



BERGEN- BELSEN

ADOLF SCHONFELD

AND

VERA KOPPEL

REMEMBER

1944 - 1945

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George Schonfeld, Translator
Ottawa, Canada • March 1996

*M*y father, in 1982, used two fingers on a beat-up old typewriter to describe what happened to our family in 1944 and 1945. He assembled this account in Hungarian both as a history for his grandchildren, and in defiance of the new attitude of denying or belittling the existence of the Holocaust.

I promised to translate it since only two of his nine grandchildren can understand Hungarian. What gave me added incentive to get on with this task, was to observe how quickly and almost deliberately we forget our past.

It made Father very angry that after all we had been through, people could claim that the Holocaust never happened. Furthermore, it seemed that since my father was mainly surrounded by Hungarian Jews, he never encountered the Canadian, who asked me if Hungarians were 'touched' by the Holocaust. This is sheer ignorance. Even a lecture given through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides reference to examining 'the singular events that took place in Hungary in 1944, which led to the largest single mass extermination of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe.'

My father died just two years later in 1984, always remembering the horrors as if they had taken place only yesterday.

In 1993, my sister, Vera Koppel, also wrote an account in Hungarian of what we experienced while my father served in labour duty, and while he was in Kirtz after our death-train incident.

I did not involve my 89-year old mother in this project, as any reminder of that horrible time is very painful to her.

munkaszolgálatos Eveim Családom Deportációj
 A erőnyűségek és borzallak éveit akaron írá-
 doknak, a soronkövetkező Generációknak, Ember-
 túno, Éppkibekialtó tragédiája megismeretlenség
 fojtva a Múlt rémségeit, de amikor hallok, hog-
 nak a megmenekültek jelenlétében arcátlanul
 mult, messze a 6.000.000. kártér, Zsidó fantazia
 borzallnak sokfélesége. Asszonyok Férfiak, Gye-
 En és Családom, ha már hajlott korban is Élő-
 nak, 3. évig tartó munkaszolgálatom egy részét
 mellé B. Pesti Országos Ortodox Főrabbiit Weiss
 éltek át a poklok poklát, ahol az Embertelen
 Tul nagy terjedelmű volna a történetek leírása
 hogy kiemeljek néhány motívumot az átélte örd-
 a mult rémségei között, Erdélyről kezdtem, a
 Parancsnokunk (civilben ácsmester) a legelképe-
 Velünk szemben Zsidó gyűlölete nem ismer hat-
 az Embereket, (Engem sokszor bántott) talán me-
 késztetek gáztetteiből, az ő fütyészavára 3.m
 ba egy odafagyott sürgőhóznát és sírva vi-
 lal a főtörzs, túl ezek 5. Zsidó elbirja azt 4.
 azelőtt 3.10 húzta a terhet fel a hegyre, no-
 hezszalva, Borzók. Tölgyes, hegyek láncolata, a
 de az ennivaló, túl keves, éhezünk és fázunk k-
 reggel ébredés, megismerjük langyos feketekáv-
 hoz, még nem virrad, az is lehet hogy a Tölgyes
 Szászok, a betegek, gyengélkedők 12, különállítv
 jóváhagyásával, mondva, hogy ezen Személyek a
 a főtörzs megjelene, első kérdése az orvosho-
 rámutatva a 12. re, válasz, alacsony jelentem ezt
 En azt hiszem, ezek őszepaktáltak magával, no-
 ki látott pár sötétlő hegyek tövében felfölvi-
 látva, En és tarsaim láttuk, 1. azt mi leli kér-
 kaja, nem keveset bakancsot húzni rá, kivonul o-
 kell tekerni a kapót, 2. azt mivel a nyakán
 azonnal csapja ki neki a bicsekával kivonul, o-
 vonult, és az orvost dühében súlyosan bántalm-
 esemen, mert a mai napki kivonulása már megkezd-

MY FATHER REMEMBERS . . .

