JUST A SHOE

By Stevi Golden Plotnik

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Written and illustrated by Stevi Golden Plotnik

For my grandmother, my Savta Bracha.

Prisoner 51000, Auschwitz, August 1943-January 1945.

The photographs in this book were provided through the 2004 March of the Living program.

For additional information, please visit www.marchoftheliving.com

Author's Note

This book tells the truth. It is intended as a transition between fairytales and textbooks. Please take care not to leave your children without a chance to be curious. They will ask questions, and with your support and guidance, they will find answers. Please help them. If you are looking for answers, there are some helpful discussion topics and resources listed in the back.

Thank you for choosing to show your children the truth. Because of you, they will one day do the same.

Excuse me?

Hello.

You, young child.

Yes you!

With the hungry eyes that peer beyond the glass. Can you see me?

I am right here. I am a lonely shoe.

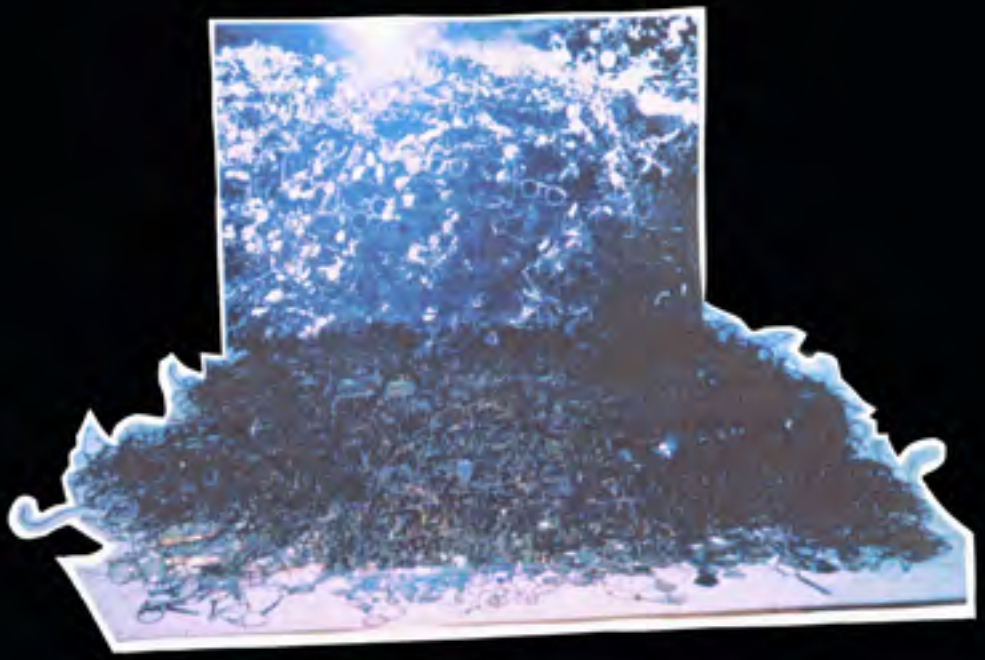
I am a lonely shoe in a pile behind the glass

at this astonishing place

called Auschwitz.

I know there is a great deal to be seen here, and I understand if you must be on your way.
Perhaps to the fields fertilized with tears?
Or to the electric fences where some finally found peace?

There are rooms and rooms filled with suitcases and pots, prayer shawls and glasses.
All like me, taken from someone without reason or care.



You are still here!

If I had a mouth you would see my smile.

So many people have walked by my glass.

They see this pile, this mountain,

but very few see me inside of it.

I know you can see me.

Oh, I look shameful. See my dirt and holes? Once I was not so. No, I once had bold leather and a sharp sole. I belonged to a boy, a boy about your age.

I took him many places.

I often took my boy running. My boy loved to run. Yes, he would run to school, through the park, and back home before Mama called for dinner. He could run and play with his friends until the stars shone on Warsaw. One day, my boy's friends ran elsewhere, to play with the boys their Mamas and Papas would allow.

Soon, very soon, it was not only Mamas and Papas making the rules. My boy's country, like many others in Europe, collapsed under the weight of a growing German government. This government, the NAZI party, made Jewish hatred their code, and though my boy was a Jew, he still ran. He ran when he was forced to change schools. He ran when his Mama sewed a yellow star on each of his coats and sweaters. And he ran home before dark, before the stars shone on Warsaw, avoiding the curfew searchlight.

kauft nur bei Deutschen!

