YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**ASARA BETEVET 5780**

**Seventy-Five Years Later: Remarks at a Kristallnacht Memorial Assembly in Bremen, Germany**

**Dr. Miriam Weitman**

My name is Miriam Weitman, and I live in the State of Israel, in Alon Shevut, a beautiful village near Jerusalem.

Seventy-five years ago, a train passed along the route of the railroad, which exists also today, just ninety minutes away from where we are standing now.

On that train was my grandmother, Martha Emanuel. She was 44 years old, and she was forced on the train with three of her eight children – her son Yona and the twins Baruch and Bella.

This train was a cargo train, which usually carried coal and cattle. But now 2,500 ill and hungry Jews – after awful years in Bergen-Belsen – were loaded on this train in terribly crowded and inhuman conditions.

On Saturday, April 14, 1945, my grandmother died on that train. Her body was taken off and placed on the side of the railroad track.

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I want to tell you today about my heroic grandmother and her wonderful family, and about the horrible journey on this train.

Let's start from the beginning.

About twenty-five years earlier, during World War I, my grandfather, Mordechai Emanuel, had served as a soldier in the German army. A few years later, Mordechai and Martha were married in the city of Hamburg, and there they raised their family.

In 1933, a few months after Hitler came to power, they realized that Germany was no longer a place for the Jews, and they all left Germany and moved to Holland. After the German occupation of Holland, life for the Jews became increasingly difficult. When the deportation of the Jews from Holland to camps began, the whole family hid – the parents and eight children – but after a few months, they were unfortunately caught and deported back to Germany, to Bergen-Belsen. Their youngest child, Bitya, was just three years old when the whole family arrived at the camp.

Bergen-Belsen was not an extermination camp, but a labor camp. The conditions were extremely difficult: malnutrition, overcrowding, unbearable living conditions, clothing that did not protect them against the wet and the cold, humiliation, cruelty, hours of standing in deadly roll calls, and very hard work – for twelve long hours, seven days a week. Wielding a heavy hammer and breaking huge stones by lifting the heavy hammer behind the back and swinging it down on the huge stones with full force – all day long, seven days a week.

But if the situation in Bergen-Belsen was terrible all the time, in the last half year it was worse than hell.

The Jews died one after another from starvation, cold, hard work, and illness. In the last three and a half months, nearly 35,000 Jews died in the camp (about 350 Jews each day). Among these were my grandfather and three of the children, including the youngest little girl, Bitya.

My grandmother Martha saw her beloved husband and three children dying in front of her eyes, and she remained alone with five ill and starving children.

As the British army approached Bergen-Belsen in April 1945, the camp commander tried to transfer the Jews that remained alive to extermination camps in the east. Three crowded trains left the camp, with about 2,500 Jews on each train. The first train arrived at the Theresienstadt camp. The second train was liberated on the way by the American army, and the American soldiers couldn't believe their eyes when they saw living skeletons coming out of the train.

The third train simply disappeared. No one knew where it was. Historians call this train "The Lost Train." This was the train that my grandmother and three of her children were on. The train traveled through Germany for fourteen long, awful days, going back and forth and constantly changing its route, as well as its destination, due to air attacks by the allies.

Water and food were not provided to the people on the train during the entire fourteen days. Nothing. Every day people died on the train. Whenever the train was forced to stop due to the bombings, the Jews would try to find some grass to eat or water near the railroad.

And on the train my grandmother was getting weaker and weaker by the day. On the fifth day of the awful journey, she died, lying on the cold floor of the train.

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I wonder what my grandmother's thoughts were in the last moments of her life on the cold floor of the train.

Did she think about her four family members who died in Bergen-Belsen one after the other just a few weeks before? Her noble and dear husband Mordechai, her nine-year-old beloved son Shalom, her five-year-old sweet daughter Bitya, and her eldest clever and wise son Elchanan?

Or maybe she was thinking about her two sons, Shlomo and Shmuel, who had remained in Bergen-Belsen? Shlomo and Shmuel were both were very ill. Did they remain in the camp? Were they also led away to the unknown? Were they still alive?

And maybe she thought of the fate that was awaiting her three hungry, sick, and weak children who were with her on the terrible train, where more and more people were dying every day?

And maybe... maybe, while she was lying on the cold floor of the train, she dreamed in the last minutes of her life about the Land of Israel, the Promised Land. There, in Bergen-Belsen camp she told her children that they have to know they have only one place to go and to live – the Land of Israel.