I felt it was my duty to record the years of unspeakable horror, both as a lesson for my own grandchildren and also, hopefully, for future generations, since it seems that the recent past is soon not to be believed. I have rarely spoken about the dark years that engulfed us during the Second World War. But now, when both old and new enemies have the temerity to deny the facts while many of us are still here, I must speak to those who will hear us. We cannot listen in silence to the lies. The gas chambers, the *hefling* camps, and the indiscriminate liquidation of children, women and men was not a Jewish invention.

Luckily, my family and I are still among the living and can testify against the inhumanity of man against man. And I know we are not the only ones. Our enemies should refrain from imagining that the Holocaust will ever be forgotten, as we still well remember how the Israelites suffered in Myzriim.

*F*or three years, I worked in one of Transylvania's many infamous labour camps where the aim was liquidation of the Jews rather than the use of their labour. One of my fellow labourers in that camp was Weisz Márton, who later was to become the Orthodox Chief Rabbi of Budapest.

It would be useless to attempt to describe the daily hell we had to face, especially given the newness of my career as a 76-year old writer who suffers from a variety of ailments. I have therefore restricted myself to chronicling some of the events and people that still haunt me at night.

At that time, Transylvania was part of Hungary and our guards, commandants and taskmasters were a selected group of Hungarian anti-Semitic sadists who took full advantage of their positions. I suspect I was spared the daily beatings inflicted on many because I did not have the higher education that seemed to incense these beasts.

One of our typical assignments was to replace the eight horses that had been used in summer and winter to carry heavy telegraph poles up the steep mountain slopes. The original calculation by our taskmaster was five men for eight horses. This 'equation' was subsequently reduced to four Jews, as he put it, for eight horses.

*T*his labour took place amidst the Transylvanian mountain chains of Recefalva, Borszék and Tölgyes, where the air is healthy and fresh. Of course, we were all hungry. But there was very little food and it was bitterly cold in the stables where we were put up for the nights. Reveillé came early in the morning, and we quickly drank our cold black coffee. We lined up for our march to work and it was still pitch dark outside. The formation was ready for the daily work, all except for 12 men whom the white ribboned (converted Jew) doctor reported to the commandant as being 'unfit to work due to a variety of illnesses.'

"Hold it man," said the commandant, "I strongly suspect that these 12 have conspired with you in order to stay away from work for the day. I will examine these men myself."

And the commandant, a carpenter by trade, proceeded to interrogate each man with the doctor at his side.

"What's eating this one, for instance?"

"His ankle is badly swollen," replied the intimidated doctor, "he is incapable of putting his boots on."

"He will work!" screamed the commandant, "the bastard Jew will learn how to put on foot rags as a soldier should!"

"And this one?"

"There is a very large, painful, infected swelling on his neck," was the doctor's reply.

"Take your pocket knife and burst it at once so that he will be able to work!"

On this basis, all 12 men went to work that day. The next

day should have been relatively easy since no one had reported sick and everyone was ready to go. The commandant, however, noticed that one of our comrades had his head covered with rags.

"What is wrong with him," the commandant screamed at the doctor.

"He has an earache."

"And you make him go out on this long march and up frozen mountains. . . He is going to slow down and stop and I will have no choice but to slice him up into pieces at once, because the instructions are simply that a Jew may not stop while on work assignment!"

After the war, we searched for this commandant. We knew his name was Orosz and he was from the town of Berettyoujfalu, but we didn't have any success.

Horthi Miklós, the Regent in Hungary at the time, had passed a law stating that those with family members who had died while serving in the army as labourers (usually Jews) would not be obliged to serve. Since my brother Sándor died at the age of 32 while working at the Don River Bend mine field, I came under this law. Naturally, at the following draft, I presented the notification of my brother's death and was allowed to return home. Four weeks later, I was recalled for mobilisation. Again I showed the death certificate indicating that I did not have to serve. The certificate proved worthless as new orders took effect and the officer tore up my papers. Again, I was placing railroad tracks and telegraph poles.

