

Honorable Mention
Fiction Writing, Division I
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My Thirteenth Birthday
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My Thirteenth Birthday

The day of my thirteenth birthday was happy. There was a chocolate cake with rich chocolate frosting and a box wrapped in pink paper tied with a big blue satin bow. I was surrounded by my family and friends. Sounds of happiness were all around and as I was about to blow out the candles, Then I woke up, in a concentration camp, miles away from my home. It was my thirteenth birthday but there was no cake or presents. I haven't seen my friends or family in months, and I wasn't happy. As I regained consciousness, I heard loud voices barking orders at us. I thought I would feel used to this after a while, but the S.S. officers' booming voices still made my eyes water. Remembering I had to be strong, I slipped on my wooden clogs and climbed down the barracks. I was always relieved to put on my shoes each morning; The knowledge that they hadn't been ripped from my arms in the middle of the night could slow my heart rate down. They weren't the best shoes but not having them would result in a lot of pain at the very least. I scurried into line trying my best not to be noticed by any of the guards or anyone else for that matter. I was lucky I looked older than I was, and it helped me get by, unnoticed, most of the time. My best chance to survive was to not stand out. My younger sister, Alma, hadn't been so lucky. As soon as my family arrived in Buchenwald, she had been separated from us. I have heard stories of gas coming out of the vents instead of water and in my nightmares sometimes I can imagine her screaming for fresh air.

"Move Jew," yelled the guard pushing past people a few feet in front of me. He said the word "Jew" as an insult and up to a year ago I didn't know it was. They marched us off to the showers, which thankfully just sprayed water, and then to breakfast which was a scrap of bread and some sort of liquid, which I consumed quickly, worried it would be taken from me if I didn't. Then, it was time for morning roll call. I really hated standing out there for so long,

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unable to move or to stay warm. No matter the weather or how low the temperature went, we stood out there every day, and if you moved you were immediately shot or worse. Sometimes the officers would just pick random people to make an example of just in case we didn't know they thought we were lower than cattle. After we got through roll call the work began. We dug for hours on end without stopping. I could imagine what would be going in the huge ditch we created, but I couldn't for too long without feeling like I was going to throw up the little food I had. If someone would fall of exhaustion, which seemed to happen more and more as they were in this camp, they would be immediately shot because they were no longer useful to the Nazis. I never looked up when I heard gunshots. I kept my head down and kept digging, but I knew the number of bodies going in this hole had just gone up.

After a long day, the last thing I wanted to do was stand for evening roll call, but I had no choice if I wanted to see tomorrow. The smell of the camp worsened as we got closer to the crematorium; unbearable after smelling cleaner air. It felt heavy and thick, and every breath took up all the energy I had left. Evening was when officers had the most fun finding ways to torture us. By the time I was standing in my spot they had already picked the prisoner who would be the victim of the officers' cruel joke. He didn't cry as he took his last breath, probably not having any tears left in him, and then just like that, he was gone. On the way back to the barracks the guards made sure to march all the groups past the lifeless body. I wanted to feel bad looking at this terrible end to a life but all I could think of was how grateful I was that it wasn't me or someone I knew lying there, which I immediately felt bad for. In a way, I kind of envied how he got to leave this terrible place which also made me feel a weird sense of guilt. As we all lay back in the barracks I thought about the friends and family I didn't see, the cake I didn't eat, and the candles I didn't blow out. If I did have candles to blow out, I knew what I would wish for. I

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would wish to survive today because that's all I could hope for. Tomorrow I would wake up and keep wishing for the same thing, because surviving would be the best birthday gift.

Works Cited

<https://www.jewishgen.org/ForgottenCamps/Camps/DayEng.html>

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Josh Kogan (second generation survivor)