

Greatest Respect for Humankind

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This is no ordinary story. This is the story of an incredibly strong kid from Krakow, Poland who survived the worst time in the history of the Jewish people. Jack Gruener, also known as Yanek in his family, was indeed a survivor. He not only survived though, Jack represents the strength and determination of the Jews throughout history. From when we were slaves in Egypt to the Pharaohs, to the war in Israel, Jack Gruener represents the Jewish people's will to never give up.

When Yanek Gruener was nine years old, everything seemed stupendous. He had a great life, a nice family, and all the resources to live a normal life. He loved being Jewish, but couldn't understand why other people didn't like him, or what he did wrong. Yanek was thrown out of school and forced to sit at home all day. After the Nazis came to their house and took all the valuables, he figured out something was really wrong. He kept asking himself, *what did I do wrong?* He and the rest of his family were captured, and split up. The only souvenir he had left of them was his memories. Yanek was sent to the scariest place that he had only thought to be a myth; a concentration camp.

In the book *Prisoner B-3087* the author writes, "Now I am officially a prisoner," (Gratz 65). This is one of the most chilling and horrendous thoughts Yanek will ever think. Nine years old, trapped in a prison, and hated by millions, but he never understood why. Yanek got his head shaved, a new pair of navy blue and white pajamas with a yellow star on them, and a tattoo, B-3087. He was no longer Yanek Gruener, he was just another number to the government monster. While in this death camp called Plaszow, Yanek found his uncle Moshe. They made a promise to each other that they would stick together. So when the prisoners with the yellow stars on their pajamas had to

move, Moshe wasn't picked to move, he was picked to die. So as Yanek moved, the promise between the kin died.

As Yanek moved through concentration camps, he had to work various back breaking jobs: transporting boulders, sewing clothes and cleaning the dirtiest place known to man, literally and figuratively. It seems like everytime Yanek became even semi close to someone, they died. At one point he almost expected his acquaintances to die, himself as well. Yanek anticipated the fact he was going to die, but he wanted to last as long as possible. He had lost hope of his family's survival, and knew he was the only one of them still alive. He would do anything to keep that true. He stole bread, brushed his teeth with his finger, survived two death walks, and 10 concentration camps.

When Yanek was 16 years old, in his tenth camp, he said the best day of his life was when the American tanks, trucks, and soldiers came in and saved him from hell on earth. That night he was so grateful just to have a toothbrush and a fresh slice of bread. He had indeed earned that bread and a lot of other things. After Yanek got healthy, he was moved to Munich. As he was walking down a street one day, he ran into his old next door neighbor. She told Yanek his first cousin was still alive in Munich. Yanek was so excited! He went and visited them every day and they became good friends.

One day they asked him what he was going to do for money. Yanek wanted to be a projectionist, but his family said he absolutely needed to go to America. He filed for a program that helped Jewish orphans get to America, and he got there! An American soldier that had helped him came to call him Jack, and so it stuck. In America Jack met Ruth, his soon to be wife. Jack became a soldier for his country and was proud of the United States.

This individual story is very meaningful to me because Yanek was my age when he was taken. This makes me really thankful and grateful I wasn't in this situation. Yanek was a smart boy and really liked his life. I just couldn't imagine being taken from my family and never seeing them again. The Holocaust was a horrible time for the Jewish people and people can't stop writing about it because it can not be forgotten. That would be the worst thing to do. This story, and all the other stories of death and survival must not die.

My great grandparents left Vienna, Austria just before the Nazis invaded Austria. All of their belongings were taken by the Nazis. They were lucky enough to escape to America and arranged for family to come to America. Then my grandpa went back and fought against the Nazis but more importantly, the rights of all humans. He was a champion for civil rights. This is why the Holocaust is really important. It's the stories in our lives that we can remember and relate to. Whether it is family members, friends, or all Jews. My grandma's birthday was on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, so that proves something can come out of a bad day in our history. As long as we never forget, all the generations in the future will be stronger, more resilient, and more passionate about anything going on in our culture.

Sources

Gratz, Alan. *Prisoner B-3087*. New York: Scholastic, 2013. Print.

"USC Shoah Foundation Institute Testimony of Jack Gruener." *United States Holocaust*

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