I recall the time we spent at the Budapest No. 117 Railway Labour Camp. We were stationed at the school on Gyáli Road not far from the Railway Station of Ferencváros where we marched out each day. The area came under bombardment every morning and evening. After signals we had to clean up and repair the rails which had been destroyed during the raid.

Most of us were not used to this type of work, but this difficulty didn't compare with the pain of not knowing what

was happening to our families, who by this time had been moved together into a group of a few houses which we called a ghetto. We heard rumours that they would ship the women and children somewhere. But where and why? What crime had my four children — aged 15, 10, 7 and 5 years, two boys and two girls — committed? What fate was awaiting them and humanity as a whole? And what about my dear wife who had not only given birth to my children, but had brought them home from the hell where so many others had perished. She is a true *Eshet chayil*. What had she ever done to warrant being treated as a violent criminal?

Our commandant at that time was a Lieutenant Knézi who was a very religious Catholic. He saw and understood the torment we felt and quite sincerely told us that by working hard, we would at least look good in the eyes of his superiors. At the same time, he explained, we would torment ourselves less by imagining the horrors that were constantly on all our minds. I will remember this man for as long as I live. Thanks to him, I passed through a very difficult period during these tragic times. I was fortunate to receive him in my home in Debrecen after the War. Perhaps I exaggerate when I think, speak or now write about Lieutenant Knézi in such glowing terms, but I cannot do otherwise.

There are many coincidences during such upheavals, sometimes lucky, sometimes unlucky. After a reorganisation of our unit, Lieutenant Knézi was transferred to Budapest with fifty men. I was among the fifty, the only one with a yellow arm band. The forty-nine others wore the white bands indicating that they had undergone a conversion ceremony. Lieutenant Knézi often invited me to his room to talk with me while I performed such small tasks as repairing or sorting out his clothing. He was quite obviously intrigued by the fact that unlike the others, I did not convert. For my part, I found all the converted men to be very fine gentlemen. Given the circumstances, the conversion they underwent simply offered an

attempt to escape hell itself.

At any rate, viewed thirty-seven years later, I don't think I suffered especially because I kept my name and my faith. In fact, during those years, I became more religious than either before or since. Praying to the Almighty for peace in the world was the only thing I could do to help my wife and children, and I searched for ways to say the prayer morning and night. Contrary to the rules, I rose each morning before reveillé for my morning prayers. Soon my comrades objected to this, saying they did not want to be disturbed until reveillé and afterward, as a result, I tried to say my prayers after everyone was awake. There was so very little time.

I was alone now in the room when Lieutenant Knézi came to get me. I was not afraid. I was in the middle of the Shemonah Esreh and I could not take a step. Furthermore, I was in the presence of the Almighty, and who is mightier than G-d? I finished praying, I could put away the Tefillin after work at night. Lieutenant Knézi told me that while my fervent praying was beautiful, holding up the unit for ten minutes couldn't happen again. He knew that I could not get up any earlier in the mornings, so he said the only solution for me was to stay in the kitchen and help the cook, rather than marching out with the unit.

All this ended in November 1944. We were surrounded by the *csendörs* – a special unit dedicated to carrying out the Final Solution – who yelled that we were now their prisoners. We were moved out of our barracks amidst insults and beatings. Out at the gate, Lieutenant Knézi waited sadly. He shook hands with me and whispered that we would meet again. How he had the courage to do this I will never know. Perhaps his own religious conviction? When I met him later in Debrecen, I asked him if he had been punished for shaking hands with one of the Jewish 'subhuman' inmates. He assured me he had not.

Now the Albrecht military station was assigned to us. The station was infested with lice and insects of all kinds and we

spent the night scratching ourselves until blood spotted the bed. The following day, we were taken to the railroad station where German soldiers took command. Eighty men were forced into a cattle car. We heard later that this train transported 4,000 Jewish men in military labour service, along with 1,800 horses to an unknown location and purpose.

