

Mirrored Soul

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Survivor: Engelina Billauer

The bond between sisters cannot be manufactured. It is the quiet of a shared glance, the steady weight of a shoulder to lean on, and a role model who walks a few steps ahead to light the way. For Engelina Billauer, this bond was the thin line between existence and extinction.

In the autumn of 1942, the world as the Billauer family knew it collapsed into a nightmare of steel and soot. As the Gestapo closed in, a flicker of hope appeared for Frieda, Engelina's sister. Because of her employment at a German company, Frieda held a precious exemption, a legal shield against deportation. But love does not seek safety at the expense of the beloved. In an act of defiant devotion, Frieda volunteered to join her parents and sister, trading her freedom for a tragic shared fate.

Together, they entered a landscape designed to erase them. They stood side-by-side as the shears stripped them of their hair, watching their identities fall in dark, discarded heaps. They became ghosts in rags, their dignity tested by the biting sting of cold-water hoses and the hollow ache of twelve-hour shifts. Though they were transported through seven different camps, including the brutal conditions of Bergen-Belsen and Stutthof, they refused to be divided.

Survival became a communal art. As a group of five, they mended one another's crumbling shoes, stitching hope into leather. When a meager crust of bread was found, it was broken in five. When typhus threatened to pull Engelina into the dark abyss of the infirmary, Frieda stood as her lighthouse. She risked everything to visit daily, anchoring her sister to the land of the living with the sheer force of her presence. As Engelina later reflected with haunting simplicity: "If it wouldn't be for my sister, I never would have survived."

As an identical twin, I see my own soul mirrored in their story. When I look at my sister, I see more than a sibling; I see a second self, a guardian of my memories and a partner in my purpose. When I struggled with my own mental health, my sister was right by my side, urging me to keep fighting, our unbreakable bond helping me navigate the overwhelming darkness. Just as Frieda helped Engelina survive the grimmest chapter of history, my sister helped me overcome mine.

While I have never had to navigate the horrors of the Shoah, I recognize the heartbeat of endurance that sustained those who did, the same pulse that binds my sister and me in the vow that we are stronger together. Frieda and Engelina prove that even when the world is stripped to its bones, love is an inexhaustible resource. Inspired by their courage, I carry their story forward as a promise: I will be a lighthouse for my sister and a steward of Zachor, transforming passive memory into concrete action. By educating younger generations through advocacy, I will ensure that "never forget" remains a living action rather than a passive thought.