

The amazing story of Zigi Shipper
Our senior journalist Anna retells the story of Ziggy Shipper
whom she met at a screening of 'Children of the Holocaust'
in January 2018.

By Anna, Y10
Journalism Club



To commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD), Holocaust Education Trust worked with Picturehouse Cinemas to put on a series of mini documentaries of 'Children of the Holocaust' followed by a talk from a survivor and we had the good fortune of meeting Zigi Shipper.

Born in 1930, to a Jewish family in Łódź, Poland, Zigi lived with his father and grandparents as his parents had divorced. In 1939, Zigi's father escaped to the Soviet Union and in 1940 Zigi and his grandparents were forced to move into the Łódź Ghetto (the second-largest ghetto in Germany-occupied Europe). In 1942, children in the ghetto were rounded up and put in lorries to be deported but Zigi managed to jump of the lorry and escape back into the ghetto without any of the guards seeing him.



He worked in a metal factory until the ghetto's liquidation in 1944 where all people in the factories were put onto cattle trucks and sent to Auschwitz - Birkenau. The cattle trucks were so overcrowded the guards could hardly close the doors. There was nowhere to sit and Zigi told us how he felt bad because he had thoughts where he wanted someone to die just so he could sit down. When arriving at Auschwitz all his belonging were taken away and he was taken to the Sauna room to strip and shave. The rest of the people from the ghetto went through the selection and those not fit; babies, children and disabled, were sent to the gas chambers and within an hour of arriving at the camp they were gone. One thing Zigi will never forget and understand is why babies were put in icy water to be put to death.

He recalls, in Auschwitz, an average day would start at 5:30am, when the guards would come to wake them up in the overcrowded barracks to count them. If anyone was missing they would check the barracks and whoever hadn't come out would be 'sent to hospitals' (killed) if they weren't dead already. Breakfast was composed of a piece of bread and 'coffee'. They would go to work for the rest of the day getting no lunch and for dinner it would be the same as breakfast. The quantity of food was so scarce that many died of starvation. We asked Zigi if there was anything that helped him get through the horrors of the war and subsequently survive, he replied, "I don't know. I can't say I was stronger than the others. I received the same amount of the food as the others, it was just one of those things".

He was later sent to Stutthof concentration camp where the conditions were equally as bad or even worse. Zigi worked voluntarily at a railway road just to be able to get more food. The only clothes he had were the striped pyjamas and in the icy cold he remembers everyone in the labour camp huddling up together to stay warm. He never understood why they couldn't just stay inside the barracks instead of being forced outside.

Due to the Soviets edging closing, Zigi and the rest of his group were sent on a death march to Neustadt, a German Naval Town, whilst he was suffering from Typhus. He revealed that this experience was one of the most

shocking he had to live through as “he could hardly walk 10cm, how was he supposed to walk 15km?” He had to go one week without water and the only source of water was the snow. Something that really stunned me was how Zigi’s friends stuck with him when he was sick even when they had the opportunity to escape and helped him walk the death march. Zigi said that “his friends saved his life and had it not been for them, he wouldn’t be here today”.

When they arrived at Neustadt they were told they were going to ‘Denmark’ but really they were to be killed in the middle of the sea. However, on the 3rd May 1945 there was a British air attack bombing the boat they were supposed to get on and suddenly all the Nazis left. Zigi had been liberated by the British and American Army. The first thing Zigi and his friends did was look for food. Unfortunately, a lot of people died in the first few days due to overeating. He spent the next three months in hospital.

After a while, he received a letter from his mother from England asking him to come live there. At first he didn’t want to go as his friends were now his family but in the end his friends persuaded him to go and the friends later followed. Zigi Shipper arrived in the UK in 1947, where he married and now has a family including grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

One of the questions Zigi was asked was if he ever felt guilty that he survived and not others and to that he responded, “No, I never felt guilty as there was nothing to feel guilty about. It was pure luck”. He also talked to us about how he tried to find his father but there was no trace of him. Nonetheless, at least he found his mother, his friends and now has a family. Zigi stated that he would have wanted to meet Hitler just to show him what his life is now and that he never would have won. When asked if he still believes in God, he told us how the majority of the survivors had lost faith in God yet he still does mainly because he was raised in a very religious family. Zigi remarked, “I don’t understand why we always blame God for what we do, it isn’t His fault but humankind. We are the ones doing it not God”. One of the key points that I took from the talk was that being religious is about doing something good in life and most importantly what you do in your daily lives.

Holly, in Year 10, stated that what she found most inspiring about Zigi was his optimism as he advised “not to hate, it’s the worst thing you can do. Enjoy life, you won’t have a good life if you hate. If I hated, I would suffer so it is better to be happy”. It was remarkable how he’d gone through such a traumatizing and negative experience but he’d made it into something positive.

After the war he never wanted to speak about his experiences as he thought “who’s going to believe me? Gas chambers, babies in icy water, people would think I’m crazy” As he was a Jew he had to leave his education at a young age so wasn’t able to finish it. However, he thinks education is very important and since coming across Holocaust Education Trusts all he wants to do now is speak and teach about it, to keep the torch burning. We asked Zigi why he thinks it is important to commemorate HMD to which he replied, “Children are our future. The most important thing is this generation. We must educate them, to teach them that it mustn’t happen again, we mustn’t give up”. At the 70th Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz he expressed how he found it “unbelievable that it was a town just for killing people”.

Zigi will always be grateful to the British people for the way they treated him since they found him on May 3rd 1945. He never would have guessed that he’d end up having a conversation with the former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, speak to the England football team and take Prince William and Kate Middleton on their tour around Auschwitz in the summer of 2017.



The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day this year was the power of words and Zigi Shipper is a perfect example of someone who has done this wisely. Meeting Zigi was an extremely inspirational moment where we were able to put our own problems into wider perspective. We will remember Zigi's story for a long time.