

This is a true-life memoir of defiant endurance overcoming great cruelty and brutality over years of Nazi slave captivity. A vision of angelic protection by a beloved late grandma brings support and shelter through numerous near-death events. Multiple Holocaust ghettos and camps are experienced until final liberation.

**UNDER MY BUBBE'S WINGS:
How Grandma's Spirit Got Me Through Nazi
Captivity**

by Iser Flaum

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A historical photograph of a soldier in a trench, looking towards a line of prisoners of war. The soldier is in the foreground, wearing a helmet and a uniform with a swastika armband. The prisoners are in the background, some working in the trench. The scene is set in a field with utility poles and a tank in the distance.

UNDER MY
Bubbe's Wings

How Grandma's Spirit
Got Me Through Nazi Captivity

Iser Flaum

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CONTENTS

SHIELDED FROM DEATH.....	1
ABOUT THIS BOOK.....	9
ONE LIFE TO SAVE MANY	11
INITIAL VISION OF MY <i>BUBBE</i>	17
LIFE BEFORE THE WAR	21
THE WAR STARTS	29
ESCAPING THE FUNERAL PYRE	34
HERDED INTO THE WARSAW GHETTO	37
CAMP ORDEALS	51
CAMPS I ENDURED.....	52
UNFORGETTABLE EPISODES IN CAPTIVITY	55
GENERAL CONDITIONS	56
OUR TASKMASTERS	63
NEWS OF FAMILY.....	66
SHOULDER TO THE WHEEL.....	67
I HAD TO REST.....	69
MY AGRICULTURAL BACKGROUND PAYS OFF	70
SUDDENLY I'M A MECHANIC.....	72
REST TIME FOR FELLOWS.....	74
CONTACT WITH FREE CIVILIANS	74
GERMAN MORALE PROPAGANDA.....	76
CONTACT WITH NON-NAZI GERMANS.....	78
CONTACT WITH BIG SHOT NAZIS	81
HOLDING ON FOR DEAR LIFE	83
BOMBERS OVERHEAD	84

LIBERATION	85
DISPLACED PERSONS (DP) CAMP	93
CIVILIAN LIFE BEGINS	99
MY WIFE’S STORY	103
EARLY LIFE	103
WAR COMES	104
LIFE IN THE CAMPS	104
SPECIAL FRIENDS	106
AFTER HER LIBERATION	108
WHAT I LEARNED	111
IN MEMORIUM	117
ENDNOTES	125
GLOSSARY.....	129
REFERENCES	133

ONE LIFE TO SAVE MANY

In this hellish environment, often the salvation of one person was paid for by the demise of another. Injustice was the norm, as the better fortune for some was frequently undercut by the intense misfortune of others. Eventually, tragedy found its way to most in the end. It was a matter of time. Searching for any fairness or justice in these settings is pointless. The incident where my fellow digger was beaten instead of me illustrates this completely. There one prisoner paid with his life for an innocent mishap (the dirt caving in) which he did not cause, while another (me, in that case) was passed over and spared. Had I been the victim, it would also have been an equally undeserving and grave injustice. As perplexing and disturbing as these situations seem, the truth of these occurrences cannot be white-washed. This was the stark reality that cannot be denied or wished away.

Another vivid and haunting near-fatal encounter at a different camp comes to mind. I shudder when remembering it until this day. It is another example of injustice and misfortune as it was dished out haphazardly among us inmates. Even as witnesses, we were also victims, being forced to partake in the calamitous proceedings imposed on us.

As this present incident commences, we lay sleeping in our barracks on our hard wooden shelves (unworthy of being called bunks) in our usual discomfort. We each slept on our side, packed like sardines with one prisoner against our front side and another against our back side. There was no room to roll onto one's back, stomach, or the opposite side to get some relief from our torment. The only exception was the top of the three bunk levels, where it was possible to sit up a bit due to increased headroom. This was a prima sought-after location of choice. We breathed in each other's smelly, un-bathed body stench and bad breath constantly. Our only mattress was just the shelf's rigid board, which was also our pillow. Sometimes there might be a thin sheet for a blanket, or

some straw. At other times even this luxury was lacking. As there was no gap between our bodies on either side, all movements, including getting up for a latrine visit, always required disturbing our neighbors. We had to climb and roll over each other. Obviously our sleep was barely restful and full of angst. Privacy was nonexistent.

In the middle of this fateful night we were awakened by much commotion outside, including the sound of gunfire. With a sudden onset of glaring lights, and snarling dogs, the guards, while shouting and hollering irately, stomped into the barracks. It seems someone among us had gotten up and urinated in a public pathway, which was strictly forbidden. This triggered a tirade of severe anger by our German masters. The perpetrator was probably not able to make it to the latrine on time. We scrambled to attention, driven by beatings to our roll call row formation just outside in the dark, accompanied by the usual curses, snapping whips, growling German shepherds, and swinging batons. As we scrambled to our assembly formation, we had to step over multiple bloodied dead bodies recognized as prisoners from a nearby bunker. There was no doubt of something being severely wrong this night. Our terror started to increase rapidly. A high-ranking officer making a rare appearance faced us with grimacing anger demanding repeatedly for the name of the one responsible for this violation. He was livid.

