

Dear Chavraya,

In a desk drawer, I keep what is surely an unlikely symbol of spiritual resistance. It is a small tube of lipstick, purchased many years ago as a prop to aid in the telling of a dear friend's story. A poignant reminder of the triumph of love over hate, of kindness in the face of brutality, it tells the story of two young women who survived five concentration camps together. Rysia and Helen were both members of my congregation in Victoria, British Columbia. I was close to both women, but Rysia was a dear friend, often as a surrogate grandmother to my children. Helen never spoke a word about the Holocaust, though her husband, Willy, also a survivor, would speak freely. I often accompanied Willy to schools, introducing him to the students, the number on his arm speaking volumes before he said a word. Often asked by the young people if he had a message for them, without a trace of bitterness Willy would say, "don't hate." After Helen and Willy died, within a few weeks of each other, Rysia, who had previously spoken only privately about her experiences, began to open up. Bravely seeking to fill the void left in the absence of her friends and of Willy's words of witness, she began to speak publicly for the first time.

Every year on Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, I take out that small tube of lipstick. I place it on my desk as a reminder of a friendship, and of a simple act of courage and kindness. Whenever I speak about the Holocaust, holding the lipstick, I tell the story of Rysia and Helen. For the first number of years after leaving Victoria, I would always call Rysia and tell her when I had shared the story, and we would both cry. Rysia has gone to the other world now, and I continue to tell her story, crying alone at my desk.

This Sunday, the 27th of Nisan, is Yom HaShoah. We come to it through the exhortation of this week's Torah portion, *Parashat K'doshim: K'doshim tihiyu/you shall be holy, as I, God, your God, am holy*. Guiding us through the question of how, a series of commandments then shows us the way of holiness. Expressed primarily in the realm of human relationships, we strive to become holy through considerate and solicitous behavior in relation to others, particularly the vulnerable and downtrodden. Rising to their crescendo, words of commandment become as a mirror in which to see the image of God in our selves and in each other, *and you shall love your neighbor as yourself/vi'ahavta l'rey'acha kamocho*.

The story of Rysia and Helen is a story of that love, expressed as selfless kindness for another. Soon after Willy and Helen died, I sat with Rysia and recorded the words that follow. On Yom HaShoah in 1996, I stood next to her at the Holocaust memorial in the Victoria Jewish cemetery as she bravely read her words of witness in memory of her two friends and of her entire family who had perished. At the very end, you will see why I keep a small tube of lipstick in my desk drawer.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor

Rysia Kraskin - - Acts of Kindness in Hell
Yom HaShoah Memorial Observance
April 14, 1996 - 25 Nisan 5756

I was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1922. My father was a merchant and I was the fourth child. I had three older brothers. My three brothers went to a non-Jewish government school. My parents sent me to a Jewish school. My brothers went to school on Saturday and I was home. I graduated from High School in 1939, a few months before the war broke out. In September the war broke out. The Germans came into Warsaw a month later. We had to wear the Magen Dovid. In the fall of 1940 the Germans announced that they were closing the ghetto so no one could go in or out. Before they closed the ghetto my parents sent me to friends in the countryside. There was no ghetto there. I was there until 1942. In 1942 in summertime the Germans took me from the street. They took me with others in trucks and brought me to Skarzysko camp where there was a munitions factory. We worked 12 hour shifts in the factory, one week in the day and one week at night. I was lucky because I spoke German. People were falling like flies because of the hard physical work and no food. A year and a half later they took the whole camp to Czenstochowa, also a munitions factory. It was my second camp of five camps. From there they took us at night walking night and day to Germany as the Russians came closer. They took us to concentration camp Ravensbruck. There was a hell. We were beaten by the Germans. Girls were examined and killed if they had a pimple on their bodies. From there they sent us in cattle wagons for many days. I think it was 16 days. We were locked in with no water and no food. After many days they took us to another camp, Burgau. There we were not long. From Burgau they took us to Turkheim , which was in Bavaria. Around the 20th of April 1945 they took us out to take us to Dachau, also walking. On the way we ran away because the Germans were not watching us as before because of the American planes going around. At the end of April, 1945, April 27th, the Americans came in and liberated us. We became "menschen" again. We became human beings.

Even as we went through hell, even amidst the horror of this terrible time, we didn't forget that we really were human beings and how to care for other people in need. During the first year in the first camp, there was a typhoid epidemic. The Germans used to come everyday to our barracks and if they found someone was sick they took them out immediately and most people we

never saw them again. The girl who was sleeping with me in one bunk got sick. I knew if I would leave her and go somewhere else because I would be afraid to catch it, they would take her away. I stayed with her although I was sure I would get typhus, not to let the Germans know that she was sick. They would know that if she was alone without me she was sick. I stayed with her, and her aunt who was also there helped her until she got better. She is still my friend and lives in Israel.

During the trip on the cattle train from Ravensbrück to Burgau, after arriving in Burgau without water for many days they opened the doors. Half were dead. When they opened the doors German women handed up cups of water. Helen Jacobs who was living here and who was with me in all of the camps, she got first the water. She was standing near to the door. Instead to drink immediately the water, she brought it to me where I was lying on the other side of the wagon. Then she went back to drink for herself. If this is not a great kindness! She handed me life, "mayim chayim." She saved me.

I don't know where she had the strength, Helen. We had to walk from where the train stopped to the camp. I was half alive. Half of the women were dead. When we came to the barracks we were told that the SS women will soon come and look us over, if we are capable to work. I was so weak I wanted to lay down on the bunk but Helen didn't let me. She took out lipstick. I don't know from where she got it, and she put some on my lips and a little bit on my cheeks, I should look like a healthy person. And again she saved my life.