*A*fter many days and nights, we finally arrived at the Bergen-Belsen station. We were happy just to be able to get out of our tight places, but no... first the horses were unloaded, the only thing considered valuable on the train. After the horses, the sick were carried off and then those who had died in transit. After the many days and nights in the crowded cars without food or water, not to mention sanitary facilities, finally we could step outside, or I should say, crawl off the train into fresh air. Naturally, we wondered why we had been brought here, and for what diabolical scheme? I confess I had fantasised at nights of perhaps meeting my darling family at that unknown destination where the speeding train was heading. Whenever I spoke of my 'fantasies' to my comrades they dismissed it saying, "Nonsense, we do not live in the age of miracles." But they were wrong, four of those 4,000 men found their families in Bergen-Belsen.

As we were marching away from the station, eight in a row towards the road sign Gefeng Lager, we could see barracks in the distance beyond the barbed wire fences and soon, we could see clothing drying in the sun.

"Friends," I said, "there are women and children in this place."

By this time we were marching next to the fence and the women and children came close to view the men passing by. They were searching for their loved ones: husbands, brothers, fathers. We were searching too. All of a sudden, I heard children crying in unison "Apu, Apu"... and I saw my four

children. Mixed feelings invaded me, happy and sad, happy to see them and sad that they were behind barbed wire. The German butchers quickly agreed that those who found family could move together. I didn't wait for permission but embraced my wife and children that same afternoon.

They quickly recounted what had happened to them since our last time together in Debrecen. They told me that first the ghetto had been closed and the women and children taken to the open air brick factory. There, the population was divided into three groups and all prepared for the trip to Auschwitz.

They say that 'he who gains time, gains life'. People started looking for ways to delay their departure so as to go with the later transport. My family was not so fortunate and were scheduled for the first transport. But once again, the Almighty intervened by producing yet another miracle. The tracks were badly damaged by the never-ceasing bombardments. A few days later, despite being almost totally blocked by wood and metal bars, some managed to look out the window and discovered that the train was back in Budapest.

The train next travelled to Austria to provide the labour to help farmers in the forests. Shortly after, the group which included my family, were transported to Bergen-Belsen and arrived five days before we did.

Now bitter winter was upon us to add to our many miseries. We knew hunger personally. Even the beets used for animal feed were in short supply, and the coffee was useful only to wash down the children with. Our growing children moved around the barracks weak and dizzy from starvation.

To this day, after so many years, we still think and talk about the horrors we lived through! Who can ever forget the ever-present stench of burning flesh and the black smoke descending on the camp day and night as the crematorium belched it out. In fact, it seemed the crematorium was not

efficient enough because soon the dead were being piled up and then thrown into holes dug close to the barracks. The corpses were then covered with benzine, set on fire and covered with lime.

We had all seen the dead of tomorrow, the *heflings* – those prisoners who were all bones and yellow skin – standing half frozen and waiting for death. But why.... why... ?

There is no answer. I only wish those who deny the Holocaust had spent 24 hours in Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz, Majdanek or Treblinka. They should have had to stand at attention for a head count for most of the day in the cold, hungry, and inhaling the fumes of the burning flesh of our people. Only then would they believe that it was all true, and that a monumental tragedy that cried to Heaven had taken place. Surely those that deny the Holocaust do not believe that Germany would pay survivors in a futile attempt to redress their crime against the Jewish people of Europe if it had not been true.

The money offered is not at all proportionate to the crime. Without an apology, sympathy and genuine contrition, it is worth absolutely nothing at all. The nay-sayers must fall silent and disappear into their dark caves in shame, in the face of what the Holocaust still means to survivors and witnesses. In this respect, I believe they will have to account for their crimes in the last judgment. But back to my ‘story’

*W*inter in Bergen-Belsen was slowly letting up, and rumours circulated of possible relocation and even liberation. We were afraid of any change that might turn a hopeless, desperate situation into something even worse. Even as the Germans were pulling back from approaching Russian troops and liberation appeared at hand for us, we were back in the railroad cars and on our way to G-d knows where.

The train was running in the April sunshine and we were

happily talking about the good life, happiness, and the freedom to come. We heard aeroplanes attacking the engine and then the cars with ear-shattering noise and destruction. We began to hear and feel that our car was next in line. There was no escape as the neighbouring car was shot to smithereens.

