

Henry Wermuth



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Learning from genocide -
for a better future

Henry Wermuth's mother and sister were taken away by the Nazis in the summer of 1942. Henry and his father were forced to work for the Nazis and Henry took an opportunity to try and derail a train that Hitler would be travelling on. Although unsuccessful, Henry was later awarded a medal for his attempt to assassinate Hitler.



'I have no hatred towards the German people, because in the same set of circumstances, with support from newspapers and the radio, it could have happened here. There's plenty of antisemitism in England.'

Henry Wermuth was born in 1923 in Frankfurt, Germany, to Bernhard and Ida Wermuth. His sister, Hanna, was born in 1929. Henry, who was Jewish, was fiercely patriotic as a young boy and experienced almost no antisemitism (anti-Jewish hatred).

The rise of the Nazis in 1933 changed everything. The SA (the military wing of the Nazi party) would march through town singing about murdering Jews. Henry never understood how the Germany of which he was so proud could elect Adolf Hitler.

In October 1938, the Nazis deported German-Jewish citizens with Polish ancestry to Poland. This included Henry's parents who were born in Poland, so the whole family were woken in the middle of the night and sent to Krakow by train where they stayed with relatives. Henry spent a happy year there until Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. Soon, Jews living in Nazi-occupied Poland were forced to wear a white armband with a blue Star of David and made to clear streets of snow and ice.

Bernhard and Henry supported the family by trading on the black market until Bernhard was caught and sent to prison. Bernhard was released in late 1940 and Henry's family moved to the small town of Bochnia.

By the summer of 1942, Henry and Bernhard were being forced to build roads for a nearby labour camp called Klaj. They heard rumours that two million Jews had by now been murdered. Henry knew that soon deportations would begin from Bochnia and wanted to save his family. Henry used cardboard to make a hiding place for Ida and Hanna in the crawlspace above the family's front door.

On 22 August, Henry and Bernhard's work group were told that they would be spending the night in Klaj. As they left, Henry urged his mother 'Promise me you will go into the secret place'.

On 24 August, the deportation of Bochnia's Jews took place. A week later, Henry and Bernhard returned to Bochnia and found photographs of Ida and Hanna in the crawlspace. On the back of each picture was a goodbye message. Ida would probably have heard the SS shouting that anyone who did not board the train would be shot. It may have seemed safer to go. It was the first and only time that Henry saw his father cry. Henry's mother and sister travelled from

Bochnia to Belzec extermination camp. All those on board the train were murdered.

In the autumn of 1942, Henry heard rumours that Hitler was due to pass near Klaj on a train. Henry believed his mother and sister were still alive and that if Hitler died, everything would go back to normal. Despite the danger and Bernhard's objections, Henry felt he had to do something. That night, Henry made his way through the forest to the railway line, avoiding guards patrolling the area. Using stones and thick lengths of wood, Henry blocked the track. The following morning, Henry waited for the sound of the collision, but it never came. He never found out what had happened.

Soon after, Henry and Bernhard were put on a train and sent to Płaszów labour camp. Subjected to sadistic and violent treatment, Henry remembers Płaszów as the worst of the nine camps he was imprisoned in.

On 31 July 1944 Henry and Bernhard were marched onto a train heading for Auschwitz-Birkenau. Suspecting they were to be murdered, Bernhard said to Henry a sentence that he has never forgotten 'Should we be gassed, breathe deeply, my son, breathe deeply, to get it over with quickly'.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz, they were sent to be deloused and told to undress. Certain he was to die, Henry kept the photograph of his mother and sister in his hand. However, Henry's group was marked for work instead and the next day he was tattooed on his forearm with the number B3407.

Inmates were fed tiny portions of bread and margarine, and a bowl of thin soup. On such a small amount of food, and with such a heavy workload, people were starving to death. A friend, Max Spira, would fill Henry and Bernhard's bowls from the bottom of the container, which meant that they received more vegetables, stopping them from starving.

In January 1945 the SS evacuated Auschwitz, marching prisoners out of the camp and on to a train. The next few months saw the SS trying to avoid capture, and Henry and Bernhard were moved from camp to camp – Nordhausen, Osterode, Helmstedt. One morning, the kapo in charge of Henry's group hit Bernhard in the head. The prisoners were loaded onto a train, and Bernhard began to complain of increasing pain. He was taken to the hospital wagon but died on 27 April 1945, just 11 days before the war ended.

That day Henry entered Mauthausen. Conditions were appalling and Henry was starving and suffering from diarrhoea. Henry weighed only five stone when American soldiers liberated Mauthausen on May 5, 1945. He had survived, and faced rebuilding his life with no friends or family.

After liberation, Henry made his way to the United Kingdom. He was only allowed to stay for two years, but after writing to the Queen Mother and finding a job, he was able to settle in Britain. He became a successful businessman, married, had two children and now has three grandchildren.

Henry continues to speak about his experiences. In 1995, he was awarded the Johanna Kirchner Medal by the City of Frankfurt for his attempt to assassinate Hitler. He has written a book about his experiences, entitled *Breathe Deeply My Son*. A film that carries the same title was released in 2017.

Find out more... The Holocaust: hmd.org.uk/holocaust