

TRIUMPH *OF THE* HUMAN SPIRIT

The overcoming power of the human spirit has enabled **Anita Gray** to forgive the inhuman cruelty she endured at the hands of Nazi soldiers. Today, instead of being filled with hatred, she has found the path to forgiveness.

WRITTEN BY JIM GIBSON PHOTOS BY FRED LOPEZ



THE GENTLE SWAY OF THE CATTLE CAR as it heads toward a line of distant mountains does nothing to assuage the young girl's rising fear. The train has been traveling southwest for hours and the mid-summer sun, now high in the sky, carries with it unbearable heat. The children are packed so tightly into the wooden car that there is no place to lie or even sit.

Another young girl begins to cry softly, "Mutter," seeking the solace of her mother, who was separated from her hours earlier and loaded onto another train by Nazi soldiers. The children are all very young, ranging in age from 8 to 13, and soon the fear the crying girl feels is passed on to all in the car and plaintive cries of "mother" and "father" fill the air. But their parents are gone, suffering their own fates on a journey of terror deep into the heart of Germany.

After a full day's ride, on which they stop only once and are given just a small portion of folkbrot, a heavy German bread, and water to drink, they arrive at a detention camp deep in the Austrian Alps. Here the boys and girls are separated.

The girls are forced to strip and shower in ice-cold water. The young 13-year-old girl's name is Anita and the utter humiliation of being naked in front of the Nazi soldiers is quickly compounded by their leers and vulgar remarks. Even though her family has lived in communist-controlled Prague, Czechoslovakia, where open worship is not allowed, she has been raised in a strict Catholic home where modesty is a virtue more valuable than gold.

The soldiers are immaculately dressed and many of them carry riding crops, which they snap loudly against their high-topped shiny black leather boots, striking fear in the young girls' hearts. The men use the crops to openly touch and humiliate many of the naked girls, who are then given two scratchy burlap dresses and sent to a barracks lined with wooden straw-filled

Anita was now 13 years old and had been working at her mother's side since she was six.

"None of the children could go to school because it cost money and we had none," says Anita matter-of-factly. "So when I was very young my father made me a small wagon that I could pull behind me. I would get up early and have bread with fruit-jelly spread on it and water to drink, and then I would leave to find a team of horses to follow. I would follow them until they did their business." She smiles. "Then I would pick it up and put it in my wagon and head back home. Some days I would follow them for miles and miles and come home with nothing."

The horse manure was used for fertilizer for Frieda's garden. Other families had gardens also and the townspeople shared all they had with one another in an effort to simply survive... and then the Nazis came.

THE UNDERGROUND

Unbeknownst to her mother or to any of the other women in the town, the men had been secretly meeting, planning their escape from communist-controlled Czechoslovakia. They were meeting in a cave underground and had begun to dig a tunnel north toward Poland. Once they reached Poland they were hoping to make their way to Holland — and a better life — with their families. Now that the Nazis had come, they were even more determined to make their escape.

On a sunny summer's day, there was a knock on the door of their home and the family was told to report to the police station for interrogation. "My mother and father didn't seem to be too concerned," Anita says, "and it was actually exciting for me. Nothing like this had ever happened to us before. Once we arrived at the police station they took us on down to the train station where about 500 of our neighbors were all

"I saw them take my mother and father away to different trains and that was the last time I saw them until 1964."

bunk beds. The children have led sheltered lives, depending on their parents for guidance in almost all they do. To be suddenly taken away by strangers and humiliated in such a way is unbelievably terrifying.

Hell now has a name — Vorarlberg.

NAZI OPPRESSION

In March 1939 Adolph Hitler had invaded communist Czechoslovakia. It was now summer and Nazi SS troops could be seen in every town patrolling the streets. Many of the people living in Anita's village on the outskirts of Prague believed things could not get any worse than they already were.

