



AGAPLESION  
DIAKONIEKLINIKUM ROTENBURG

## Aktive Solidarität

**„I was petrified of coming to Rotenburg ... I was afraid of the Germans ... of the German language ...“**

Elzbieta Chylinska, née Wojnowska, born in 1935, is a patient who underwent a total knee replacement in the Diakoniekrankenhaus in Rotenburg (Wümme), Germany, in September 2007. This medical treatment was organized within the framework of the „Aktive Solidarität“ campaign, founded by Wolfram Neumann, Professor of Orthopaedics at the University of Magdeburg, in conjunction with the „Polnisch-Deutsche Aussöhnung“ foundation. This campaign provides free therapy to former slave labourers and survivors from extermination camps in 80 participating hospitals in Germany. The campaign is supported politically and logistically by the foundation under public law „Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft“. Several patients from Poland were treated in Rotenburg over the last few years, including two former detainees from Auschwitz.



Before departure to her home country after a two-week stay in the Diakoniekrankenhaus, Elzbieta Chylinska felt able to talk to us about experiences from her childhood.

In 1939 at the time of the German invasion of Poland, the family Wojnowska lived in Warsaw, the mother was a nurse. Both parents became members of the Polish resistance movement. In 1941 - Elzbieta was six-year-old - her father was arrested. He was active as a wireless operator in the Armia Krajowa, which represented the biggest resistance movement during Second World War, and he was shot on July 17, 1941 in Palmiry near Warsaw together with thousands of opponents of the fascist regime.

Before the execution mother and daughter were interrogated several times by the Gestapo. Again and again the discharge of the father was offered, but only on condition that names of members of the resistance movement were handed over. In order to increase pressure on the family the little brother of Elzbieta, a three year old blond-haired and blue-eyed boy, was taken away by the Gestapo. Elzbieta never saw him again for the rest of her life. In the Gestapo headquarters, her mother was cautioned by a German about the imminent imprisonment and deportation of the family; at the same time she was informed about the execution of her husband. Therefore the mother and daughter did not return to their home and hid in different places at friends and relatives in Wola, a district of Warsaw, from 1941 to 1944. The mother continued

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her conspiratorial activities in the resistance movement, with Elzbieta's help. After the beginning of the Warsaw Uprising at August 1, 1944, both escaped to the centre of Warsaw and witnessed unimaginable cruelties in the 63 days enduring struggle for every street and every house. The German occupation troops committed mass murder of the civil population, 150.000 - 225.000 victims are estimated to have been killed. After SS troops surrounded their house, Elzbieta together with her mother and her grandmother were taken away to a place, where Jews and invalids or the weaker ones were shot directly. The remaining people were led away to a railway station, where transport to Krakow and a discharge was promised to them. Elzbieta was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau via railway in freight carriages usually used for transporting livestock, together with her mother, her grandmother and many more. Other civilians as well as members of the Armia Krajowa were taken away to Mauthausen-Gusen, to Ravensbrück or to the prison camp "Strafgefangenenlager" XIB in Fallingb. Elzbieta witnessed the death of her grandmother, who committed suicide in despair with a high-voltage electrical fence immediately after the arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

After the selection by the SS on the ramp the 9-year-old girl was separated from her mother. Infants and young children under 3 were murdered directly after their arrival. Even older children were intended for extermination, since they were not able to perform forced labour. At first the newcomers had to wait for several hours. Elzbieta escaped the homicide initially due to the failure of overworked equipment used as part of the extermination process, which kept breaking down as Jews from all over Europe arrived daily.

Together with hundreds of children aged from 3 to 14 from different countries, she was locked up in a block after a two-week quarantine. In the camp there was terrible hunger and it was bitterly cold. The morning roll call took place daily at 6 a.m., and each child had to name its' camp number. If a child was flagging or blacked out during the roll call, they were pulled out of the row and beaten. In case they were not able to rise again afterwards they were beaten to death and burnt in the crematorium. After each roll call there were many bodies laying on the ground, fainting occurred commonly due to malnutrition and poor clothes. Food consisted of, black coffee, bread and soup from beets or potato peel. The children were prohibited from speaking in the block. Outside of the barracks, which were surrounded by barbed wire, it was dangerous to attract the attention of the camp guards patrolling with dogs. Also inside the barracks children died every day from the consequences of food deprivation and infections; their bodies had to be brought out in the morning.

Soon it was known to the children that they would be killed by gas and burnt in the crematorium. Once Elzbieta was taken to the gas chamber together with a group of children, surviving only because of a technical breakdown in the release of Zyklon B.

The children's block was visited several times by SS doctor Josef Mengele, who was searching for victims for his infamous experiments. After taking off the children's clothes, Mengele made a selection: Sick or weak children, and those who were assigned to have the appearance of a „Muselmann“ had to set out for the gas chamber immediately. Together with 20 other children Elzbieta was transferred to the experimental block; all of them received injections by Mengele into the back for a period of three days, whereupon half of this group died. In the end Elzbieta was one of three children, who survived the otherwise lethal experiments on humans.

In 1944 at Christmas Elzbieta succeeded in securing a secret meeting with her mother with the aid of others, and she received bread and herring. Information concerning the Red Army offensive raised the hope of survival for Elzbieta for the first time.



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In January 1945, Elzbieta was liberated by the Red Army, together with a few other children left back in the camp, and they received medical support. Elzbieta suffered from ulcerations due to dog bites, bilateral deafness and loss of speech. From January to October 1945 she strayed all over the country. In December 1945 she was retrieved by her mother, who had also survived the extermination camp and the following so-called death march - an evacuation of the camp in the face of the advancing Red Army - to a children's home in Gorzów Wielkopolski. She has lived there ever since. In 1950, when she was 15 years old, Elzbieta attended primary school for the first time. She was educated later as a nurse. Since 1970, Elzbieta Chylinska has been generally disabled due to the severe damage incurred to her health during her time at Auschwitz. She is the last remaining person out of 40 children coming from Auschwitz, who found a home in Gorzów.

Elzbieta Chylinska was not able to talk for many years about the experiences of her childhood, even to her own two children. During a school excursion to Auschwitz, a teacher clarified the fate of her mother to her daughter for the first time.

*Michael Schulte*

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