Sensing that death was imminent, I screamed to my wife and children to drop to the floor in one pile and I threw myself over them, covering them as much as possible to protect them from the shower of bullets, shrapnel and phosphor grenades. Sure enough, I felt a horrendous blow near my right thigh. I touched my leg, and my hand was bloodied and my clothing in flames. By now the noise was subsiding as the target moved to the next car. The engine slowed down to the point that we could jump off the train. I was rapidly losing blood, but I didn't care since my family had escaped without a scratch and was running for a doctor to help me. Once the airplanes moved on, 200 dead were counted, many, many were wounded. The train was destroyed.

Horse-drawn carts and small trucks arrived to transport the wounded to a hospital in a small town called Kiritz about two hours away where they were prepared for our arrival. In a festive atmosphere, we were taken to the operating room between rows of nuns. I was anaesthetised and operated on. Many unknown hours passed and when I opened my eyes, caring, loving human faces surrounded my bed. But I had to find out where my family was and what happened to the death-train. No one could tell me. My bed was clean and snow white, and through the open door I heard the nuns singing.

Over my bed there was a sign, 'Semita'. As the days passed, the priest stopped to say a few words to me on his Sunday morning visits. Needless to say, the one thing on my mind was what was going on with my family. We were once again separated. Who was looking after them? How was their life unfolding? I could only hope that they would not be further harmed and that soon we would be together in peace and

happiness.

I was in this hospital for six months, because in addition to my wounds, I had contracted *fleckfieber*, a condition which involves high fever and required more operations and intravenous feeding. I must say that the doctors, nun nurses and other employees of this little hospital were, in my judgment, kind, humane and excellent professionals. They made my stay there bearable, considering that I still had to overcome my health problems, my death sentence as a Jew (or was this suddenly lifted?) and most of all, the agonising uncertainty regarding my wife and children.

The last time I saw them was on the death train. I did not sleep very well in this hospital. I have been told many times that the administration was aware that liberation was imminent and they thought it wise to be good to Jews. While this may have been true, I must say that I was saved and treated for wounds and illness by people who only a short time before had been loyal subjects of the Third Reich with its genocidal policies. Liberation did, in fact, take place two weeks later.

*A*midst the noise of battle as Russian troops claimed the town square, the loud-speaker on the roof repeated *Aufpassen-Krankenhaus*. I was taken into the bomb shelter with the other patients and hospital staff.

When the alarm was called off, I was taken back to my room where Russian lieutenants entered along with doctors and nurses. I was presented and the Russians talked to me in Yiddish. They asked me if I was being properly looked after, and if I had any complaints. They asked what I had heard of Auschwitz Vernichtungslager (death camp), while they looked at my doctor who claimed: "*das haben einzelne Menschen gemacht*". I told them I was very well treated but I had not eaten a good meal for many years. Starting that afternoon, we all received larger portions.

Three men and a young girl were with me in the hospital room. After the Russians' visit, the girl was moved out, but she often came back to see us. Her name is Polgár Irén and she was a charming, well behaved, pretty little girl, as well as an observant Jewess who was always ready to help. She was mobile so she would get what we asked for. Her left arm was bandaged and in a sling. She was with me in the death-train and had held a baby in her arm with her left hand on the baby's head. The bullets had shattered the innocent little baby's head along with the three middle fingers of Irén's hand. As Polgár Irén moved with great ease, she could help the three of us who were all bedridden. With her good right hand, she was able to bring us additional food and drinks in the mornings and afternoons. She usually brought the loot to me for division as my hands were unaffected.

One of my roommates, Varsányi, was wounded in his arm and shoulder, and the other, Angyal, had lost both his eyes. He begged me to speak with the chief surgeon on his behalf to seek the assistance of an eye specialist who could perhaps help him out of an unbearable condition. When I spoke to the chief, he replied "if Angyal could have been operated on, it would have had to be done by a specialist. But his eyes were totally lost when he was brought here."