Anita's father, Paul, like all the other men, had not worked for several years. The entire world was in the grips of the Great Depression and life seemed almost hopeless. Anita's mother Frieda kept a garden that provided virtually all the food her small family had to eat.

gathered. There were armed soldiers everywhere and this is when they separated us and put us in cattle cars. I saw them take my mother and father away to different trains and that was the last time I saw them until 1964."

Many people are unaware that it wasn't only persons identified as Jewish who were detained in Nazi concentration camps; anyone considered an enemy of the state was either killed outright or detained. Thousands of Czech citizens were sent to such camps and suffered atrocities similar to those perpetrated on the Jewish people.

THE GREATEST LOSS

She could hear the loud click of his leather boots on the wooden barracks floor. Each night the German guard, leading a large ferocious German Shepherd on a heavy leash, came to the barracks and stopped beside the bed of one of the girls — a different girl each

night. He would command the girl he had chosen to come with him. Several hours later the girl would return alone with a loaf of bread and Anita could hear each one crying in her bunk in the stillness of the night. No one ever talked about what happened and his nightly visits struck terror in the young girls' hearts — because many of the girls who were taken away never returned.

Tonight she heard the boots coming near and she held her breath. They stopped beside her bunk. "Rouse!" he commanded her loudly. Anita's fear was so great that she could barely stand. He commanded her to come with him. The dog walked menacingly beside her and her breath came in short gasps. He led her to the infirmary where they were completely alone. He turned to face her and attacked her, viciously sexually assaulting her. For what seemed like an eternity the young innocent girl endured his brutal attack almost fainting in pain and fear.

"Just before the Nazis came to take us away, my mother had just talked to me about the immeasurable value of virtue," Anita says. "I had just turned 13 and this is the age that I would have been confirmed in the Catholic Church if we had been allowed to freely worship. Instead of my confirmation my mother sat me down and talked with me concerning remaining pure for my husband. We were so poor. As women, we had nothing to offer our husbands except our chastity. A young girl's virginity was her priceless gift to her husband. That night he took away the only gift I had to give anyone. He took everything I had."

With her clothes bloodied and a loaf of folkbrot in her hands, she walked back to her barracks bed in shame, knowing that the other girls who had been assaulted knew all that had happened to her that night. She lay in the darkness and cried just as they had — and determined in her heart that she would live. The Nazis might have taken her most valuable possession, but they would not take her heart — or her life. She would live.

SURVIVAL

"The camp was hell," she says. "We were as afraid of one another as we were the Nazis because if someone told on you for an infraction, she would get privileges or extra food and everyone was just trying to survive. You could trust no one. We were sent to work in the factories where we made parts for Messerschmitt airplanes. If we made an error they would take away our bread for the day. This was serious because the only food we had was one bowl of soup along with folkbrot and water to drink each day."

Like their Jewish counterparts in concentration camps in Germany, the Czechs were "marked" and brainwashed by the Nazis. "The Germans were meticulous in record keeping and they tattooed each one of us with a number on our wrist," Anita says. "Being Catholics, we all thought we had received the 'mark of the beast.' We weren't allowed to speak to one another and they played propaganda endlessly over a loudspeaker each day in an effort to make us accept them. It was indescribable."

Anita strived to be a model prisoner and somehow survived the next six years of hell, the last two being



spent in an Austrian prison for stealing food while she was on a work detail.

"The prison was much better than the camp," she says. "I received more food and medical attention and there was no cruelty although it was very strict. I remember when we heard the Americans were coming. I really had no idea what an American was, but if they could free us from the Germans, I wanted to see them."

Anita was struggling in her heart to understand why this had happened to her and her family.

"I thought my family and I were being punished by God for something bad I had done. I was guilt-ridden," she says. "Then, as I heard more about the war, I began to understand that this wasn't my fault; it was because of the Nazis and what they were doing."

FREEDOM

Finally the fateful day came and the Americans arrived. The people in the prison and in the camps were set free.

