



Video Story Transcript

Remembering Lisa Derman

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://youtu.be/DddvI0dRdeQ>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

For 20 years, I was artistic director of the Illinois Storytelling Festival, which is now in its 25th year. We started in 1984 and very soon in our history, we became committed to the idea that we needed to have elders telling their life stories. Not professional story tellers, just people who had lived interesting lives and had something to say. Civilian story tellers, I always called them.

So that started with some of my uncles and aunts who lived in Spring Grove and then we expanded over the years, and we included anyone we could find with an interesting story and, so, some of our most notable years were when we featured some of the original Tuskegee Airmen who came and told us the stories of their experiences in World War II.

And in 2002 we had invited Holocaust survivors and camp liberators to come and tell in what we called our elders concert or our traditions tent with the idea that almost every family has some kind of storytelling tradition, almost anyone who has walked on this earth has some body of stories that they tell about their life's experience.

So, it was Sunday afternoon, and Lisa Derman was our storyteller, a Holocaust survivor. She had escaped Poland in her teens, was a resistance fighter during World War II, and she and her husband Aaron had come that warm July day. Lisa had been very active; in fact, she is one of the key people who had lobbied the state legislature in Springfield. I believe Illinois was the first state to require Holocaust Studies, at all middle school and high school levels.

So, a real celebrity, a real power house. She had told the story thousands of times and she told it to us that day. Things started out on a great note; we had a piece of music that Jim Pfitzer a pianist played on a portable piano off stage that was music composed in the ghettos, lyrics and music composed in the ghettos during World War II. It had been translated by Bresnick Perry, another storyteller who was there that same day. There was a real sense of love, all things coming together that day.

And Lisa told her story. In a village in Poland where she and her family lived that was occupied first by German soldiers and then they noticed that a new group of soldiers came with different uniforms and that was the SS, or the equivalent of the SS; I'm not completely sure.

And then the extermination began. And she and her sisters escaped the first wave of it. She talked of running through the woods and hearing the shots and not being sure what they were, and then coming upon a scene in a clearing where 10,000 villagers were machine gunned in seven hours, she said. Her mother, and I believe one of her brothers, were among the group who died that day.

But she and her sister escaped because, while many turned them away, there was a particular Christian woman when her and her sister came to the door of the Christian part of village, she opened the door and said, "You don't need to tell me why you are here; I know why you are here. God has sent you to the right place." And she hid them in the spring works under the hide-a-bed.

And that's how Lisa and her sister survived that first encounter, and at that point she looked at us and she said out to the audience: "There will be a time when all of you will have to stand up and do what is right. The call will come. And you must care and stand up and do what's right. I may not be here much longer," she said, "but my story must go on."

Well moments after that, when she was literally describing her escape and she was, Aaron her husband who was sitting next to her that day in Spring Grove at our storytelling festival, he was just a teenager, that day that they escaped from Poland, that day Aaron was on top of the train car, and Lisa was waiting to catch the next train. Aaron had gotten up on the train, and other people who were helping them escape, there was a Gentile who had organized this.

Lisa said, "I was waiting there, the trains were coming, and I knew, I looked, and I could see the last train, the last car, was coming. I was the last one to grab on to the car. Aaron and others were up on the top, and I had to make a decision that I had to grab one of these, but there was no ladder. But I jumped on that side of the car anyway."

So she was holding on, apparently to the door latch, and she said, "I didn't know what was happening. I thought I might die." But she kind of smiled when she remembered. She smiled, "When I heard footsteps, they were coming back for me" or words to that effect, and then she just sort of stopped and put her hand on her chest, looked and Aaron and said, "I hope I'm not having a heart attack," and then she just nodded her head, and it was over.

It was that sudden and that peaceful. And then we had a fire man, a paramedic, chief of the fire department of Spring Grove in front row and they started CPR and they had a defibrillator there, but the doctor said that she had a massive heart attack right at that moment.

Then after the ambulance left, there were prayers in Hebrew and in English and American sign language, and that spot is a sacred spot to anybody who was there that day. And so the continuation of that story is that the Illinois Storytelling Association, we're working to raise money to put a bronze with Lisa's story in that spot.

We have already secured a donation from a nursery for a Burr Oak. We planted it a year later. Not only is planting a tree a Jewish custom, but the Burr Oak tree is what survived the Illinois fires. So the Burr Oak is the survivor of the great fires that used to cross the great plains in the Midwest for centuries and destroy most everything but helped the Burr Oak survive and establish all kinds of beautiful native flowers.

So it is this beauty created after the survival, and we thought that would be appropriate tribute for Lisa. So that's the story. We are hoping we'll continue that, that when people come to see that bronze, hear Lisa's story, they will think about her last words which truly were: the time will come for all of you to care, to answer the call, and to stand up. And when we hear a story like that—and there are thousands—to me there is no more powerful way to move people to action, to move people toward justice and peace.