



FIG. 26. *Hadassah Bimko Rosensaft 810*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 56½ x 58¼ x 2 inches; 2015.

Hadassah Bimko Rosensaft (1912–1997)

Because of her medical training, Rosensaft was assigned to work in what was called the Jewish Infirmary at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she saved hundreds of Jewish women from the gas chambers. After liberation at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, she helped thousands of critically ill inmates to survive. Born: Poland. During Holocaust: Poland, Germany.

HADASSAH BIMKO ROSENSAFT

Saving Others

Menachem Z. Rosensaft

On September 21, 1945, a 33-year old Jewish woman took the stand at the first trial of Nazi war criminals accused of perpetrating what we now call the Holocaust. For two days, she bore witness against SS-Hauptsturmführer Josef Kramer, the commandant of Bergen-Belsen who had previously been the camp commandant at Birkenau, and against 31 other SS men and women, as well as 12 so-called kapos – inmates who had been assigned certain supervisory tasks – who had sadistically persecuted and tortured her and countless others.

Asked if she was of Polish nationality, my mother, Dr. Hadassah Rosensaft, then Ada Bimko, introduced herself to the British military tribunal sitting in Lüneburg, Germany, as “a Jewess from Poland.” She then gave a detailed, often chilling account of the horrors to which the inmates of Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen had been subjected by the defendants.¹

Alexander Easterman, who attended the Belsen Trial as an official observer of the World Jewish Congress, described my mother’s “iron control” as she testified against her erstwhile tormentors. “Hers,” Easterman wrote, “was the accusing finger of the Jewish people as she stood erect before the den of murderers glowering under dazzling arc lights, and pointed with outstretched finger as she identified each criminal in turn.”²

My mother’s testimony at Lüneburg was not her most important accomplishment by any means. S.J. Goldsmith, who first met my mother when he was a war correspondent covering the Belsen Trial, wrote about her that, “She not only suffered but also helped to alleviate the sufferings of others.”³

When my mother, a dentist who had studied in medicine in France in the early 1930s, arrived at Birkenau with her family from their hometown of Sosnowiec in southern Poland on the night of August 3-4, 1943, her parents, husband and five-and-a-half-year-old son were sent directly into one of the gas chambers. Forced to wear prison clothes, her head shaved, and with the number 52406 tattooed on her arm, she felt utterly disoriented and deprived of her sense of self. “I always felt humiliated and ashamed,” she wrote in her posthumously published memoir. “I hated sleeping in my clothes. I was ashamed to admit that I was hungry. I was ashamed to go to the bathroom and to be exposed half naked in front of so many other women. I was ashamed of the way I looked. I seldom

spoke.”⁴ But then a cathartic, almost surreal event occurred. “One morning, after the roll call,” she recalled, “a torrential rain came down. We wanted to return to the barracks but instead were forced by the SS women to sit there for hours. As the rain fell down over our bodies, I realized that we were utterly helpless. Tears came to my eyes, the first ones since my arrival. When they mixed with the rain and I sat there sobbing, I found myself again.”⁵

In October of 1943, Birkenau’s chief medical officer, the notorious Josef Mengele, assigned my mother to work as a doctor in the camp’s infirmary. There she was able to save the lives of fellow inmates by performing rudimentary surgery, camouflaging their wounds and sending them out on work detail in advance of selection by the SS for extermination.

In September 1944, Ruta Krakowiak, a young Jewish inmate from the Polish town of Tomaszów Mazowiecki, became seriously ill. Diagnosed with scarlet fever, she was taken to the Birkenau infirmary from which patients deemed too sick to work were sent to their death in one of the camp’s gas chambers. One morning, even though she was still running a high fever, she recalled decades later, my mother, the inmate in charge of the infirmary, “took me aside and gave me clothes. She asked me to get dressed as fast as possible and to move quietly. She wanted me to join the few healthy inmates who were being transferred to



Birkenau. I was told not to ask any questions, not to say a word.”⁶ Ruta Krakowiak, who would become Ruth Fenton, did as she was told, and lived.

