

Estelle Laughlin was born in Warsaw, Poland and came to the United States in 1948. She is a former 6th grade teacher and reading specialist and has been volunteering at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum since 2007.

History illuminates the way out of ethical darkness. I learned this fact as a young person in the Warsaw Ghetto, in the extermination camp Majdanek, and in two slave labor camps. Of course, when I was ten through fourteen years of age, I did not yet understand that when you lose everything, your memories and the collective memories of your people become your possessions and guides.

I had just turned ten when Germany invaded Poland. Four weeks of heavy air raids set my city in flames and reduced blocks in my street to desolate holes of rubble. The marching thunder of invaders' boots against cobble stones, the clang of rifles, soldiers' arms swinging in unison as if pulled by one fanatical thread still haunt my dreams.

My once peaceful streets were soon patrolled by foreign soldiers. They shouted hatred and contempt; snapped whips in our streets and houses; they slapped, kicked, and ripped beards off the faces of my neighbors. They cut off electricity, rationed all food and water, closed our schools, and made books illegal.

To make life more unbearable, they built a thick wall to isolate us in a ghetto and packed the area with Jews driven out of surrounding communities. The number of refugees far exceeded the available housing and food. Most died in the streets of cold and starvation. Corpses, tragic heaps of corpses, littered our streets.

Yet, in this hell we found inspiration to not surrender our will to live, to mobilize our resolve to resist tyrannical laws, and to live according to the dictates of our conscience. Our inspiration came from history and tradition—the universal link to eternal values.

Just as our ancestors who were imprisoned in ghettos continued to create their own culture, so did we. Immediately, people in my community marshaled forces and instituted a far reaching Self-Aid Center to help the needy and to preserve quality of life.

Like the Maccabees in ancient times, we resisted barbaric ordinances. To own a book—a capital crime—was an act of defiance, and many defied. During night—windows blackened to keep our existence secret—in a small room illuminated by flickering carbide light, my father read to us his favorite stories about ancient Pharaohs, about Haman and Nebuchadnezzar, and life in old shtetls. The distant stories became real and immediate, the heroes as familiar as my best friends.

Memory of historical precedents and principals of morality gave us courage to carry on our traditions. In protest to strict bans, we celebrated holidays publicly. On Passover, the courtyard committee made sure there was matzo in every house.

We had no food, our lives teetered on a sword's edge, yet people sat at tables in dark rooms writing. For some, the pen was a weapon of resistance. Some wrote to mobilize spiritual strength. Others felt compelled to leave records for history to remember. Twenty years after the Warsaw Ghetto was annihilated, Chaim Kaplan's brilliant historical diary was found carefully preserved in a kerosene can. We cannot help but feel awed by the price these heroes paid to remind us what can happen to the conscience of nation, what can happen to love and trust.

The voices of ordinary people who struggle to hold on to traditional values, to love, and to kindness, too, must be

preserved for history to inspire us. Even in barbed-wire isolation in concentration camps—where no one could hear us, and we had no paper or pencils to record our thoughts—the women in our barracks gathered on bare bunk planks to tell stories and compose songs. Our words sanctified simple moments when life was good; they cried out against injustice and kept our souls and hope from dying.

The impulse to imprint human experiences for posterity is instinctive and essential for survival. It is passed down by word of mouth, expressed in poetry and prose, music and art, and inscribed upon the face of the earth by ancient traces and fossils. We must observe and listen thoughtfully and compassionately, if civilization is to progress.

In gratitude to the victimized people who paid the supreme price to live by their values, and for the inspiration they gave me to survive the Holocaust whole—with love, compassion, and joy of life—I volunteer at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in the Visitors Services and the Speakers Bureau. I am honored to make my humble contribution to an institution dedicated to keeping truth alive and visible, so that we can find our way out of ethical darkness.

History always remembers.