

SHABBAT IN THE HOLOCAUST

by Pearl Benisch

[Editor's Note: During World War II, the author was confined to various ghettos and concentration camps: Krakow, Plashow, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen. And through it all, she maintained her dignity and her Jewish observance. Here is one story from her fascinating war diary, "To Vanquish the Dragon."]

At last we reached our place of work, a sewing factory in a large building under heavy guard. I was assigned to a sewing machine and met Mr. Weissblum, our foreman.

"What did you sew in Plashow?" he asked. "Slacks or jackets?"

"Jackets."

"Good," he said, placing a stack of pre-cut uniform parts on the machine. "The minimum daily quota is five jackets. They have to be finished by the end of the day. If not, you cannot come anymore: the war machine must produce. And if you make six," he added, "you'll get a bonus twice a week: half a loaf of bread."

The work was not new to me; I had been doing it in Plashow. But quota or no quota, I could not allow myself to turn out shoddy work for the sake of speed. My father had been a perfectionist: in everything we did, no matter how well we did it, he had urged us to do better, to strive for perfection. So even now, when I was tempted to speed up and put the job past me, I could not do it. I was an incorrigible chip off the old block. So I labored frantically, first to meet, then to surpass the quota, striving for the sixth jacket with all my strength, to merit that precious half-loaf of bread the next day or the day after.

Time was up. The work was finished, but so was my strength. Weissblum examined the results; he was satisfied. Now we assembled for the march back home. I joined my friend Rivkah, who had been working in the kitchen. Silently we walked home, each of us wrapped in her own thoughts. Even now we had to race, chased by the dogs and their Nazi masters, the two-legged animals.

Back in the ghetto, it was time for another roll call, accompanied by the usual screaming and heavy blows from black jackboots. All this was for good reason, to be sure. You did not stand erect enough. Your column was not straight. You looked too good. Your cheeks still had color in them.

Then it was over. We breathed deeply, free to go home for a few hours' rest. There we were young

again, able to joke, poke fun at ourselves, or seriously discuss our situation and the people around us, or dream about a better future.

The next day, my anxious hands were able to turn out not six but seven uniform jackets. I stashed one under the left-over raw material; one extra jacket a day would provide five or six to hand over on Shabbos. Again the next day, and then the next, I churned out seven jackets, oozing sweat and exhausting my last reserves of strength. At the end of the day Weissblum examined the six jackets I had left for him. He selected one and showed it to the girls.

"Look, girls," he declared. "This is how it should be done."

He is pleased, I thought. A ray of hope crept into me.

Another day passed, then another. Then came the Sabbath, the day that I had loved so much, now a day that filled me with concern. In the morning I braced myself to face my first Shabbos in Tarnow...

I sat down at my machine and, as I had done so many times before, withdrew the thread from the needle. In case the Germans pulled a surprise inspection, this would permit me to pretend that I was working. I had to be able to move the pedal and activate the needle without actually performing any labor.

Weissblum came over and lay the cut cloth on my machine in the usual fashion. I pretended to prepare for work until he walked away. Then I brought out my finished five jackets, the day's quota. During the morning Weissblum passed my station several times and saw me examining a finished jacket or folding another one. The hours passed slowly, painfully, my heart racing instead of the machine, my pulse jumping every time Weissblum approached my chair. So far, so good.

I had just begun to relax when Weissblum suddenly noticed that my machine was idle, pedal, needle, and all, and that its operator was merely folding and unfolding her jackets. He came right over, his face red with anger. "Why aren't you working, you lazy brat?" he roared.

He looked into my eyes and understood at once. "It's Shabbos for you? Do you think you're holier than me? We're all Jews here; it's Shabbos for all of us. We have to work -- so do you. Start the machine this minute," he ordered, "or I'll report you."

I was seized with a sudden calm. The pressure of the week fled like magic.

"Mr. Weissblum," I said, "I'm no one's lazy brat. Here are my five jackets, all ready. We're all Jews, you said. So why should I play games in front of you? When the Germans come to inspect the place I have to pretend I'm working. I don't want to endanger anybody, God forbid.

"Mr. Weissblum," I pleaded, "just yesterday you admired my work. I'll make six jackets this week for next Shabbos if it will help, but please leave me alone. Look the other way."

Since he was letting me talk, I added, "You'll share the reward of my mitzvah of remembering

Shabbos."

His reaction was the opposite of what I had expected.

"This is no time or place for mitzvahs," he screamed in rage. "I'll teach you a lesson!" And he stalked off in a fury...

I slipped out of the room and went downstairs... waiting for Weissblum's wrath to subside.

When he found me there an hour later, he was still flaming with anger. "You thought you'd escape me here? Another mistake. Come up with me right now; and you'll work!"

I followed him upstairs to the sewing hall. "Now sit down and work," he commanded. My friends contemplated the scene sympathetically, fearing what might happen.

"I'll sit down as you wish, but I will not work," I said resolutely, handing him my five jackets. "Here's my quota for the day."

With that I sat down at the machine. No longer did I shift my strips of cloth from left to right as before. No more make-believe: I simply stared straight ahead, bracing myself for his reaction.

"You stubborn Jew!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, angrier than ever. "Get up!"

I obeyed. Now we were face-to-face. He extended a hand to slap me. I stared straight into his eyes, which met mine. They expressed a certain acknowledgment, a weak, fleeting Jewish spark. Had he recalled something from his parents' home? Or had a vestige of Jewish faith, cherished by generations of ancestors, survived? One way or the other, the spark was there; he could not extinguish it. At the last moment he restrained himself, and his hand descended slowly.

I appreciated that. Despite all the suffering he inflicted on me while I was working under him, I remember this fact to his credit.

Reprinted with permission from InnerNet Magazine