As the death-train (my designation) began to slow down after the strafing began, Angyal had jumped off the wagon and found shelter under the train itself, behind a wheel. However, the shower of bullets had hit the gravel bed between the tracks and it was the stones that claimed the eyes of my friend, never to be restored. Later, back in Hungary, he was declared 100% war-disabled.

I must confess that Polgár Irén had to remind me of Shavuot while in Kiritz. As we did not have Sidurim, she asked me to say the Mazkir so that she would be able to say it after me. I felt honoured and I obliged with pleasure. We both cried our hearts out, remembering how it used to be – the holidays with

our loved ones. Will we ever forget what we had been through? My feeling was that we would live with the memories for the remainder of our days. What would give us consolation was faith and hope. In the meantime, my two friends left the hospital, as nothing more could be done for them.

As I was still bleeding I had to remain behind. The *fleckfieber* renders me contagious so I am quarantined. I get a private room in the garden house and through the open windows I smell the fragrance of the lovely flowers in the garden. It is summer now and most days, the sun shines. But what is it all worth if everyone goes home except me? Now I truly feel sick. Again I have a very high fever and my vision is blurred. What will happen to our reunion? When will the six of us be together again? It would be nice if you were around my bed now! But if you wait too long the darkness will descend on me and I will not be able to see your sweet faces!

Through the slightly opened door and with eyes not quite clear I perceive someone looking into my room and waving goodbye. It is Polgár Irén with the blind Angyal on her arm. They are going back to Karcag, Hungary. I wave to them. G-d bless you on your journey dear friends.

My fever is dropping and I feel less agitated. I am beginning to feel better and my appetite is coming back. Now they wheel me back to my room. I have new roommates, French and German. We quickly start talking in mime language and become friends. I am weak but I start walking. The Schwestern were still very good to us. "*Was haben sie gern? Die Küche wird Ihnen machen was sie wollen?*" they frequently asked. I asked for coffee cake, which they made very rich with chocolate. With every meal they gave us wine, saying it helped our recovery.

Soon, I began to entertain the idea of returning home to my family. My doctors tried to dissuade me of this plan. They said I still bled and I was not strong enough. However, when they saw that I was determined, they let me go, suggesting that I rest on the way and have my wounds dressed in hospitals.

I stopped in Berlin in the *Judisches Krankenhaus*. Then I continued my journey back home. I visited hospitals in Hungary where I was declared 50% war disabled. This designation allowed me to travel free for a while and then later with student tickets on city tramways. This free travel was the sum total of what that country provided its war wounded - the group which included myself. As I said earlier, I was definitely not merely a war victim.

My family had returned home earlier from Theresienstadt camp in Czechoslovakia.

Unannounced, I arrived in the small flat Erev Rosh Hashana. An unforgettable reunion.

My wife soon showed me a letter she received from Polgár Irén. "Madame," she wrote, "I was with your husband in the hospital in the town of Kiritz. You must be patient and be assured that he will come home...". The letter went on to other matters. My wife answered her but Irén never replied. Naturally, I also wanted to let her know that I was alive and finally reunited with my loving wife and children. She did not reply to my letter either. I remembered that she had told me in Kiritz that she had someone who was interested in marriage, so I concluded that they must have found each other, got married and left the country. I looked for her for a while as I wanted to know how she was doing since we had been through so much together and she had been so kind and nice and helpful with us in the hospital.

When I completely gave up hope of finding her, we received a visitor from Israel. She told us she was learning English from a very nice lady who was not charging any fees for these lessons, and that they had become very good friends. She told us this woman had a disability. She had lost her three middle fingers on her left hand. I immediately asked her name and was told that she went by Mrs. Grosz.

I suspected that it had to be Irén, and the next time we went to Israel we looked up Mrs. Grosz. It was Polgár Irén! We met her in a hospital after being told that she had been admitted with a minor problem. Her husband was with her and I was with my wife. All of us were crying because of the past and more recent events. Thirty-two years had passed since she waved good-bye to me in Kiritz.