"The soldiers saw how emaciated we all were and their first instinct was to give us food. They set up a kitchen and even though we were warned not to eat too much, we all did and got terrible stomachaches," she says and smiles. "I was afraid the food would all go away and I wanted to eat it while I could."

Having no place to go, Anita remained in the prison although she was free to come and go as she pleased. Within weeks, a department of the American Red Cross moved her into a halfway house in Karlsruhe, Germany in an effort to assimilate her back into society. There were 15 women in the house and they were required to adhere to strict rules.

One day they were all told to assemble in a gathering room and an American officer named

Captain Giavetti arrived to inspect them. American officers, knowing they would be involved for years in the reconstruction of Germany, had moved their families to Europe to be with them. This officer was looking for a young woman to help raise his four- and five-year-old daughters and introduce them to the local culture.

He chose Anita and her life took a new direction. "I became a member of their family," she says. "They lived in a huge villa and although I worked with the children, I was treated more like a daughter than a worker. I stayed with the family for eight years and in 1953 they applied for a visa to bring me to the United States with them." She was given a quota number and waited for the visa to be approved.



LOVE CALLS

One day Anita answered a knock at the door and there stood one of the most handsome men she had ever seen. He was an American Navy courier bringing documents to the captain. "When I saw him, my heart was beating so hard. It was definitely love at first sight," she says.

The young man delivered the papers and left. Anita was surprised to see him return several weeks later without any papers to deliver. He had come to ask the captain if he could take Anita to dinner. He too had been smitten the first time he saw Anita. The captain approved and she went on her first date. Soon the young courier, named Arthur Armstrong, became a regular visitor at the villa.

"He was very respectful and he was so funny. He always made me laugh," Anita says and smiles. "We dated for one year and then one day he asked the captain, who was like my father, if he could marry me and take me to America. The captain reluctantly said yes because I had become such a part of their family."

Arthur, a career Navy man, and Anita were married by a Justice of the Peace on May 23, 1954 and she began the life of a military wife in America. They had two sons, Daniel and Gary, and lived together until Arthur's death in 1990.

"Arthur was the first person I had trusted as an adult," she says. "He had such a good heart I would have trusted him to the ends of the Earth."

In late 1954, when Arthur reenlisted, he received a bonus from the Navy of \$1,700 and he asked Anita what she would like to have most on Earth. She said she would like to know if her parents were still alive. Arthur gave the American Red Cross \$500 and asked them to see if they could either find out where her parents were buried or if they were still alive.

Life went on but Anita never stopped wondering if her parents were alive. In 1961 they adopted their daughter Mickee. Many times over the next several years Anita found herself left alone to raise her children while Arthur, who was now struggling with alcoholism, was stationed overseas. Many times he was away for as many as 11 months out of the year. She struggled to learn the nuances of the English language as she simply tried to survive in America. She held various jobs from office manager to bartender and was always successful in whatever she chose to do.

BACK FROM THE DEAD

In 1964, a decade after Arthur had paid the Red Cross to find her parents, she received a phone call from an aid worker with the miraculous news — not only was her parents alive — she now had their address. The meticulous recordkeeping of the Nazis had paid off; a Red Cross worker who was combing through a prodigious amount of files had finally found her mother and father.

"I honestly didn't expect them to be alive and when I found out they were in Germany but were very ill, I really wanted to go and see them. Somehow Arthur found the money to send me and our children. We flew to Germany and the city of Pirmasens," she says. When I arrived, I found that both my parents were at the end of their lives. My mother was dying of ovarian cancer and my father had lung cancer."

When Anita walked into the upstairs apartment where her parents lived, she locked eyes with her mother and cried out, "Mutter." The two women fell into each other's arms crying. They hugged one another without speaking for many minutes.

"When we could finally speak, my mother told me that I was so beautiful," Anita says, her voice cracking with emotion. "She said the memory of me and the hope that I was alive somewhere in the world was the only thing that had kept her and my father alive. I believe that through their faith, which was as big as a mountain, they had willed me to find them and return to see them once again."

