

# Bringing History to Life - Diana Golden

As told by her daughter Estelle Golden

I wish I remembered the moment, as a child, that I first noticed the markings on my mother's left forearm, just below her elbow. It was a tattoo, with the numbers A-24328. I wish I could remember what I asked her about it. I wish I could remember what she told me.

As I grew up, I learned about what had happened to the European Jews during the 1930s and 1940s. I learned about the Holocaust; about the killing centers. I began to ask my Mom more questions. I realized that she had survived a devastating ordeal, but rarely mentioned it.

That all changed one evening in the early 1970s. Mom saw someone on TV who was insisting that the Holocaust never took place, or if it had, only a few people had died. Until that moment, she hadn't wanted to burden anyone by sharing her history, but after she heard those lies, she knew that she had to speak up. And she did – for over 30 years, she shared her unforgettable story with thousands of people.

Diana Golden passed away in 2014, at the age of 91, so now I am sharing her experience with you.

My mother was born Diana Galante, in 1922, in Rhodes Italy. Rhodes is one of the islands in the Aegean Sea, very close to Turkey:

Jewish people had lived in Rhodes for over 2,300 years. The fate of the Rhodes Jews in World War II is rarely heard about, as only about 1,700 Jews lived there in 1943 at the time of Nazi occupation.

Diana's family lived in the largest town on the Island, called Rhodes Town. It was a beautiful medieval city surrounded by stone walls built during the Roman empire. Besides her father Rahamim, and mother Lea, she had three sisters (Rachelle, Jeanette, and Felicia), and two brothers (Salvo and Baruch), plus many relatives.

Most Jews in Rhodes lived within the walls in an area known as the Juderia. Life in the Juderia was very vibrant – crowds of people going to work, to market, to daily services at any one of four synagogues, or observing the other rituals of Jewish life. People lived along narrow streets paved with pebbles, in homes built centuries earlier of hewn stone. Though Italian was the official language, in the Juderia, residents spoke Ladino, a Judeo-Spanish language.

Diana's father owned a "dry goods" shop in the town center, selling things like thread, needles, and lace.

When she turned 17, Diana started working in a jewelry store. Her life was rich with family, faith, and community.

Two thousand miles away in Germany, things were happening that concerned the Jews of Rhodes. When Adolf Hitler rose to power in 1933, they began to receive news about the Nazi persecution of German Jews. As Diana recalled in her testimony for the USC Shoah Foundation in 1997:

*The Italian press was very bad. The papers said that the Jews were like weeds; that we grow even through the cement. That all the wars, everything bad that has happened to the world has been manipulated by the Jews. I still have it in my mind. It hurt me very much. And we started to hear stories in the community about the persecution in Germany: that Jews were not allowed to work in any government jobs, Jewish doctors could not have non-Jewish patients, school children could not attend public schools.*

In June of 1936, Italy signed a “friendship treaty” with Nazi Germany. With this alliance, the Italian government also began changing its attitude towards the Jews. A new fascist Governor was appointed to Rhodes and he passed antisemitic laws, including closing the Rabbinical schools, and forcing Jews to work on Jewish holidays. He even demanded that 100 headstones from the Jewish cemetery be removed and given to him to use as building materials for his new house. The Jews of Rhodes were afraid about what was going to happen to them.

In December 1937, Italy withdrew from the League of Nations, a group developed after World War I as a way to solve disputes between countries and prevent future wars. In the fall of 1938, Italy followed Germany in passing more stringent anti-Jewish laws. The Italian military started patrolling the Jewish area of Rhodes. Trade with other countries stopped, resulting in food shortages. Daily life on Rhodes became a challenge for all its citizens. Italian currency was worthless so people resorted to bartering or trading to get what they needed to live. Diana’s parents traded their Turkish rugs for food. Her father had no goods to sell in his shop. The family resorted to growing vegetables in petroleum (gas) cans and raising chickens they didn’t have the heart to kill. Frequent bombing raids by the British army damaged or destroyed many homes. About 2,000 Jews, half the Jewish population, fled Rhodes for safer countries.

On September 9, 1943, a battle broke out on Rhodes between Italian and German forces, ending in Italian surrender and Germany in full control of the island. Though Nazi soldiers were a constant and watchful presence in the Jewish neighborhood, they largely left the residents alone. However, everyone had to carry a special photo identification card with the word “Jude”, meaning Jewish.