Jude

Das Gesetz unterscheidet:
Wer ist Deutschblütiger?
Wer ist Jude?
Als Jude gilt auch:
Als Jude gilt auch:
Als Jude gilt auch:
Als Jude gilt auch:
Welche Eheschließungen sind verboten?
Verboten!
§

Kauft nicht bei Juden, kauft in deutschen Geschäften!
Kauft nicht bei Juden, kauft in deutschen Geschäften!
Kauft nicht bei Juden, kauft in deutschen Geschäften!

My boy's home was lovely. It was warm and alive with Mama's cooking, Papa's violin, and his young sisters' laughter. My boy was the oldest, and helped with the packing when his family was forced to leave. Papa said a house does not make a home, and my boy tried to believe him as they walked through the streets of Warsaw to join thousands of others in the ghetto at the heart of the city. The apartment they found was intended for four, though they lived with thirteen. My boy shared a mattress with four others he did not know.

The ghetto was miserable with buildings that crumbled like its prisoners from disease and hunger. Some lost their battle, though they fought with might, and my boy would watch as their bodies were carried away. He stood with many, some too tired to mourn. When they carried his baby sister, my boy ran through the streets, trying to feel almost as free as he once had, until he reached the walls. Those brick ghetto walls, that stood menacingly tall, blocking out the city, the world, that had turned its back.

With spring came rain and an end to the bitter cold. Papa was taken away to work, the Germans said, though the papers skating the streets said otherwise. The people in the ghetto spoke words my boy had never heard before. Labour camp? Gas chamber? He did not understand, and would run down the streets, over the words, and through the pain of the ghetto. My boy had become strong, and when a man called Mordechai asked him to run packages, my boy did so with pride, though he did not know the word "resistance."

Standing at deportation with Mama and his sister, my boy carried the heart of a soldier and waited to begin the uprising. When he saw the signal, he would throw the stones that filled his pocket and scream his new words of power and freedom in the faces of the guards. He felt the breeze of hope on his fist as he turned to attack one guard holding a woman and her young daughter.

My boy stopped. It was Mama looking at him from over the guard's arm, her eyes wailing as she and his sister were dragged to the train. It took no thought. My boy dropped his stone and ran after them. He left behind the ghetto in Warsaw that would resist the soldiers for nearly a month.

The journey was short, though the suffocating cattle car made days run slow, and hope dry. Finally the doors heaved open and the car's prisoners collectively breathed the air that was heavy, dense with smoke that had not been created by wood. Dogs and soldiers barked together, baring guns and teeth like prized jewels. My boy, Mama, his sister, and the others leapt from the train and joined the crowd through the gate with a sign showing words my boy could not read. Entering the camp, they matched the stares of prisoners pausing briefly to acknowledge the new shipment. For a moment, a quick glance, my boy caught a soft face that brought violin songs to his heart.

His gaze and memory disrupted, my boy was shoved into a line of men, leaving Mama and his sister in the women's line. A white-coated man examined them one at a time, then pointed left or right—only his gaze determined their destinies. Sent to the left, my boy noticed, were those too old, too young, or too weak to work. He spotted his sister among them. They filed into a building with a red smokestack that stood as tall and proud as the men and women who approached it. My boy finally understood. They were the source of the smoke. People. Jews like him. His heart grew numb. The door closed behind them; he caught one last look at his sister in the doorway.

ARBEIT MACHT FREI

51000 was printed on my boy's arm, and he rubbed the place where the needle had stung as he and the other men and boys were stripped of their clothes and hair. Dressed in stripes, they followed the guard to the barracks, and crawled in, four to a shelf, for mere hours of sleep. My boy found a spot near a window, and slid into the bottom shelf next to a man who moaned in his sleep.

When sun breaks through the window, my boy is dreaming of home, where his sisters laugh, Mama cooks, and Papa plays violin. He is woken by more barking, and directed to the showers to sort belongings stolen from prisoners sent to death. Amongst the precious items my boy meets other boys, alone like him. One wishes he had never been Jewish. One asks why God has abandoned his people. One violently curses and weeps, having just found his Mama's blouse in the pile.

My boy says nothing. With each word that reaches his tongue comes the urge to scream and run from the cold room, into the sunlight, then back to a world that makes sense. But he knows the world will never again make sense. So my boy sorts in silence, and waits until night, when he can dream of home.

His knees and ribs extend through the thin layer of remaining muscle. His eyes are tired and stamped into a face that has aged years, though only months have passed at the camp. They have been marching for days without destination, and my boy never loses step though some collapse, and others are shot. In rows of six, the prisoners march through forests, down paths, and across bridges in the snow so white it burns their eyes. Whispers swim through the crowd: the allies are here, these are the final days, keep marching and you will be rescued. And with each gunshot, each body left in the snow, my boy tries harder to believe them. Returning back to the camp, a few dozen fewer, they hear the crashes of barracks being hurriedly dissembled. From amongst the workers, my boy hears a whistle—the song that plays every evening accompanied by laughter and cooking. He looks up to see the face that greeted him when he entered the camp so long ago. Papa's eyes shine as my boy marches by the wreckage, feeling warm in the winter chill.

