



ANN DUBAY

From Auschwitz to Darfur

This is a story about a girl who stared horror in the face — and didn't blink.

In 1942, when she was 14 and living in Vienna, Vera Korkus and her parents were transported, along with other Jews, to the Theresienstadt concentration camp.

Vera's father died in the camp from lung cancer, and in 1944, Vera and her mother were transferred to Auschwitz.

"When we arrived they separated us into two lines. I was sent to the laundry to work. My mother went with the other line," remembers Korkus, who now is 78 and lives in Santa Rosa. "In the laundry I saw my sister Ruth for a few minutes. She had been in hiding, was betrayed and sent to Auschwitz. We hadn't seen each other for years.

"When I told Ruth that our mother was in the other line, Ruth said that our mother was dead, that she had been sent to the gas chamber."

Eventually Vera was sent to the front lines to dig trenches, where she worked with two young Czechoslovakian women, Sonia and Zita.

"They were 21, and I was 16," recalls Korkus. "We had to carry tree trunks to build tank traps. They were taller than me and would each carry an end of the trunk, so I could carry the middle."

In the harsh conditions of the Nazi labor camps, this small kindness became the basis for friendship — and trust.

In January of 1945, as the Russian troops closed in on the German army, Vera and the other women were forced into a death march to Bergen-Belsen. Hundreds died.

"If they couldn't walk, they were shot," said Korkus.

In the town of Wohlau, Poland, the soldiers finally let the women rest at an abandoned reformatory, where there were big barracks and a courtyard.

"We were so tired, most people just sat," remembered Korkus. But the teen approached Sonia and Zita and told them that she was going to try to escape. The three agreed to run together. They knew that if they failed, they would be killed.

"When the soldiers started yelling 'Assemble! Assemble!' we ran like hell to a barn with hay in the top," said Korkus. "We climbed a ladder and hid."

The soldiers climbed into the hay loft and began searching. They found another group of women who were also hiding. Vera and her friends took advantage of the diversion to run into a different barn.

"There were stacks of straw, and we dug in as deep as we could," recalls Korkus. "The soldiers were stabbing in the straw with their bayonets . . . Finally, they left."

The women stayed in the empty reformatory. The entire town, which was only miles from the war front, was deserted.

"We were wearing striped jackets and were bald," remembers Korkus.

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AUSCHWITZ: Holocaust survivor's story is a reminder of current horror

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"We searched a house and found clothes and hats to wear."

They were in the reformatory for a week, when Russian soldiers appeared. "We heard them speaking and flew downstairs and threw ourselves around their necks."

The soldiers gave them food, but the young women's glee turned to fright when some of the men pursued them.

"We had to be constantly on the alert," recalled Korkus. "We nailed our door shut."

Somehow, they survived that long cold winter.

When Allied victory was declared in April, Sonia and Zita were sent to Poland for medical treatment, and Vera eventually made her way back to Vienna. There she found her sister Ruth, who had also made a daring escape. "Maybe it's genetic," says Korkus. "We both made our escapes at about the same time."

After the war, Vera lost contact with Zita, but remained friends with Sonia, who eventually moved to Switzerland. When Vera moved to the United States in 1949, the women stayed in contact through letters, phone calls and occasional visits. In May, she will fly to Switzerland to visit her friend, whom she hasn't seen for 20 years.

"Sonia said to me 'You better come soon, we're not getting any younger,'" Korkus said. "She has a heck of a sense of humor."

The two women, whose friendship now spans 61 years, "never talk about the past."

Korkus has, however, shared her story with others. She used to speak to school groups about her experience. She was interviewed by the group Listening for Change (formerly known as the Survivor Project) and her story and photos are posted

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Go to ourpledge.org for information about Darfur and for details about a rally at 1:30 p.m. today at the Presidio in San Francisco.

To read more about Vera Korkus and other survivors, go to www.listeningforachange.org.

on its Web site, along with those of other Holocaust survivors.

I heard Korkus speak on Monday, at a Yom Hashoah (Holocaust remembrance) service at Congregation Shomrei Torah in Santa Rosa.

Her words were sparse, her story told without embellishment. In a follow-up phone interview, she filled in the details, but didn't dramatize her words. She didn't need to. The facts said it all.

After hearing Korkus and survivors of other genocides talk, listeners can't help but repeat the promise made after World War II, "never again."

Yet, throughout the world, mass killings continue.

I have no doubt that somewhere in the Darfur region of Sudan today another teenage girl is staring horror in the face. Will she stare back, like Vera did? Or will she blink and be extinguished forever? Will we someday hear her story? Or will she be only a memory to a few friends and brothers or sisters?

If the world took seriously that 60-year-old promise, we wouldn't need to ask these questions. We would know that children throughout the world could sleep peacefully at night, safe from the nightmare of being torn from their homes and families.

But as people in Rwanda and now Darfur have discovered, promises are cheap — even when millions of lives are at stake.