Her visit opened her eyes. In many ways Germany had not changed in all the years she had been gone. Her parents' only bathroom was a community outhouse and medical care was virtually nonexistent. She spent two weeks catching up on a lifetime of memories.

Anita says, "We didn't talk about the Nazis or the bad things of the past, we talked about us and the wonderful memories of the time we were together when I was young and all that had happened in our lives since the war ended. It was so wonderful."

Not long after Anita left to return to America — having held onto the hope of seeing their beloved daughter alive for over 25 years — both her parents passed away.

"Their faith had kept them alive waiting for me to return," she says. "With all their energy spent, and knowing I was well, I know they were content to go on home to be with God."

A LIFETIME OF PAIN

The abusive years spent in a Nazi internment camp left Anita with deep emotional scars that continued to plague her life. Nightmares, distrust, sleepless nights and the inability to intimately bond with her husband left her feeling incomplete and lacking. She developed a smoking habit and frequently drank to help her cope with the pain, especially following Arthur's death in 1990.

One day in 2000 Anita was driving to work in Wildwood from her home in Lake Panasoffkee in Sumter County and she passed a sign by the road that said "Vacation Bible School."

"I had no idea what a vacation Bible school was and so when I started to pass by on the third day I decided to go in and see. I sat down and as I listened I became so convicted. The preacher said, 'Whatever is in your heart that is troubling you come and lay it all on the altar' and I did. I went forward and I physically took my cigarettes and lighter out of my purse and laid them on the altar. I accepted Jesus as my savior and I said, 'Jesus here they are. Please take them from me.' I had smoked heavily for 27 years and from that moment in time until now I have never had the desire for another cigarette," she says and smiles.

Anita joined the First Baptist Church in Lake Panasoffkee where she still attends today. She volunteers for Hospice and helps others any way she can. She keeps a garden just as her mother did many years ago and is an honorary Master Gardener.

How did her new relationship with God, formed at the age of 74, help her overcome her hatred of the Nazi who assaulted her over 60 years before?

"I have no animosity for any human being," she says. "The guard who took so much from me; he didn't truly know what he was doing. I believe if he had known how much pain it would cause me throughout my life that he never would have done it. I have completely forgiven him. If anyone should have hatred for the Nazis it would be me, but I choose not to. Through my faith in God, I now have a renewed faith in mankind."

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Even though, through forgiveness, Anita has freed herself from the bondage of hatred, the nightmares continue and it has affected how she relates to her friends.

"Even today I have no close friends," she says. "I struggle with the ability to trust. I love many people and I respect them, but in my life I have had no intimate friends. I have learned to put my trust in Jesus. He is my friend and the one I can tell anything. I know that when I tell Him He isn't going anywhere with it — it is just between me and Him."

Today Anita lives in Sumter County with her German Shepherd, CJ.

"Many people are surprised when they see I have a German Shepherd because of the memories it might bring back, but I keep him for a reason," she says. "He is a reminder of the past, I don't think we should ever forget what has brought us to where we are today;

"When we could finally speak, my mother told me that I was so beautiful..."

but he is also a reminder of God's grace and the forgiveness that lets us know He is inside us."

What makes Anita Gray's tortuous journey through life so amazing and inspiring is the fact that not only has she overcome the worst of mankind's cruelty, at 86 years of age she has devoted her life to reaching out and helping others. Even though she is virtually blind from macular degeneration, she travels whenever possible to the jungles of Nicaragua as a missionary to help distribute food and clothing and teach others about forgiveness and the love of God.

"I am so grateful for all God has given me," she says. "I have so much and have been so blessed. When I reach out to others and show them how much He loves them, I feel like it is my way of giving back for all the wonderful things I've been given."

And that is the true essence of the overcoming power of the human spirit.