On July 19, 1944, life changed forever for the Jews of Rhodes. Trucks drove through the streets with loudspeakers, ordering all Jewish men to report to the German headquarters, supposedly to help plant vegetables. Everyone expected the men to return home by evening, but they did not. The next day the trucks came around again ordering all Jewish women and children to report to headquarters and to bring some clothes in a knapsack. They united with the men who were being held captive. Now everyone was detained in the building headquarters.

After three days of being locked in without being fed, they were ordered to turn in their passports and to walk the three miles to the port where three merchant boats were waiting. It was a hot day and everyone was already exhausted from the stress and lack of food and water. The Nazi soldiers used whips on their legs to get them to move faster. At the port, the 1,700 Jews were ordered onto the ships and down through trap doors into the dark, dank cargo holds. As Diana recalled:

*It was dark, no light, no bathrooms, and a single barrel of rancid water for drinking during the eight-day journey to mainland Greece. We sat on our knapsacks, so crowded we could not stretch our legs. No food – whatever bits of bread or cheese we happened to bring was all we had – after a few days there was nothing left. The children were crying constantly. Everyone was in tears, looking at each other with pity in our hearts. People were dying from the first day. Each morning a soldier would open the trap door to the hold and say, “Kaput?”, and the victims would be handed up.*

Upon arrival at the Greek port of Peiraeus, everyone staggered onto land and was ordered by Nazi soldiers to climb into the beds of military trucks. Anyone who could not climb onto the tall platform fast enough was beaten or whipped. The trucks took them to the Haidari Concentration Camp. At the camp, the men and women were separated.

They stayed at Haidari for just three days, with very little food or water and only bare concrete floors to sleep on. Then once again they were rounded up for transport. Guarded by soldiers, they sat outside all day in the hot sun. Several people passed away during the wait, including Diana’s grandmother. Diana’s father was one of the men given shovels and ordered to bury the victims nearby.

Several trucks arrived and took the group to the Athens railyard, where everyone was crowded into train boxcars. They had no idea where they were going.

*We counted 72 people in our car after they bolted the doors. Later we found out that some cars packed in even more. It was hot, the floor was littered with straw. It smelled like animals. It was a living hell. We were perspiring, sitting in our waste from the overflowing bucket they left us as a toilet; with diarrhea, body lice, head lice. So crowded together that we couldn’t stand, we couldn’t sit. And no food, just starving to death. Most of the day we were in a daze; sighing, crying and praying for God to deliver us from this horror. My father passed away after several days. He was delirious, screaming for water, infected with typhus. We cried and said, “Papa, you are no longer suffering.” This was the only consolation that we had.*

For 21 hellish days, the train moved along the 800-mile journey to the Auschwitz death center in Poland, arriving on August 16, 1944. World War II was in its final stages and Germany was being reduced to rubble. The Jews from Rhodes were among the last ones to be deported to camps like Auschwitz.

The train stopped at an area called “the ramp.” The car doors slid open, German voices commanded everyone to leave their belongings and exit the boxcars. Dazed, Diana and her family struggled on their stiff and weak legs. They were greeted by German SS officers holding guns, whips, and fierce German Shepherds on leashes.

They were ordered to queue up into long lines. At the front of the line were more officers, looking each arrival up and down and directing them to different groups. It was here that Diana and her two sisters and some cousins got separated from the rest of their family.

They joined a group of younger women being marched away from the ramp. Diana looked back and saw lines of people on the other side – including Diana’s mother, an aunt who was blind, and her little brother – going in a different direction. Those officers at the ramp were doctors who decided who was healthy enough to work and live another day, and whose life would end that day in the gas chambers.

Diana’s group passed under a gate with its ironic words in German: “Arbeit Macht Frei” – “work will set you free”.

They walked for about an hour to Birkenau, a sub-camp within the Auschwitz complex. They gathered in an open area and were told to remove their clothes. They stood in the heat for a very long time, filthy, hungry, and parched from not having eaten or drank anything in more than three weeks. They begged for water, but received none.

Finally, the camp guards started processing the new arrivals. First, each prisoner had an ID number tattooed on their forearm. Next, all of their body hair was shaved off, followed by a spray of disinfectant powder and a brief cold shower. Finally, they were given a simple cotton dress to wear, but no underwear. Diana noticed that all of the work was done by female prisoners being watched over by Nazi SS officers.