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After my grandmother's body was removed from the train to the side of the tracks, the train kept going…

At the end, the train was liberated by Russian soldiers near Troebitz, a small village in the east of Germany. The three children on the train – Yona, Baruch, and Bella – were so weak that they could not go to the village. They remained on the train, sick, weak, and starving.

After recovering somewhat, Yona, Baruch, and Bella tried to get information about their two remaining brothers in Bergen-Belsen camp, and after many weeks they learned that Shmuel had survived, but Shlomo had not.

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I am Miriam, the daughter of Yona, who was on that train. After the Holocaust, Yona immigrated to Israel, and I am his eldest daughter. My father named me Miriam as a kind of translation of his mother's name, Martha.

Of a family of ten, only four remained.

On Holocaust Remembrance Day, Jews light six memorial candles in memory of the six million Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust. The six candles also remind me of the six victims of my father's family – Grandpa Mordechai Emanuel, Grandma Martha, and their four children, Elchanan, Shlomo, Shalom, and Bitya.

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When my grandmother was taken off the train, her son Yona tried to reach her and bury her, or at least cover her body with some soil. But he was so weak and sick that he couldn't walk, nor could he crawl. And so, my grandmother's body was left by the railroad uncovered and unburied.

About ten years ago, sixty-five years after the train journey, we discovered a document stating that my grandmother, as well as others whose bodies were removed from the train that same day, were buried by the British army. We were deeply moved to know our grandmother was buried, but we had no idea where to find her grave.

After lengthy and fascinating inquiries that included correspondence with German historians and reading countless documents in the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., as well as archives in England, Germany, and Israel, we found out that my grandmother is buried in a forest near Lunenburg, just a few steps from where her body was removed from the train – just 90 minutes away from where we are standing now.

About eight years ago, we all traveled to Lunenburg – her son Baruch, who was with her on the train, about ten grandchildren, and even a great-granddaughter. We set up a headstone on which we put the names of all the twelve Jews whose bodies were taken off the train on that day with my grandmother.

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My grandmother, as well as my grandfather and all their children, were heroes. Their most impressive heroism was their ability to continue to live as proud Jews in Bergen-Belsen. They even tried to help others. It is unbelievable that they were able in such terrible conditions to think not only about themselves and their survival, but also about other people's needs. It is remarkable and impressive that they gave thought to the commandments and laws of the Torah and tried to keep Jewish tradition in a situation in which it was natural to think only of how to obtain food and how to survive. We admire the amazing spiritual strength demonstrated when they decided in such a horrible reality to get up before all the others to say their daily prayers and to avoid eating bread during eight days of Passover. These are just some examples of how the family preserved their divine image during these horrific times.

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I came here to Bremen in order to tell my family story, which is part of the much larger story of the Jewish People in the last century. Thank God, today we have a home in the land of Israel, something my grandparents could only dream of. The memory of everything they went through during those years of the Holocaust strengthens us to build our state and to make the world a better place.

My father Yona wrote many articles in order to make the world and the people better. He also wrote a book, *Dignity to Survive*, which recounts the family's heart-wrenching story during the Holocaust. He always emphasized the importance of remembering the Holocaust with the purpose of learning that we have to always remember our values and be more sensitive and kind to others.

I appreciate the fact that today there are many German people who understand the importance of remembering the Holocaust's victims and who fight against evil. It is exciting to see the good relationship and cooperation between the Jewish community here in Bremen and the municipality and the state authorities.

I would like to thank all the supporters of the Jewish communities here in Germany, as well as all the supporters of State of Israel – the homeland of the Jews and the only place where we can live independently in a democratic state and feel safe.

I want to thank God for giving me and my family the privilege, the honor, and the opportunity, to live in that wonderful country – the State of Israel.

Thank you all.

[Dr. Miriam Weitman serves as a nationwide advisor for high schools at the Ministry of Education. She also lectures at Herzog College and teaches at the women's Daf Yomi class in Alon Shevut. She is married to Rav Zeev Weitman (Yeshivat Har Etzion machzor 4), rabbi of Alon Shevut.

Dr. Weitman was invited by the President of the Parliament of Bremen, Germany, to speak at their Kristallnacht ceremony on Nov. 8, 2019. This annual ceremony is held adjacent to the monument for the victims slaughtered near the Bremen synagogue, engulfed in flames and entirely destroyed on that night in 1939. These remarks were delivered in English, with copies of their translation into German distributed to the hundreds who were in attendance.]