That night, on the shelf, Papa holds my boy close as they pray for the guard who found him a place in the barracks. They are happy, and talk only of home, and the future, and the world that could also be happy again.

They never talk of the end.

I leave my boy at the doors of the gas chamber. The guard barks at them to undress and pile their clothes in the corner. I am lost beneath a grey shawl, but catch a final glimpse of my boy, white-knuckled and grasping Papa's hand, standing naked and bare. Tears fill his eyes that pierce and scream, and he joins the others in a room. I cannot describe what is to come, but I can imagine.

I imagine my boy, terrified and lonely, though surrounded on all sides by bodies like his own. Some cry out, some pray, and some stand in silence as the doors are bolted, and the cans fall from above. He screams for Mama, Papa, and sisters until his air is replaced with the blue gas that embraces his lungs, freeing my boy for his final run.

And myself? I am taken and sorted by boys like mine and moved to a cellar to await a new foot. It does not come. One week has passed. Tanks parade through the camp just as they have so many times before. Though these tanks are rather odd. They are not followed by gunshots and barking. No, these tanks are friendly, and pave valleys of freedom in the dirt trod by millions of shoes like me.

Mama and several others leave the camp that day, with smiles that mask their hoarse questions. Where do I go? Who is left? What will I do? There are no answers yet, though they come in time, some bringing relief, some bringing remorse. But one question remains from that winter day that the survivors may ask forever:

Why?

Why was I chosen to survive while others perished?

What is that? There.

Is that a tear in your eye?

How I wish I could shed just one.

Oh, please child, please cry. Cry for the millions of children just like you who will never cry again. Their tears were dried by the guns, the gas, the hate that ended their journeys.

You still have a journey.

May it take you to the farthest ends of your dreams.

And may it take you to others who do not know this story.

And may you tell them, teach them what you know now.

Yes child.

But why listen to me?

I am just a shoe.

Just a lonely shoe in a pile behind the glass
at this astonishing place
called Auschwitz.

Some topics for discussion…

- This story is about one boy's journey through the Holocaust. Do you know anything about the Holocaust?
- There were 1.5 million children killed in the Holocaust. How many children are in your school, your community? How many do you know that are Jewish?
- Let's look at the pictures, what do you think is happening in each one? Which ones stand out to you?
- Who do you think is taking these pictures? What might they be thinking?
- What other objects might have stories to tell?
- The NAZI party hated people who were different. Do people still think this way?
- What can you do to make sure a tragedy like the Holocaust never happens again?

A few resources…

- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: www.ushmm.org
- Yad Vashem: www.yadvashem.org
- Children's Books about the Holocaust: http://www.holocaust-trc.org/chldbook.htm

A reflection on "Just a Shoe"...

Writing a picture book is a literary manifestation of a profound experience. I have carried the weight of a desperate need to make others understand my experience on the March of the Living. People often asked me what I gained from my week in Poland, visiting thriving cities with their echoing ghettos, and concentration camps that still smell of horror. They expect my response to be something along the lines of "a new appreciation for my Jewish roots" or "a duty to tell others so that this atrocity never happens again." Neither of these suffice. One cannot communicate the experience of being a participant on the March using words only. All that can be said is what I did and what I saw; a laundry list of events. I was never able to explain how I felt, or how I feel now, after.

Really, the only person who understood was my grandmother, whom I had the privilege of visiting in Israel days after following her footsteps in Auschwitz. Though I had openly discussed the Holocaust with her before, I had new questions, new insight that brought me to a deeper level. Which bunk did she sleep on? Did she wear blue or grey stripes? Did she ever notice this tree, or that hill? Losing myself in the Auschwitz labyrinth made me not only a witness, not only a survivor, but also a victim. Her eyes were my eyes; her feet, my feet; her heart my heart.

Years later, in the fall of 2007, a university course acted like a magnifying glass, in that it focused all my pent up energy to transmit my feelings into a way of communicating my experience: a picture book. Based on my journals from the March, and my love of children's literature, the story was already written. I was lucky that the professor's approach was entirely self-exploratory. Indeed, it allowed me to flourish. Because I felt so unhindered, I had the freedom and motivation to express what I really needed to. Creating "Just a Shoe" was truly therapeutic. I released something I didn't even know was there, but had been silently chewing at me for three and a half years.