

# Growing Up with Two Survivors of World War II

## John Guzłowski

**A** while ago, I was invited to a local high school to read poems and talk about my mother and father and their experiences as Polish slave laborers in Germany during World War II. After I got done reading some poems from *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*, my book about my parents, a student raised his hand and asked me a question I often get asked. He wanted to know what it was like growing up as a child of two survivors.

I smiled and said, "It wasn't easy." The students laughed, and I did too.

But it was true. Growing up with two survivors wasn't easy.

The first problem was that when my parents, my sister Donna, and I came to America we had almost nothing. Everything we owned fit into a wooden trunk that my dad made, and here's what was in this trunk: some pillows, some clothes, some letters from family in Poland who survived the war, a skillet, a wooden cross, some photos of our lives in the Displaced Persons refugee camps in Germany, some wool sweaters my mom knitted while we were waiting for six years to leave those camps.

Because we had so little, much of my parents' lives in the first years after we came to the US was spent working. Both of them worked in factories. For a while my dad worked two shifts, sixteen hours a day. It was hard, but the work accomplished what my parents wanted. They bought a small apartment house in the Humboldt Park area of Chicago. It had three four-room apartments with no central heating. That didn't matter to them. They had a house. Owning a house made them feel secure, more secure than they had felt in fifteen years, ever since the war came and destroyed their families and sent them to the slave labor camps.

And how did the work affect my sister Donna and me?

What was most difficult was that there were times when nobody was home with us. For years, my dad worked from 8 am to midnight, and my mom worked from 4 pm to midnight. We were just kids, but we were kids with a lot of responsibility. Taking care of the cleaning and the cooking and each other. The hardest part I remember was when I was six and my sister was eight. Being alone for hours and hours was tough then. Our parents told us not to leave the house, so we stayed indoors, but this was before TV, and we didn't have many toys because my parents couldn't afford them, so there wasn't much for us to do. A lot of times, we just spent our time after school looking out the window at the kids in the neighborhood playing. And on top of that we had to feed ourselves. My mom would prepare the food, but we had to get the heavy pots out of the icebox and heat them up and make sure everything was cleaned up after we ate.

But waiting for our parents to get home and preparing the food weren't the only problems my sister Donna and I ran into. Just being with my parents was difficult.

When he wasn't getting ready for work or working in the factory or resting after a long day there, my dad was an alcoholic. On Friday evenings, he'd come home from work and open up a bottle of vodka or brandy and pour himself a healthy drink, and then pour himself another and another. He often drank until he passed out. Then he would wake up and drink some more.

And what did he do when he was drunk? He couldn't stop thinking and talking about the war. It was something that pressed on his heart and his soul, pressed hard. When I was a kid, six and seven years old, my father after a few drinks would tell me about the terrible things he saw in his four years in Buchenwald Concentration Camp and elsewhere during the war. Weeping, he told me of his friends who were castrated and crucified by the Germans; he told me about the slave laborers, men who were like his brothers, freezing to death as they worked in the fields; he

told me about the Polish women who had their breasts sliced off with bayonets by German soldiers. If my mom was home, she would beg him to stop talking about the war. Sometimes he would, but too often he couldn't. Once, she was so upset by the stories he was telling me that she knocked him down onto the floor. And still he kept weeping and telling his stories.

The only time he wouldn't drink on the weekends was when he'd go to church on Sunday morning. He felt that Jesus wouldn't want to see him drunk, weeping in church. But right after church, when the bars opened up at noon, that's where my dad would be.

That's what it was like on weekends. Like I said, during the week, he was all about the work he had to do in the factory. But that doesn't mean he was able to escape his memories. A lot of times when I was a kid growing up, his screams woke me up at night. He was having nightmares about the war and the camps. He often dreamt about being dragged to the ovens by the German guards who wanted to burn him alive.

Looking back on all of this now, I realize he had PTSD and that it was ruining his life and killing him. And I realize that he should have sought out some kind of help, but back then people didn't think that way. My dad was just another drunken survivor of the horrors of war.

My mother?

She was nothing like my dad. She wasn't an alcoholic, but she was a woman who also had a hard time escaping her memories of the war. While my father talked about the war constantly and could not stop himself from expressing his grief, my mom was the exact opposite. She tried to never show any emotions. No fear, no grief, no joy.

She struggled to keep all the terrible things that happened to her hidden, locked in a secret place no one could ever enter. She never spoke about the war. She never spoke about the day the Germans came to her family's farm in Poland and raped her mother and her sister and my

mother, never spoke about how they then killed her mother, her sister, and her sister's baby. She never spoke about the terrible way the women in the slave camps were treated, the hunger, the impossible work conditions, the sexual abuse, the killing.

I remember once when I was in my teens asking her to tell me about what happened in the camps. All she would say was, "If they give you bread, eat it. If they beat you, run away." She said that and then walked away.

She couldn't share her memories and the emotions they generated. I remember she often would receive letters from a sister of hers who also survived the war and went back to Poland after her liberation from the slave labor camps. My mother could not read these letters with my sister and me watching. Reading about her sister's hard life under the communists filled my mother with too much grief. She would take the letters to a bedroom and close the door and read them there and weep.

When she did express her emotions, they often rushed out of her in violence. Sometimes, if my sister made a mistake cleaning house or washing dishes, or if she said or did something my mother didn't like, my mother would chase her through the house, spanking her. I'm not sure why, but my mother never beat me. She just looked at me and told me I was stupid and worthless. My sister Donna and I used to say that she learned parenting from the Nazis.

What did I think of all this growing up?

I thought it was normal. We grew up in a neighborhood of survivors, Displaced Persons (DPs) who came over after the war: Poles and Ukrainians and Russians. There were even two women Auschwitz survivors living in the apartment below us. What I saw parents doing to their kids in the neighborhood made me think my parents were normal. I saw my friend Joey's dad rip his pants off and chase him naked through the streets, beating him with a belt. I saw my friend

Stash's mom hit him in the face with a coffee pot and break two of his teeth. I saw a neighbor force his daughters out of the house each night because he couldn't go to sleep with them in the apartment. The girls had to stand on a street corner waiting for him to fall asleep. Their mom would then call them home.

My dad's drunkenness and my mom's abuse? Like I said, it seemed normal. I felt my parents weren't that bad.

But it wasn't always like that. There were also good times: watching comedy and music shows with my parents on TV, taking walks on Sundays in Chicago's parks after church, going to Riverview Amusement Park or North Avenue Beach on Saturday afternoons, and celebrating weddings and birthdays and holidays with other DPs.

Those were the times my parents, at least for a brief moment, forgot the terrors and suffering they had experienced in the war. My mother forgot seeing what happened to her mother and her sister and her sister's baby, and my father forgot for a moment watching his friend castrated and crucified for talking to a German woman. And my sister and I could forget for a moment the lives we were living with my parents.

**John Guzowski's** poems about his parents' experiences as slave laborers in Nazi Germany appear in his award-winning *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*. His most recent book of poems is *Small Talk: Writing about God and Writing and Me*. He is also the author of the Hank and Marvin mysteries, and a columnist for *Dziennik Zwiazkowy*, the oldest Polish newspaper in America.