Tears come easily to our eyes when we are reminded of loved ones who did not come back. My wife lost her mother, four of her five brothers and two sisters, all married with children. Her one surviving brother came back without his wife and son, and he now lives in the USA. He married an Auschwitz survivor whose husband did not return, and they have a son. I lost my mother, three brothers and a sister. My sister had a son who survived and now also lives in the USA.

Our community once approached Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who helped Jews in Budapest by issuing Swedish passports to them, thereby claiming they were Swedish citizens. The Germans could not touch them. Our request was turned down however, and no one could save the hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews outside Budapest.

We cannot complain, though. We can now look at our four children and nine grandchildren.

Every time I visit Israel I am reminded that the Holocaust would have never taken place if we had had our own country during that dark period in our history.

—ADOLF SCHONFELD

Derecskén születtem és itt nőttem
boldogam meg Fittler nem jött.
Derecskén egy kis falu volt 1200
alul 120 családval. Itt voltam és
ha nem is könyvtárok voltak és
sok tanult a közeli Dörmögben.
Mindent megfogalmaztam dolgoztam
keményen, munkáim, stb. stb.

nem is volt az alet Dörmögben
jött el, az alet Dörmögben, az alet
Dörmögben családunk ott született
ott itt haladtunk.

Apunk az alet Dörmögben, Apunk
az alet Dörmögben, Apunk
az alet Dörmögben volt a családunk
tanítójak. Apunk egy másik Dörmögben
is volt (Dörmög) és két fia tanított. A
nem jött Dörmögben Apunk és Dörmög.

ma is volt egy egy Dörmögben 4 és
his Dörmögben. 4 fia tanított. Apunk
Dörmögben volt a haladtunk.
Apunk is az Apunk is az alet
Dörmögben az alet Dörmögben.

VERA REMEMBERS . . .

We were all born in a rural Hungarian town called Derecske. It had 10 000 inhabitants including 120 Jewish families. Our great grandfather, Schönfeld Shmile was from one of the founding families of the Congregation. Both our grandfathers were soldiers in the First World War. Schönfeld Éliás came home, but died seven years later at the age of 47. Szolovits Lajos (Chaim) died a national war hero at age 36.

In 1942, my father decided to move to Debrecen, a city 20 km away. Life had become very difficult in small towns. Restrictions enforced by the *csendőrs* increased by the day. My mother objected vehemently to the move as she did not want to be separated from her mother, sisters and brothers. However, it is due to my father's sheer determination that we are here today. Not one Jew from Derecske who lived there during the round-ups survived the Holocaust.

At one point, we were on our way to Auschwitz, but miraculously the train turned back and we ended up in Austria until December when we were taken to Bergen-Belsen. One week later we met Apu, who was brought there from Budapest. Many from his unit escaped along the way, but our father, guided by the principle, 'follow the crowd', ended up with us in Bergen-Belsen.

By April 1945, we could hear the sound of artillery fire day and night and we expected imminent liberation. But no..., the Germans once again put us into railway cars and we started a never-ending journey to G-d only knew where. On April 16th, we were attacked due to the fact that, as we found out later, a military unit was attached to our train.

As the noise of explosions and machine gun fire drew nearer, Apu threw us on the rail car floor and flung himself across us to shield the five of us from the bullets. He was badly wounded as the grenade tore out the flesh from his rear thigh. When the train slowed down and finally stopped we all jumped

to the ground and started running. Some were shot while running. The wounded were taken to different hospitals.

We all waited outside until the truck came and Apu was put on it. He tried to console us, telling Lali, we shall eat *kuglof* (a rich chocolate pastry) again, soon. Anyu was devastated. Given his wounded condition, she had very little hope of ever seeing our father again. Furthermore, no one had yet told us that the extermination had ended.

After Apu was on the truck, we children went back to the train just to be inside. Anyu waited until the truck was full and left. She then joined us in the car - very sad, hopeless and frightened. Few survived. Why should they care for a Jew? Fortunately, Apu was taken to a larger hospital and the doctors obviously knew that the war was coming to an end and thought it wise to show professionalism towards their new influx of Jewish patients. Apu received an operation and was generally well treated. He came back to Debrecen at the end of September in 1945.