Auschwitz was the only camp to tattoo their prisoners; marking the change in their identity from a name to a number.

By this time the sun had set. The prisoners were directed to another area of the camp with rows of barracks surrounded by electrified barbed wire fences. Diana and her sisters were assigned to Barrack 20, a long building with three-tiered bunks along both walls. At the end of the barrack was an area, separated by a curtain. This was the Capo’s room. Capos were also prisoners -- forced to help control the barracks. In exchange, they got better food, water and a private space.

Diana soon learned about life as a prisoner in Auschwitz. Her day began at 4:00 am, being woken to the sound of whistles and the Capo yelling “Aufstehen!, Auftehan!, Up!, Up!.” Sometimes she could stay inside while the Nazi officers inspected the women as they passed through. More often she was made to stand outside in the cold and dark, for hours, until finally the prisoners were counted and inspected to see if they had enough strength left to work. But the count took a long time, as the Nazi officer called off each prisoner’s number in German. Learning her number was a matter of survival.

Diana also learned not to look at the officers, not to show any emotion, or draw any attention to herself. To do otherwise risked being taken elsewhere and beaten to death, shot on the spot, or taken to the infirmary for a fatal injection of a deadly drug. The barracks washrooms were then open briefly, but the brown, rusty water never flowed long enough to clean up, as there were far fewer faucets than women. If she was pushy enough, she might get a turn.

Food was another matter. Diana was already starving when she arrived at Auschwitz, and continued to starve with the insufficient food rations. To receive your ration, you had to wait in a long line to pick up a metal bowl, a bowl that was never washed. There were more prisoners than there were bowls, so not everyone got one. Once you had a bowl, you stood in a second line that ended at a barrel where food was ladled out by the Capo. Without a bowl, you could not receive the meager portions. Almost daily, fights broke out between women fighting for a bowl, or trying to cut in line. For breakfast, they were served “coffee”, which was just brown water. For lunch and dinner, a thin broth, and if you were lucky you might find a piece of vegetable in your bowl. As Diana recalled:

*The only time we were sure to get something to eat was in the evening. Again, we had to stand at attention, rain or shine, and wait about an hour until the officer came and we counted off by our prisoner number. As we broke the line, the Capo was there to give us a small slice of bread. By the time I walked five feet, that bread was gulped down like it never existed. And we were hungry, filthy, thirsty; day and night, night and day.*

After dinner was “free time”, so to speak, when they were able to wander about the immediate area around the barracks and along the electric fence that separated the men’s and women’s barracks. Any contact with the fence meant instant death. That was a choice that some prisoners made.

Then, lights out. But there was no peace even at rest:

*My sisters were together with me. We had bunks, about the size of a double bed, with planks, nothing else. And naturally, being the last ones to arrive, we were up on the third bunk. It was very difficult to climb up there. We started with 10 girls in the same bed, but usually at night someone died. We were fighting for space most of the time. If we got out of the bunk at night there was no way to get back in and we would sleep on the floor.*

All this time, Diana assumed that at some point she would be reunited with her other family members. They found some Belgium prisoners who pointed to the furnace smoke stacks and explained the fate of their loved ones:

*We started to scream, “Oh, no, no, no, my mama, my papa, my brother, my sister! I don’t want to live anymore.” They tried to comfort us and said, “You just have to survive now. The war will soon be over.”*

As long as a prisoner was able to stand, they were considered healthy enough to work. The mandated work day was 11 hours long, five days a week. Some work had a purpose, like working in the kitchen or camp maintenance. But some work seemed designed to further torture the prisoners:

*Each morning we were ordered to walk a couple of miles away to a pile of bricks. We had to pick up two ice-cold bricks and walk a long way and deposit them in another pile. Back and forth. We were guarded by SS women with German Shepherds, and if a girl fell down, or fainted, the dogs would be sent to dismember her. It was horrible. After a few days we figured out that if we hid when the guards were*

*sending us out, we could get out of that job. Eventually we were assigned a different job: dumping the buckets of waste from the latrines. We had to carry them four or five blocks, and the waste would splash all over our legs.*

For the prisoners, their emotional and physical survival came down to simply staying alive from one moment to the next.