After a pause of silence with no one coming forward, another more horrific peril became shockingly evident. Peering at us from the darkness beside the officer and the guards, to their rear, we could make out a soldier lying on the ground pointing a machine gun squarely at us. He was slowly sweeping it back and forth across our rows in a threatening manner. We all shuddered and groaned at this lethal realization, as we fixated on the end of the barrel, still smoking from recent action. While his aim rotated gradually across our rows, I perceived it to momentarily point at me, as if I were singled out. I felt faint from its terrible piercing stare, praying for it to keep moving on away from me. It seemed

to fixate on me forever as my anxiety spiked, but finally continued on to the next person.

Again the officer sternly repeated his demand to divulge the transgressor. He started counting with anger to three, "*Eins, zvai, drai,*" reaching the deadline to produce the culprit or the machine gun would be unleashed. Given the scattered bodies around us, there was absolutely no possibility of this being a bluff. Our masters' determination and steely intention to take such harsh action was not at all in doubt. We had observed their willingness for such callous cruelty frequently in this bizarre world multiple times before. There was deathly silence with our hearts sinking as we contemplated our imminent finality in panic. Again, this felt like the end of my story. I could almost feel my flesh tearing with bullets not yet launched. Is this how I would leave this earth, shredded and ground up like hamburger? Is this the way it ends for me?

After the count of three, the officer ordered the machine gunner to ready his weapon, upon which he pulled back the bolt. Its clicking, a cold-blooded noise from hell, was the only sound in a universe become totally silent. No one took a breath as we listened in unbearable dread for the order to fire. Suddenly, one prisoner broke the silence by shouting out the name of one among us, identifying him as the culprit. Within seconds several others joined him until it became a swelling chorus confirming this name as the culprit, identifying the wrong-doer. It was immediately obvious to me that this person had been selected as a sacrificial lamb so that the rest of us could be spared the inevitable outcome. This was clearly a false accusation offered as a last chance attempt of desperation to save the group as a whole. It was no random choice; the selected victim was conspicuously the most unpopular among us. He had a reputation as being a misfit in our midst. Apparently someone chose him so the rest could live, as others chimed in their support. The first one to yell out decided, in this gruesome and horrific dilemma, that one of us must be an offering to save the many.

The pathetic victim had a reputation of being the *schlemiel* of the group, being highly awkward and ungainly when performing our manual burdens. He typically did not even know how to grasp a shovel correctly and could barely contribute usefully to our assigned duties. Unfortunately, this fellow inmate had great difficulty fitting into this laborious grunt-worker role required in the camps. He was awkwardly out-of-place, even more so than the rest of us. In every camp or group I sojourned, there were prisoners like this and they stood out distinctly in this very unforgiving environment. They were usually culled out early on by our ruthless and demanding masters.

Such unlucky *schlemiel* often originated from a background of purely cerebral or nerdy undertakings, such as being a scholar or student, likely having spent most of his years behind a desk. In normal times, he might have had an honored role in our society. But now, his former achievements were of no value. He likely was unable to adapt to the very tough and physically strenuous demands of our situation. Chances are he had never performed any manual labor, seldom having broken a sweat in his former life. As such, he was totally unprepared for our world of severe brute physicality in which we found ourselves. Those who could not conform and contribute to our laborious working activity were usually discarded by our taskmasters one way or the other. This victim today somehow had survived until now, but probably not for long this day.

Sadly, someone in our group, as ratified by several others, decided that this one was to be sacrificed for the sake of the rest of us. Once again, an innocent among us would bear the full brunt of evil, buying temporary salvation for others. As usual, we were actually all truly innocent and undeserving of the fierce machine gun's bites. This was typical among the "lose-lose" alternatives we often faced in this place, having frequent choices between either a terrible option versus an even more gruesome one. It is troubling to affirm this unsavory aspect of our circumstances, yet I cannot sugar-coat the truth which is one of the heavy burdens of having lived through this painful experience.

Under My Bubbe's Wings

The German officer seemed satisfied with the selection as the victim was dragged out of the ranks, protesting and wailing his innocence to unpitying ears. A point needed to be made, and the particular victim was not especially important to our overseers. As we were grimly whipped back onto our bunker shelves, spared by this high price, we heard him scream for a long time as he was bludgeoned to death outside. It seemed an endless process. Sleep for us did not come easily as his shrieks haunted our spirits. This was an especially restless night. May his soul be comforted in everlasting peace.

The next morning at roll call, we saw his bloody body left hanging from a tree as a reminder to obey the rules. This was a favorite presentation method of our taskmasters assuring that all eyes would absorb the lesson to be indelibly burned into memory. Such a dramatic scene sternly hit the viewer and shocked him to his core, driving him to capitulation and complete submission, as it was intended to do.

Again, mixed feelings of abhorrence and relief simultaneously transfixed me into a trance where I felt my *Bubbe's* love encircling me with her protective wings. Yes, even in this gruesome and unfair situation of undesirable alternatives, she was determined to keep the ultimate catastrophic harm far away from me, her exclusive charge.

This is a true-life memoir of defiant endurance overcoming great cruelty and brutality over years of Nazi slave captivity. A vision of angelic protection by a beloved late grandma brings support and shelter through numerous near-death events. Multiple Holocaust ghettos and camps are experienced until final liberation.

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