SARA NUSS-GALLES

Bergen-Belsen Camp Reunion

Childhood at Bergen-Belsen's displaced persons camp

I stand in what feels like a sacred space at the Morris Museum in New Jersey, peering into the black-and-white aerial image of Bergen-Belsen. I am trying to place myself. As a child I lived there in the latter 1940s in what my parents called the *Lager*—German for "camp." It is a benign word, "camp," and this one was unlike the camps my future American friends experienced in their youth. No T-shirts, baseball caps, bug juice, or s'mores over the wood fire for my siblings, me, or the thousands of others that sojourned in the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp after World War II.

I stare at the drawing of Bergen-Belsen. Did I walk this snaking pathway, did I lay eyes on this ash pit, that cluster of buildings? What about those guard towers or the northern stretch of fields? Is that where my brother Terry smeared my sister, Eve, entirely in mud? I recall hearing that the mud dried so hard my mother had to chip it off Eve. Where did my oldest brother, Hershel, take his ORT training class on fixing engines? What about the sewer, or was it a well, that Myraleh—our overwrought neighbor's son—fell into. His accident unleashed emergency vehicles and pent-up hysteria. And after Myraleh was rescued from the depths, we kids were threatened within an inch of our lives. Such was my parents' version of love—following all their losses—not tender, but brusque and more apt to be scary than reassuring. As if they couldn't manage softness and remain intact within their unnumbered skin. Most of those whom my parents had held precious were lost—rounded up, caught in the midst of fleeing, gathered in the Warsaw ghetto, burned in a theater, sent to one or another labor or death camp. We never knew exactly. Tenderness was erased from my parents' emotional vocabulary; perhaps that helped their survival. More important for the moment, however, was that we kids were mad at Myraleh. His accident had curtailed our freedom.

The exhibition I am viewing, *Fourteen Stations/Hey Yud Dalet*, has just been installed in the museum, but I have lived it for nearly a decade. It began when my husband, Arie Galles, came running into my cubicle at the Jewish community newspaper where I was on staff. On entering an octagonal gallery space in the building I worked in, he'd had a vision: a suite of aerial views of concentration camps. Hadn't people repeatedly asked, "Where was God?" Well, God was said to be everywhere, especially above. So when/if the almighty looked down on these killing grounds, what was visible? Surely, these views existed, Arie said. He would find them and draw them in black and white.

Arie grabbed paper from my desk and sketched the exhibit—*Fourteen Stations*; it would be in keeping with the Fourteen Stations of the Cross this Jewish boy had studied in Catholic school lessons when his family returned to live in Poland again after the war. Yes, Jews did that, return to what had become more cemetery than home. And, also, "stations" to commemorate railroad stations that were so integral to the Nazis' extermination plan. How else could the "Final Solution" mechanism function so efficiently—millions of people had to be transported to slaughter, all while a war raged.

My husband, whom I had met at an exhibition of his then-exuberant colorful aerial landscape paintings at a gallery in Chicago in 1979, was in a fever as he explained his idea to me. He pointed to walls, laid out drawings, as the conception came about in mere minutes. Little did we know. For ten years he conducted research at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and College Park, Maryland, examining thousands and thousands of aerial reconnaissance negatives and documents. At England's Keele University and the Royal Air Force archives; he worked by telephone, mail, fax, and most recently email with scholars, clerks, librarians, cartographers, and finally a professor from the University of Warsaw who flew over and photographed Gross-Rosen, the missing image. The professor accepted payment only for the rental of the airplane, nothing for his effort.

Arie mastered charcoal, Pink Pearl eraser, Conté crayon, soaking and preparing fine watercolor paper, bending wrought iron, building crates. And I helped. Our son and daughter went to college, graduated, moved to the West Coast to follow their own dreams. I continued writing. I went into and through menopause. After a long illness, Arie's mother died in 1997. My father became ill and passed away in the fall of the new millennium, 2000. I wrote. My stories recounted my childhood in America—holidays, food, games, friends. But I never wrote about the war. The war was in our home—as Arie hovered above the camps, I was his companion.

And now, I stand in the octagonal-shaped gallery built to exhibit the completed *Fourteen Stations*. Objectively, (can I possibly be objective) the most beautiful and terrifying drawing is of Babi Yar, the killing field in a ravine outside Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. Ravines formed by nature are jagged and sharp. As a result of Nazi attempts to eradicate all signs of the atrocity, the dynamited and raked killing fields of Babi Yar are gently sloping and beckoning. The drawing of Gross-Rosen, the last one Arie completed in 2002, is frighteningly beautiful, a virtuosity of expertise in countless shadings of charcoal.

I peer into the textural drawing of Bergen-Belsen. There, a little Sara played, ate, ran, jumped, and trailed her siblings. There, I watched our neighbor shake her baby's diaper out the barrack window into the weedy field. There, my parents opened a *Kantine* (convenience store) where a small, intense, brown-haired imp with a large forehead and a serious mien—an *alt Gemiet*, an "old soul," my parents called me—stood outside pulling customers in. There, I caught Mr. Piatnik stealing cigarettes from the *Kantine*. Years later, sitting on our front porch on the north side of Chicago, I learned that this was a ruse. My father put Piatnik up to palming the cigarettes just so I could catch him.

Arie and I have never visited the camps. "Of course, you know, when you stand there . . . ," people often say to me. I listen to them and I respond, "No, I don't know, we haven't been back there." Our journeys to concentration camps have been through aerial views, hovering above, seeing perhaps what God might have seen, unwilling or helpless to act.

Born in Kyrgyzstan to Jewish Polish refugees who fled the Nazis, **Sara Nuss-Galles** mines the telling details of daily life. Her family lived in the Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp after WWII before coming to the U.S. A guest columnist on NPR's *Marketplace*, her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, literary magazines, and anthologies. She also writes humor and bawdy tales to share the joy of life.