

BEN HELFGOTT

Before World War II the Helfgott family led a happy life in a small Polish border town, Piotrkow, where Ben Helfgott made his mark among the young boys. His sister Mala recalled, almost sixty years later: 'Ben was very popular with his friends and always a leader. I remember one day, in Piotrkow before the war, coming across a group of boys and one of them saying, Don't start with her, she is Ben Helfgott's sister.'

However, the family's feelings of security collapsed when in September 1939, the Nazi's stormed into the country. Ben – not yet 10 years old – saw the full horrors of the occupation firsthand as the Nazi brutality accelerated with murder, violence and terror.

A month later, Hitler's Nazi's herded the Jews into the first ghetto in occupied Europe. Ben registered at the glass factory in his hometown to work in August 1942, aged 12. It was at the height of the deportation and, as he later recalled, there were rumours that if one had a job assisting the war effort of the Third Reich, one would not be sent away. "We did not know where Jews were taken – we heard stories of gas chambers, but who could believe it? It was beyond our comprehension."

The man in charge of his work unit – Mr Janota – treated him brutally and beat him constantly. Every year at a certain time Mr Janota used to borrow a horse and cart from a friend of Ben's father. This time though, Ben's father was at his friends' house when Janota came to borrow the horse. When his father recognized Janota's name he asked him why he behaved so beastly towards his son. After this exchange, the horse-owner didn't want to lend Janota the horse and cart. Ben's father, who had always been generous of spirit, persuaded him to let Janota have the horse and cart for the day. Five weeks later, on the 14th of October 1942, the deportation of the Jews from Piotrkow to the death camp Treblinka began. Within one week out of 24,500 Jews, 22,000 were deported to certain death. On the last day of the deportation, the cattle trains were not filled to capacity with human cargo. As the glass factory was near the railway station, SS guards marched into the factory and rounded up anyone whom they thought was Jewish. When Ben was stopped, he insisted that he was a Pole, but the SS continued to question him. At that moment Mr Janota came to his rescue, confirming that he was a Pole. Janota lied to the SS men, risking his own life and saving the boy.

Or was it, as Ben asked himself later, his father's example of tolerance and understanding that had saved him?

The horrors of the Holocaust continued, and a few days before the end of the war Ben's father was shot, when he tried to escape to freedom from one of the death marches. He was thirty-eight years old.

Ben was sent to a labour camp but miraculously survived. He was weak and emaciated when he was liberated from the camp Theresienstadt at the close of the war in 1945, 15 years old.

Together with some other survivors he was sent to England. He soon took up weight lifting and Ben Helfgott is the only known survivor of a Nazi Concentration Camp to compete in the Olympic Games. Within a few years, he was winning local championships and becoming British middleweight weightlifting champion and record holder. He captained the British Olympic Weightlifting Teams of 1956 and 1960.

Ben went to University to study economics, married, had three boys and ended up in business; today he is retired.

In 1995 he was elected to the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame. Ben Helfgott has devoted himself to the welfare of those young men and women who had come with him from the hell of Europe.





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Northwood Holocaust Memorial Day Events
PO Box 288
Northwood
HA6 9BT

T: 01923 448 006
F: 01923 820357
E: enquiries@northwoodhmd.org.uk
www: northwoodhmd.org.uk
Facebook Group: Northwood HMD Pass It On