In November 1944, my mother was sent to the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen in Germany where she and a small group of other Jewish women kept 149 Jewish children alive until that camp’s liberation. This rescue operation began in December 1944 when they found 49 Dutch Jewish children outside their barrack and were ordered by the SS to take them in. These children became the core of what was called a Kinderheim, a children’s home. They were soon joined by other children originally from Poland, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere.⁷

Hela Los Jafe, one of my mother’s fellow inmates, recalled that, “Ada [my mother] walked from block to block, found the children, took them, lived with them, and took care of them.”⁸ According to Hela Los Jafe,

The children were very small and sick, and we had to wash them, clothe them, calm them and feed them. . . . It was cold and terrible there, and the children cried because they were cold. Luckily they had Ada Bimko. Most of them were orphans, and she was like a mother to them . . . Most of them were sick with terrible indigestion, dysentery and diarrhea, and just lay on the bunks. . . . There was little food, but somehow Ada managed to get some special food and white bread from the Germans. . . . Later, there was typhus among the children. Ada was the one who could get injections, chocolate, pills and vitamins. I don’t know how she did it. Although most of the children were sick, thanks to Ada nearly all of them survived.⁹

Keeping the children alive became a communal endeavor. “We sent word of the children to the Jewish men who worked in the SS food depot,” my mother wrote, “and they risked their lives daily to steal food and pass it to us under the barbed wire.”¹⁰ Jewish prisoners in the Bergen-Belsen pharmacy smuggled over medicine for the children. My mother recalled that when the children desperately needed warm clothes during the harsh winter months of 1945,

Somebody mentioned that there was a storage room in the camp where clothes taken away from the arriving inmates were kept. I went there

with two of the nurses. To my surprise I was greeted and hugged by two Polish women whom I had helped and protected from heavy work in the scabies block in Birkenau. They gave us all the clothes we wanted.¹¹

In January 1945, Hetty Verolme was almost 15, old enough to be considered an adult by the Germans. The inmates of her barrack at Bergen-Belsen were being evacuated to another camp. In her memoir, she described how my mother, whom she called “the doctor,” took her by the hand to ask the camp commandant to let her stay with the other children. “After he had scrutinized me,” Hetty wrote, “he nodded his approval to the doctor and barked ‘Los!’ (Get going). Before he could change his mind, the doctor and I ran for our lives back to the children.”¹²

Mala Tribich was 14 years old when she was deported to Bergen-Belsen from Ravensbrück, another concentration camp. In 2006, she told the BBC that Belsen in early 1945,

was something beyond description. There was a terrible stench of burning flesh. The crematorium could not cope with all the bodies so they were burning them in pits. People were so emaciated, they looked like skeletons. They would be walking along and just drop dead. I heard there was a children’s barracks. We found it and we were interviewed by two women - Dr. Bimko and Sister Luba [one of the nurses who had come to Belsen from Auschwitz with my mother]. They took us in. That was one of the things that saved my life, because I don’t think we would have survived in the main camp.¹³

In 1981, my mother, who had been appointed to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council by President Jimmy Carter, chaired a session on medical rescue at an international conference on the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps. A survivor, Ray Kaner, took the floor to describe how she had been critically ill with typhoid at Bergen-Belsen in the winter of 1945. Her sister went to speak to my mother in the already overcrowded camp infirmary. Even though there was no room, Ray Kaner said, my mother had her brought to the infirmary and “Somehow, . . . my temperature dropped. I did survive the night.” And then she said to my mother, “I looked for you for many years - 36 years.”¹⁴



Within a few days of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945, Brigadier H. L. Glyn-Hughes, the Deputy Director of Medical Services of the British Army of the Rhine, appointed my mother to organize and head a group of doctors and nurses among the survivors to help care for the camp’s thousands of critically ill inmates. For weeks on end, she and her team of 28 doctors and 620 other female and male volunteers, only a few of whom were trained nurses, worked round the clock with the military personnel to try to save the lives of as many of the survivors as possible. Despite their desperate efforts, the Holocaust claimed 13,944 additional victims at Bergen-Belsen during the two months following the liberation.

Lt. Colonel Mervyn Gonin, one of the British officers at Bergen-Belsen in April 1945, described my mother as “the bravest woman I have ever known, who worked miracles of care, kindness and healing with the help of no medicines but the voice and discipline of a Regimental Sergeant Major of the guards.”¹⁵

Where my mother found the strength to help and take care of others rather than focusing on her own survival has always been a profound mystery to me. Perhaps, as S.J. Goldsmith wrote, “she saved herself by saving others.”¹⁶ ■