*We were in such a condition; filthy, our lips were cracked, we started to have trench mouth – sores in our mouth and tongue – even talking was very painful. Many died like that, including my three cousins. At the end of the day male prisoners would come with pushcarts to collect the dead or almost dead. It was a horrible thing to see all this wasted youth. We used to look up to the sky to ask God, “Why this, why?” There was nothing we could do. We were all in the same condition. We tried to find consolation remembering happy days with the family.*

On the war front, the Russian army was advancing towards Auschwitz. In response, the Nazis stepped up the murder of their prisoners, and looked to move those healthy enough to work from Poland to Germany. The prisoners began to hear that they might be selected to go, if they could pass an inspection, where officers would decide if you could survive long enough to be useful.

Around the third week in October 1944, Diana, one sister, and a cousin, passed inspection and were selected. But another sister was very sick and was passed over. Diana feared she would never see her again, as anyone who was too sick to work was sent to the gas chambers.

Diana and her group made the three-day trip to Germany in train boxcars. They were sent to a factory in the woods where they worked thirteen hours a day, six days a week, making military equipment. Diana was assigned to drill holes in a round plate used in machine guns. Prisoners had to meet their work quota in order to get food. In general, conditions were better than in Auschwitz. Diana had a bed all to herself, with a straw mattress and a blanket. There were no fences or gas chambers or crematoriums. But there was no serious thought of escape. The Capos were armed and very strict. As Diana recalled:

*We were surrounded by nothing but woods. Where could we go? The back of our dresses had a wide stripe of green fluorescent paint, that shines at night. Our shoes were backless clogs. There was snow, it was very cold and there was no food. We would have died of exposure. One girl did run away – at night. The dogs found her and the Germans beat her and left her to die in a trough of freezing water.*

Across Europe, the allied forces continued to fight and advance against the Germans. Several times factory work stopped due to air raids. Around the third week of April, 1945, the prisoners were locked in the barracks for 48 hours. The prisoners were afraid that as Germany was losing the war, they were of no further use and would be blown up inside the barracks. Instead, the prisoners were loaded into open boxcars and taken to another camp, called Theresienstadt. Diana noticed that just before arriving at Theresienstadt, the SS guards changed from their uniforms to civilian clothes. Once at camp, the guards completely disappeared. Soon the Russian army arrived in trucks to liberate the camp.

It was May 9, 1945. The emaciated survivors were given water, bread, and soup. Their portions were rationed because if they ate too much too soon, they could die. The Russian soldiers told them, "Tomorrow you will get more. You are free now. You are free."

Diana learned that her sister, who was left behind at Auschwitz, survived and was in a hospital very sick from typhus. They were able to find her and help her recover.

Now as stateless refugees, the journey back to their lives was a long one. Over the next nine months they travelled to the Czech Republic, where they were housed in a convent, then to a refugee camp in Prague, then to a former detention camp in Hungary, which was in shambles.

They helped clean up the camp and stayed there for a few months, then travelled to Austria which has a common border with Italy, ending up at Kaisersteinbruch, yet another broken down former prison camp that they had to make livable. Finally, they were trucked to Vienna and boarded a train to Bolzano, Italy, on the Italian-Austria border. As mother recalled:

*We literally got down on our knees and kissed the ground. Only then, we knew we were free.*

Of the Jews who were deported from Rhodes, 22 died on the voyage, 1,145 at Auschwitz, and 437 in the labor camps. Jewish life on Rhodes, which had endured for over 2,300 years, did not survive the Holocaust. In 2002, a monument was erected in what was the old Juderia and is now known as Jewish Martyrs Square.

In 1949, sponsored by relatives, Diana immigrated to America. She ended up staying with relatives in Seattle, where, in 1951 on a blind date, she met a Portland musician named Kenneth Golden. She moved to Portland, married him in 1952 and three years later I was born. My sister Elaine was born in 1958. Diana was an active volunteer in the Jewish Community; was a founding member of a new Jewish Synagogue in Vancouver, Washington; and voted in every election. She helped my father in his music store. She valued her friends and relatives and always sent a card or note for every birthday or anniversary.

When recounting her own history that I have just shared with you, Diana was often asked how it was that she could not hate the people who murdered her family and community, who caused so much pain and suffering. And she would reply:

*I try not to be angry, bitter, or ask for revenge. What would that solve? You cannot conquer hate with more hate. Only with love. All I want to do is have my own life and not repeat the mistakes and horrors that the Nazis did. Whatever I can do for others, I want to do it, no matter how little. The choice is mine. I choose caring. I choose love. ■*