

MY JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

with one of the last concentration camp survivors

When author Kate Thompson visited 95-year-old Renee Salt in her London home, she had no idea of the journey it would take them both on...

I first met Renee Salt in October 2022 at the launch of an exhibition about Auschwitz-Birkenau in London. I'd read the bestselling book, *Night*, by survivor Elie Wiesel, and was keen to learn more about the Holocaust.

Renee, then 93, had come with the Holocaust Educational Trust to speak about her experiences. The silver-haired grandmother looked so small in front of the pack of photographers and something in me folded. Surely this was too much for such an elderly woman? Then she began to speak and I realised how clumsy I had been in my assumptions. Far from frail, she was the strongest, most resilient person in that room.

Renee spoke unprompted for 30 minutes. I could not believe what I was hearing. Of course, I knew about the Holocaust, but to hear the human lived experience of it from a survivor was powerful.

I had to know more. As an author specialising in wartime women's voices, I was surprised that her story had not already been told in a book. So, I visited her in her sheltered housing flat two weeks later, where I discovered her memories were



undimmed by the passing years. 'If I want to say something about the past, I close my eyes and I see everything so clearly. It plays in my mind like a film,' she told me.

And what images to relive. Your 11-year-old sister being torn from your mother's arms by the SS. The cattle trucks stuffed with human cargo. Arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau and witnessing murder on an industrial scale. The 'hills' at Bergen-Belsen, which turned out to be corpses stacked one on top of another.

Witnessing atrocities of the past

Renee has seen things no human should ever witness, much less a 15-year-old girl. She experienced some of the foulest atrocities of the past: the Łódź Ghetto, Auschwitz-Birkenau and then Bergen-Belsen.

This elegant, courageous woman, one of the oldest Holocaust survivors in the country, told me, 'I only survived because of my mother's love.'

From invasion to liberation, September 1939 to April 1945, as Renee was marched from ghetto to camp, bewildered at the seemingly fathomless depths of sadism, there was one constant. One hand that clutched hers. Her mother's. Every day that the mother and daughter were tangled together in hell, they were a powerful source of solace and hope to one another.

As I got to know Renee better, I realised that her need to share had finally overcome the desire to forget. What neither of us realised, however, was what the research of the book would uncover.



tears running down her face. We never saw her again. Stenia, my brilliant and beloved 11-year-old sister was gone. I don't know why I was spared. We didn't know where they were taking her, but we knew she wouldn't return. It felt like my heart had been cut in half.'

Renee was born Rywka Ruchla Berkowicz in Zduńska Wola, Poland, in 1929 and lived with her mother Sala, father Szaja and sister Stenia, who was XX years younger. Her father was an accountant and her mother was a housewife, with the looks of a silent movie star.

On 1 September 1939, the German army invaded Poland. Renee remembers sheltering in an apple orchard, watching the inferno of bombs, fire and smoke. Within weeks, the Jewish community were persecuted, and Renee and her family were forced into a ghetto.

Despite being just 11, Renee was put to work in a factory making socks for the army. Starvation, disease and random executions were commonplace. But even these horrors paled in comparison to August 1942, when the SS ordered parents in the ghetto to hand over all children up to the age of 18.

Stolen children

'Everywhere I looked, children were weeping, reaching out for their parents. Mothers were screaming,' Renee told me. 'My mother tried to hide Stenia and me inside her coat, but it didn't take very long before she was spotted. The Germans got hold of Stenia and my mother got a beating.'

'My sister begged him to stop and then she ran away from us with

To see the area for myself, I visited Zduńska Wola last January. Renee's old home in the ghetto is still a mean-looking old building, down a forbidding dead-end street.

The square where Stenia was taken, along with several hundred other children, is a very ordinary space. Youngsters bundled up in warm winter coats walked past me on their way to school. There was nothing to signal the abject horror of the morning so many children were stolen. My walk took me next to the Jewish cemetery, where Renee was forced to sit for three days and nights while

'Children were weeping, reaching out for their parents'

hundreds more Jewish men, women and children were slaughtered and thrown into a pit.

From Zduńska Wola, Renee and her parents were transported north-east to Łódź, the Third Reich's most isolated ghetto. I travelled on the same train tracks, reminding myself of the difference between my own journey and Renee's. I was travelling on comfortable trains, not crammed with hundreds of others into freight wagons designed for cattle. I knew



Renee's parents and younger sister



where Renee's journey went and how her story would end. This was not something she could possibly have known about at that time.

Close encounters

In the city of Łódź, it was poignant to find the records of the Berkowicz family, including the falsified date of birth Renee's father gave to make his daughter 16 instead of 13 – to the Germans, it meant she wasn't a 'useless mouth' and was worth keeping because she could work.

It was here that Renee faced unimaginable terror when the hospital where she was being treated for typhus was raided by the SS in the middle of the night in August 1943.

'I heard the lorries pulling up outside,' Renee told me. 'Then we heard heavy boots and screams, the sound of patients pleading and crying. I lay there in the dark, so sick, so terrified, waiting for them to come into our ward. The next morning, we learned the SS had emptied out practically the whole hospital and took everyone away, except for my ward. The next morning, my mother came and took me home. She had been waiting outside the hospital all night.'

I stood outside the hospital, now a very ordinary block of flats, and tried to imagine the paralysing fear Renee and her mother must have experienced.

From Łódź, I travelled south to Auschwitz-Birkenau and stood next to the ramp where Renee and her parents were forced off the wagons into the hell of a smoky dawn in August 1944.

