



Excerpt from *Tapestry of Hope* by Alice Kern, survivor of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen

#### PREFACE

For many years the time I spent in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen was a constant haunting horror. Yes, I did survive the Holocaust, but only because I refused to die.

In 1944, when I was taken away from my warm and secure home with Mother and two little cousins, we were told that we were going to a Labor Camp. Our lives in the ghetto, where we were concentrated away from the core of the city and its Gentile society, had become so unbearable and humiliating that when the order came to leave it seemed like a relief.

With only the clothes on our back we were driven into cattle cars. Upon arrival in Auschwitz we were “selected” under the bright spotlight beaming down on us; Mother and the cousins went to the left. That was the last time I saw them.

All the experiences thereafter were impossible to forget, I was alive, I had my eyes open, yet my mind lived in the past. There was no future and the present was uncertain. It was hard to imagine how it would be to live again under normal circumstances – not to be afraid that your fellow citizen would hurt you, condemn you or hate you for numerous unknown reasons. To become one of the people who has the right to come and go and not be persecuted was less difficult than being able to forget the past hurts.

For many years I felt I could not function, until one day I took a pencil and started to write. Onto the pages poured memory after memory until I found myself creating this manuscript. My life until then had seemed like a pretense; I was filled with pain from many wounds, yet I could not cry or burden anyone with what troubled me. The silent, white sheet of paper took all my tears, aches, and pain. I felt reborn, finally able to concentrate on the present and even to anticipate a future. I no longer felt a need to remember the smallest details of my cherished memories. I could let them go now. It was all down in black and white forever.

The past and the pain will last forever. I had to teach myself to be human again – to love and be loved and not to hate. I did not know who my enemies were, except the few who inflicted direct pain upon me. I refused to hate a whole nation, since some good deeds had been done by them, and some had dared to stand up against the Hitler regime. A deep pain will always be inside me, yet I will not accuse one person unless I know him to be guilty.

Hatred is a sickness I did not and do not wish for. I picked myself up and started again, as I was taught at an early age. This was how my parents lived and I did not want to change the direction they pointed out for me.

Still, it seems, complete innocence is not a good thing. One should be prepared to see when others wish to inflict harm. To be alert may be to avoid the hurt. All the worldly goods left behind in the ghetto when we were taken away were lost. Nothing from my past was recovered. I could not return after the liberation because of ill health. That does not matter – I have my life.

But one memory haunts me: a promise my Mother made long ago.

I was still very young when my brother Zoli was studying in Paris to become a doctor, making Mother the proudest Mother in town. As the years went by, she kept preparing my dowry, yet the most precious needlepoint tapestry was promised to Zoli for his office when he became a doctor.

To some day recover that needlepoint tapestry, so that my brother can hang it up in his doctor's office as Mother wished, would be one wonderful reward of this writing.

The tapestry is four feet by five feet and is copied from an original painting of a French family gathered around a table covered with a white lace table cloth. An entertainer is playing for them. The father of the house is standing behind a seated mother in her French rococo dress wearing a necklace around her neck with a pendant in the shape of a T. in the original painting there was a cross, but in our religion this symbol is not acceptable, so the top of the cross was left out. On each side of the table the beautifully-dressed daughters are looking toward the mandolin player who is standing on the right side. A plumed velvet chapeau is on the