

The BAG from hell

An unexpected find broke the silence surrounding her mother's history. Hephzibah Rudofsky (Kohn) shares the story behind the artefacts her grandmother brought out of Bergen-Belsen



Sewn on the left-hand side of one's outerwear, this is the star my grandmother wore in Holland, where Jews had to purchase them

Zahava, aged seven



Zahava and her parents, Amsterdam, 1938

Note indicating my grandfather's declining health

Photo of my uncle, Jehudi, that was smuggled into Westerbork



Westerbork work card



Honduras citizenship document

Rosh Hashanah card



When I was growing up, my mother rarely spoke about her experiences during the war. That in itself was a challenge – knowing that my mother, Zahava Kohn, had endured a horrifying childhood in Bergen-Belsen, but was unable or unwilling to speak about it. My mother coped by shutting away this part of her life. And I think she did this also to protect our family. Or was it because no one had asked her about her childhood experiences? Did she feel no one would understand what she had been through? All this changed in 2001. After my grandmother died, when my mother was clearing out her mother's possessions, she came across a large bag at the back of a cupboard.

THIS BAG held the extraordinary story of the Kanarek family, in the form of fragments of papers, letters, documents, and photographs that my grandmother had managed to keep during their wartime ordeal.

The contents of the bag triggered memories of the war and proved a watershed moment for my mother. I often think how easy it would have been to discard this bag, throwing away the evidence of an almost unbelievable history. But she kept it – and with it, the story of my mother's life from her birth in 1935 until 1945 when Bergen-Belsen was liberated – and beyond.

My mother could have been safe and living in Palestine when Nazism gripped Europe, for her parents had already moved there in 1935. But when my grandmother became very ill, they were advised to return to Europe – so they decided to move back to Holland in 1937. It was a move that would seal their fate.

Piecing together the story from these artefacts has been poignant. The contents shed light and add a new dimension to their hideous ordeal. These artefacts added detail, colour and a narrative of which my mother hadn't been aware. She realised the effort her mother had gone to keep these documents. It allowed her to unlock her memory and start to speak about this part of her life.

Citizenship

The Honduras citizenship papers that could have been the passport to a safe haven – but arrived too late. The coded cards from the Resistance to the family in Switzerland and to my grandmother in Westerbork giving snippets of information about Jehudi in hiding. The detailed work cards from my grandparents in Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen. The notes indicating my grandfather's deteriorating health at the end of 1944. All these beg the question how they were able to muster the energy to work in these gruelling conditions. They were starving, poorly clad and suffering from disease. I think of the daily

roll calls in all weathers – the freezing winters, the blistering hot summers. The lack of sanitation. The pervasive disease. The lack of medical care. The unpredictability, the fear, the pain and suffering, the delicate balance between life and death.

Baby and beans

The tiny photograph of my uncle, Jehudi, which was smuggled into Westerbork in a bag of raw beans by the Dutch Resistance, has indescribable meaning for me. My grandparents handed over their 16-month-old son to the Dutch Resistance in December 1942. As a mother myself, I find it impossible to imagine what it must have been like to make that decision. I look at this photo and imagine how overwhelmed my grandmother must have been to receive this tangible, visual reminder that her son was still alive, safe and well. In the midst of the danger and brutality of Westerbork, this photograph must have been exceptionally precious to her.

New year greetings

The Rosh Hashanah card that my mother made and gave to her parents in Westerbork in 1943 is another piece of living history. I had no idea they were still able to mark Rosh Hashanah at this time and in these conditions. My mother was aged only eight and had missed several years of education. I've always wondered who helped her find this piece of card and colored pencils – and who helped with the message.

Dear Parents

I hope that next year we will be in better circumstances. In the meantime, Shana Tova (happy new year and may you be inscribed in the book of life).

Four months later, in January 1944, my mother and my grandparents were sent to Bergen-Belsen.



Starvation

Holding the three tin bowls from Bergen-Belsen that had belonged to my mother and my grandparents is chilling. Bergen-Belsen was a starva-

tion camp. The only food these bowls ever contained was the watery turnip soup the prisoners received each evening. Many people would have discarded these bowls after the war, eager to put the past behind them. I wonder what motivated my grandmother to keep them.

Letters home

There are numerous letters from my grandmother in Bergen-Belsen to her parents in Zurich. She is forced to write that they are all healthy and well and asks them to send food parcels. These letters were part of a terrible deception by the Gestapo. Reading them, I'm appalled at how they tried to dupe my great-grandparents, the Guttmanns. What must they have thought after the war when they realised the full horror their daughter and family experienced? It's unimaginable.



Matzah

There are the letters from my grandfather to his in-laws in Zurich from Biberach in March 1945. Despite all they had suffered, his concern was only to receive matzah in time for the beginning of Pesach. This evidence of an undimmed faith and allegiance to Jewish tradition continues to impress me. Many members of the family had died. He did not even know his son was alive at this point, but his Jewish identity remained solid.



Notes from Bergen-Belsen

First Aid

The leather medical kits they were each given in Biberach remain untouched and in pristine condition. This is hardly surprising – bandages and ointment were of no use to the dying, the starving and the thousands racked by typhus.

Back to school

We have some wonderful post-war photographs too. It's hard to select just one – but the 1947 photograph of my mother back at school in Amsterdam always touches me. Every child in the photograph is smiling. But what lies behind those smiles? What memories do they conceal? How many parents, siblings, aunts, uncle, cousins and grandparents have they lost? Each child

has either survived a concentration camp or been hidden. Yet the photo speaks also of hope for the future. These children have their lives ahead of them and the prospect of growing up in a better world.

The photograph of the Kanareks in Scheveningen in 1961 illustrates a new chapter in their lives.

It is a testament to their resilience that the members of this family rebuilt their lives – their resolve and determination for a new beginning. It has an added poignancy as, the next summer, my mother met my late father, Ralph Kohn, in Scheveningen, The Hague.

It's impossible to convey in words what it feels like to see and hold these documents and objects (now protected in archival slips) and feel that physical connection with the past.

It has brought my family history to life in a way I could never have imagined.

Delving into my mother's past has increased my sense of Jewish history and identity. It has also enormously increased my admiration and appreciation for her remarkable strength and resilience.

In spite of carrying the burden of a terrible past, my mother has managed to move forward, start afresh and create a family built on foundations of love and Jewish tradition.



Medical kit



Kanarek family, Amsterdam, August 1941



Class photo, Amsterdam, 1947



Scheveningen, 1961



My parents' civil wedding, Amsterdam, February 1963



My mother Zahava and I, in 2018