bowl for food, and a piece of bread. Not even cattle would be transported in such wagons in freezing weather, yet we rode endlessly. Rain and snow fell on us, and before long, we ran out of food and water.

On April 29, after a 16-day journey, we finally arrived at the train station in Mauthausen. We dragged ourselves up the road to the camp. At a well, exhausted, we tried to drink, but the locals began chasing us and throwing stones.

It was the first time I reached the end of my strength, the first time I thought of death. I was certain that the end had come.

We dragged ourselves to the camp, where piles of corpses lay by the barracks, stripped to the bone. We were made to remove the clothes we had arrived in and were given others—infested with lice.

On the way back from the washroom, I collapsed from exhaustion, unable to continue. Once again, someone kind found a way to drag me to the building.

On May 5th, the American soldiers arrived. Those who could, ran to greet them, but I no longer had the strength. The soldiers were horrified when they saw us. They immediately began distributing canned food and temporarily moved us into the quarters of the German soldiers. However, they left me where I was, as it was uncertain whether I had typhus or tuberculosis. They cared for the sick where they found us, and later allowed me to join the others.

I was lucky again. I survived. But the joy was mixed with pain. I was alone. Though I kept hoping that perhaps one of my parents had survived, I knew in my heart that it wasn't true.

After many days we took buses to České Budějovice and from there we took a special train to Prague. I wanted to go home—to Holic, even though I knew I would not find anyone there.

I didn't recognize anything in Holic—the people, nor the town we had left three years earlier. Everything was suddenly different. Strangers lived in our house. Fortunately, my mother's friend, Aunt Wíšová, took me in and gradually helped me regain my strength.

I also received family treasures—photographs, my father's diary, and a few keepsakes hidden for us by Aunt Kačerová, the wife of my mother's cousin, who had taken his own life in despair after Munich. I stayed in Holic over the holidays, and at their end, I returned to Prague to search for other relatives. I learned that my mother's brother, saved by his non-Jewish wife, was alive. My uncle and aunt, childless, would have been happy to take me in, but I longed for independence. I met a friend who shared a similar fate, and together we found a place to stay. And by chance, one day in Prague on the tram, I ran into my other aunt, my father's sister, Aunt Ilka! I couldn't believe my luck. My cousin Vera had also survived. I had family again!

I will summarize my life after the war by saying that I focused on catching up with the education I had missed, while also seeking out peers. We surviving Jews naturally gravitated toward one another; we didn't need to explain anything. I joined the Zionist Dror movement, where I made many lifelong friends, including my husband, Hanuš. In 1949, together we left for Israel, as we no longer felt safe in Europe. We sought a homeland where being Jewish would no longer pose a threat.

How safe we were there in the end, and still are today, is another story. You all know the challenges we continue to face...

But we left full of hope, young, and with a will to live. After difficult beginnings, we started families, built homes, learned a language. Our men fought for our country in other wars, and now we have several more generations. My children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren live in Israel, but they know where their roots lie. They have visited the Czech Republic, and they love this country. We have friends here and remain in touch.

I share my story with more and more generations of young people. I visit our soldiers, and students from here and across Europe come to see me.

As I mentioned at the beginning, this is not a pleasant memory, but it is the only way to ensure the memory never fades and to warn of the consequences when such evil is allowed to grow. It begins subtly, but hatred grows quickly and must be stopped before it spreads. I wish for all of us that evil everywhere in the world will be defeated, so that future generations may live in peace.