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Gena Turgel, Holocaust Survivor With a Love Story, Dies at 95

By [Neil Genzlinger](#)

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Gena Turgel, who was half of an oft-told love story born in the Holocaust and whose barracks mates at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp included Anne Frank, died on June 7. She was 95.

The Holocaust Educational Trust was among those announcing her death. The location was not given.

Ms. Turgel (pronounced tur-GELL) was imprisoned in several concentration camps after the Nazis invaded Poland and rousted her family from a comfortable home in Krakow. Most of her family members died, but she and her mother survived to see the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, in northern Germany.

One of the liberating British soldiers, Sgt. Norman Turgel, saw her and was lovestruck — so much so that soon after meeting her he managed to arrange a dinner for her at the officers' mess at his British camp. The lavish setting she encountered when she entered perplexed her.

“I turned 'round to this Sergeant Norman,” Ms. Turgel recalled in an oral history for Shalom TV, a Jewish cable channel. “I said: ‘Do we expect any special visitors? What am I doing here?’ So he says: ‘You are the special visitor. This is our engagement party.’ ”

They married six months later. Their love story became a favorite light-in-the-darkness tale for the news media — Ms. Turgel was “the Bride of Belsen” — but she took care over the years to make sure that the horrors she and millions of others experienced were recounted as well.

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She related her story in interviews and in a book, “I Light a Candle” (1987), and worked with educational groups over the years. In 2005, at 81, she escorted Queen Elizabeth II to her seat for a Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration in London, held on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, one of the camps in which she was held.

“My story,” she said in a 2001 interview, “the story of a survivor, is the story that six million others cannot tell.”

Gena Goldfinger was born on Feb. 1, 1923, in Krakow, the youngest of nine children of Samuel and Estera Goldfinger, who ran a small textile business. Her father died when she was young, but her mother continued the business, and the family was living comfortably when the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, confiscated their possessions and uprooted them.

They were relocated to a cramped apartment, then to the Jewish ghetto in Krakow, then, in 1942, to the Plaszow concentration camp nearby. In 1944, Ms. Turgel was force-walked, over days and days, to Auschwitz, further west in Poland. She often described being sent naked into a building with others, supposedly for a disinfecting shower; nothing happened for a long time, though eventually water came on. She concluded later that the building was a gas chamber, and that a malfunction or some other intercession had saved her life.



Queen Elizabeth II, left, talked to Ms. Turgel during a garden party at Buckingham Palace in May 2015. Pool photo by WPA

Her other family members were not so lucky; one, a sister, was subjected to horrible medical experiments.

“I often ask, ‘Why were my brothers and sister shot?’ ” Ms. Turgel said in an interview with The Toronto Star in 1987. “Why was my sister injected with petrol? Was I meant to be here to tell this story to people who didn’t know? Perhaps God guided me, put me under his wing.”

With her mother, she was moved to Bergen-Belsen after a brief period at Auschwitz. Another prisoner in her crowded barracks there was Anne Frank.

“Her bed was around the corner from me,” Ms. Turgel told the British newspaper The Sun in 2015. “She was delirious, terrible, burning up,” she said, adding that she had brought Frank water to wash.

Frank, whose wartime diary became one of the most famous pieces of Holocaust documentation, died in March 1945 during a typhus epidemic at the camp. Ms. Turgel saw the effects of that epidemic up close: In an effort to ensure her and her mother’s survival, she had talked her way into a job at the camp hospital.

“The people were dying like flies — in the hundreds,” she said in the oral history. “Reports used to come in — 500 people who died. Three hundred? We said, ‘Thank God, only 300.’ ”

The British liberated the camp in April 1945. In subsequent days Ms. Turgel helped guide the liberators and convey to them the needs of the sick. Sergeant Turgel was part of an intelligence unit looking for German officers to arrest.

The couple returned to the camp for the 40th anniversary of the liberation, followed by television cameras.

Mr. Turgel died in 1995. Ms. Turgel is survived by three children, as well as grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

She once recalled the vows she had made to herself after her husband took her to England to live.

“I adopted three ambitions,” she said. “To learn the way of British life, and to learn the English language, and to write about my memoirs in case I forget. But how can one forget those atrocities?”

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