

*Postcards for Survival*

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Survivor's Testimony" Sally Roisman

Sally Zielinska and her sisters, Esther and Manya, huddle over a flimsy postcard in the dull, lifeless barracks of Gräben concentration camp in Poland [00:52:06]. It is 1943, and the Zielinska sisters are the luckiest girls in Gräben as they read another postcard from their brother, Hersh Mayer.

The postcards are defiant.

They slip past the hypervigilant German censorship officials, and by some miracle, the Germans are fooled into believing the recipients are not Jews. The postcards arrive worn, their words a lifeline across walls and barbed wire. But most of all, they remind Sally that beyond Gräben's borders, a life worth fighting for still exists.

As Sally etches her brother's handwriting into her memory, she knows these may be the last words she receives from him. But she holds onto the hope that they might not be – gripping the postcards that remain her last tie to the family she was forced to leave behind in the ghetto.

After September of 1943, the postcards stopped arriving. Still, Sally guards her precious possessions with her life.

In January of 1945, Sally is forced to evacuate from Gräben on a death march to Bergen-Belsen. Still, through sheets of hammering snow, she refuses to let go of the postcards.

Soon after, Sally witnesses a German guard murder a man for stealing a potato at her new concentration camp. Somehow, the guard smirks with pride at the life he has just taken, and horror shudders through Sally's body.

*Even here, even now, I must survive.*

So, she grips the postcards tighter. The yellowing paper thins and its creases deepen, but it does not tear. Her postcards fuel a fire of hope, and that hope refuses to be extinguished.

Eighty-one years later, Sally's flame remains flickering and alive. It spreads across generations and borders, reappearing wherever injustice demands resistance. It burns in the streets of Iran after the death of Mahsa Amini, where women cut their hair as revolt, letting strands fall like severed chains. It smolders in Nepal, where voices rise against censorship, and in the thunder of Black Lives Matter protests, where names are chanted before they are buried. It illuminates in the candlelit vigils that followed the murder of six Asian women in Atlanta during the COVID-19 pandemic. It blazes when my classmates walk out after the Annunciation Catholic School shooting.

These movements, like Sally's postcards, are fragile. They are folded and unfolded by trembling hands, creased by fear, and stained by loss. Yet, her story taught me that fragility does not mean weakness – it calls for persistence. Hope persists by being carried: through snow, through rain, and through time. During an era of unprecedented political division, I choose to hold onto hope, just as Sally latched onto her postcards throughout all of her trials. Though hope may fray and thin, it will not be erased.

In October of 1996, Sally presents her postcards to the camera as she memorializes her story. The paper is battered and weary but still intact.

She is defiant.