'An army of heavily armed Gestapo and SS men with lunging, barking German Shepherd dogs were waiting on the platform shouting orders. It's impossible to describe the chaos,' Renee told me about her arrival at the notorious death camp. 'They shouted: "Raus! (Be quick.) Leave the luggage." My father jumped off first and I jumped after him. But by then he had disappeared into thin air, without a kiss or a goodbye.'

'I never saw my father again. I believed he died in the gas chambers. A terrible sickly-sweet foul smell filled the air and a thick noxious smoke hung over everything.'

Renee's memories of this time are seared into her mind.

'My mother and I shuffled forward in the queue, holding hands, too scared to talk. At the head of the queue stood an SS officer conducting a selection, spotless in his grey-green uniform, with silver skulls on the

collar. We later learned that this was Dr Josef Mengele, the butcher of Auschwitz.

'With a click of his finger he directed one person to live, another one to die. All the old people, pregnant women, invalids and children were directed to the left and joined a long queue of women trailing off into the distance.

'At the front of the queue, the moment of the selection, I was so terrified I could hardly breathe. An SS officer noticed we were holding hands so he split us up. My mother was directed left and I was sent to the right. Before I had a chance to cry out, she came back to my side. I believe it was a miracle.'

For three weeks, Renee and her mother were forced to sit in silence day and night, in a human chain, watched over by a kapo (a prisoner assigned to supervise the other inmates) with a whip. At the end of August 1944, they were on the move again, this time to work on bombsites in Hamburg. Their missing loved ones were never far from their thoughts...

'With a click of his finger, he directed people to die'



Renee met her husband Charles in 1940s Paris



A twist in the story

Soon after my return from Poland, came some shocking news: 80 years on from Renee's brutal separation from her father at Auschwitz-Birkenau, an International Tracing Report I had requested from the Wiener Holocaust Library in London landed in my inbox.

Her father Szaja didn't die in the gas chambers as Renee had believed. He was transported out of Auschwitz-Birkenau on 1 September 1944 and sent to Kaufering IV, a sub camp of Dachau concentration camp, where he died on 20 January 1945.

Sitting down with Renee's son Martin to share this news with Renee was a deeply emotional experience.

'It wasn't easy to hear, but at least I know,' she told me, unable to stop her tears flowing. 'After 80 years, my question has been answered. Knowing the date of my father's death and what happened to him means I have closure.'

Four months later, in May 2024, I travelled to Kaufering in Bavaria, southern Germany, to deliver a memorial plaque Renee had commissioned. We held a simple but beautiful ceremony at Renee's father's newly-erected plaque at the site of the mass graves.

Having just come out of hospital for pneumonia, Renee was too weak to attend, but we did a live link-up via FaceTime so she could watch as myself and a small group from the European Holocaust Memorial in Kaufering lit



Charles next to a Belsen sign; Renee outside Auschwitz in 2005



A time to remember

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps. This significant commemoration will likely be the last in which survivors of the brutal death camps are still alive to tell their stories.

a candle and I read some words about finding his grave. It was a beautiful reminder that no story is ever truly finished, and that resolutions and healing can come when you least expect them.

My journey ended at the site of her mother Sala's grave, 400 miles north in the grounds of Bergen-Belsen, today a NATO training camp. Tragically, Sala survived to liberation, but died 12 days later on 27 April 1945, weakened by starvation and injuries from a savage bull attack, which the SS had let out of a slaughterhouse in Hamburg for fun. She was 42.

'My mother's last words were, "Do not cry when I die." In the days after, I didn't care if I died as well. It's impossible to describe Bergen-Belsen in the days before liberation. I saw skeletons walking, their arms and legs like matchsticks. Some were dressed in rags while others were naked. Like leaves from a tree, people were falling down and dying. I saw bodies piled up to heaven.'

The British Army were so appalled by the conditions in Bergen-Belsen when they drove through the gates to the camp on 15 April 1945 that it was quickly dubbed 'the horror camp'.

Joined together by trauma

Unlike six million other Jewish people murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, Renee's story didn't end during the war. Two years after her liberation, she moved to Paris where she met former British Army military policeman Charles Salt.

'We met at a party and immediately I felt at ease with this tall, handsome English man. Charles turned to me and said: "[EXPLAINING HE WAS THE ARMED FORCE LIBERATION TEAM?]. I was at Bergen-Belsen", I replied, "Me too!"

We talked for a long time that first night. Just knowing that he'd seen what I'd seen made me feel that I was with a man

who could understand.' Charles wooed the young survivor, taking her dancing. They took long walks through the city and each time she unpeeled a painful piece of her past. When Charles proposed in 1949, Renee accepted and returned to his home in Stepney, east London. The pair went on to have two children, Sharon and Martin, and made an unofficial pact to never discuss the past.

'We couldn't, it was too painful. Every time we spoke of Belsen, Charles would have tears in his eyes.' It wasn't until the early 1990s, when Renee joined a group called the Holocaust Survivors' Centre in London, that she bravely made the decision to start telling her story. Since then, Renee has shared her testimony with everyone from school children to politicians and, more recently, with Prince William, when she met him last February at a synagogue in London.

Over and over, Renee has stared into the abyss. A beautiful and vulnerable young woman who survived against the odds and lived to become a wife, a mother, a grandmother. A survivor.

When I got home to England I finished the book, written in collaboration with Renee,

incorporating her memories and my research. I wrote it faster than any other book I've written, the words tumbling out in anger at man's inhumanity and awe at Renee's courage. It has been my absolute privilege to write and today I feel blessed to count Renee as a friend. I hope it stands as a fitting

tribute to the power of a mother's love and the resilience of a remarkable 95-year-old survivor.

• *A Mother's Promise (Orion)* is available on Kindle now and in hardback and audio on 26 February.



Charles and Renee were married for XX years

'Like leaves from a tree, people were falling and dying'

