

Lives of Color
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Survivor Testimony: Ursula Levy

Life is full of choices: Yes or no. Stay or leave. Live or die. We can choose to shadow our aspirations with negativity or highlight them with brightness. We can paint our future with the darkness of despair or with the vibrancy of belief.

In April 1939, a young Jewish girl, Ursula Levy, boarded a train in Germany with her older brother, George, to a new life where their survival would ultimately be determined by their strength, faith, and hope. At the time, Ursula was a month shy of four years old. She did not understand that antisemitism was the reason her father and uncle had been sent to a concentration camp and treated so badly that they both died shortly after being released. She could not know how scared her mother must have been when she decided to send her children into hiding in Holland to keep them safe. Ursula only knew that she and George ended up at St. Jacobus, a children's home at a convent in Eersel, Holland. There, she sang songs and played games with the Dutch children, oblivious to the activities of the ruthless Nazis who would soon threaten her life and the lives of those she loved.

It was May 10, 1940, when Ursula heard planes flying overhead. She grew excited, not realizing that those planes signaled the German invasion of Holland. The Nazis had taken over. The Jewish children hiding in the convent were eventually discovered, and in April 1943, Ursula and George were deported. They went first to the Vught concentration camp and later were transferred to Westerbork and then to Bergen-Belsen.

To Ursula, most of the other concentration camp prisoners seemed void of color, hope, and life. But at Bergen-Belsen, there was one group of prisoners who inspired Ursula. "I was so impressed by a group of French women who were so animated and full of life... They would dress in red, white, and blue colors," she recalls. These women rebelled against their captors and a life of isolation and death by wearing vibrant, beautiful colors. For Ursula, these colors were splashes of strength, faith, and hope in a place full of misery and desolation.

During her time in the concentration camps, Ursula lived with lice and constant hunger, surrounded by piles of corpses and fellow prisoners who were barely alive, but still she survived. How? Her life was never vacant of color; it was painted with the certainty that she and her brother would live. "We always had hope that we would get out. I never doubted that we would survive," Ursula insists in her video testimony. Like the French women with their bright clothing, Ursula chose to respond to her horrific situation with fortitude and the belief in a brighter future.

It was 1989 when my father chose to live vibrantly. After growing up amidst war and narrowly escaping a bombing in Beirut, my father made the heart-wrenching decision to leave Lebanon and his family and travel to the United States. He arrived with \$1,000 and little knowledge of the English language. He worked two jobs, went to college full time, and graduated in four years without ever taking out a student loan. My father painted over the conflict in his world with courage, confidence, and hope for a better future.

The French women at Bergen-Belsen, Ursula Levy, and my father all chose to respond to hatred and despair by refusing to give in to it. Despite the danger that threatened to overshadow them, they painted their lives with the brightness of strength, faith, and hope. Their stories should inspire us as we choose the colors with which we will paint our future. Will we allow our future to disappear into the shadows of fear and animosity? Or will we illuminate it with colors that crowd out hatred, wash over evil, and transform our world?