*B*ack in the train, we saw what we escaped from and what Apu had done to save our lives. Men, women and children were lying on the floor in pools of blood. Anyu's uncle and his grandchild were both dead. The roof, floor and walls of the railway car were almost transparent with bullet holes. The train was cleared and the dead were carried off. We were on our way to Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia without Apu. Men climbed on top of our rail car and placed a giant red cross on the roof. Anyu supplied the white sheet and someone else the red cross.

We were liberated by Russian troops on May 6th and went back to Hungary in July. We were sick, dirty and wore only rags. Given we had nothing, we headed straight back to the ghetto. There was not very much there either since it had of course been looted during our absence. The Jewish aid organi-

zation, 'JOINT', gave us some food and clothing. Of the two large families, only we alone had survived.

I often tell my children and grandchildren that our survival was due to Apu's insistence on moving from Derecske to Debrecen and to his shielding us in the death train.

I was already 15 years old so I remember everyone: our grandmothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Everyone loved and cared for each other. Our maternal grandmother, whom we called Mama, was loved by all. She was widowed at the age of 30 and raised seven children alone. The boys went to school and got married and as was the custom, the girls simply got married. All the work was done with her own two hands. Everyone called her Lea Néném (Auntie Lea). She also cared for her father, Lövy Sámuel, a widowed, retired Jewish school teacher, until his death in 1927. I will not forget Mama for as long as I live.

All were murdered in Auschwitz.

We moved to Debrecen in the autumn of 1942. Apu was instantly called in for duty to serve in labour camps. Sometimes he returned home and then was recalled. It was a difficult time for us. Anyu wanted to move back to Derecske but this was no longer permitted for Jews.

*O*n March 19, 1944, the Germans ordered all of us to wear the yellow stars when we were out on the street. For some time, it had already been dangerous for Jews to go outside. Now with the yellow star, it became impossible if we did not want to be beaten or killed. On one occasion Anyu removed the star from the coat of seven-year old blond Évi while she went out for some groceries. This was very risky and we waited, terrified, for her return. Thank G-d, she came back safely.

At the beginning of June, we were rounded up to move to the ghetto and could only take the bare essentials with us. By this time, we did not have any valuables anyway, as we had to

give them all up on prior searches.

First, we were lucky enough to live with Anyu's aunt, Lövy Szeréna, who had a house in the ghetto. Two weeks later we were moved again to a more crowded, larger ghetto. There too, Anyu had an Aunt and we moved in with her and her large family. Once more we had to reduce our belongings. We were more and more crowded and there was less and less food.

On June 16th (my 15th birthday), we were taken to the open air brick factory and were allowed to take with us only what we could carry on our back. I do not know how she managed it, but Anyu had brought a bed spread with her which she laid out to give us some sense of place and comfort. As soon as we got there, it started to rain. We had to 'camp' out in the clay mud. Évi came down with chickenpox with a high fever.

A few days later we had to pack and start a 15 km march. Even five-year old Gyuri had a backpack. Those who could not walk were kicked and beaten by the Germans. How the five of us managed I'll never know.

We finally arrived, however, and stayed in a low stable where we had to crawl in on hands and knees and slept on bare ground. We went on, sleeping under the open sky. The rain kept falling. While we did not have much to eat, Anyu had a few biscuits in her pocket. They were so delicious and so filling!

Then we were put into rail cars with 80 to 100 people in a car. There was no room when we lay down on the hay-covered floor and there was a bucket for a toilet. We were only permitted to empty it very rarely and it often tipped and turned over. There is no need to describe the smell. The children were crying. Everybody was hungry. There was no way to wash. The old people and children were sick.

People began to die.

*W*e finally arrived in Strasshof, Austria. This was a selection camp and we had to undress and were disinfected.

We were waiting naked while the German soldiers walked up and down inspecting us. Later we stood more formally, still naked, for the decision. Expecting special consideration for having small children, Anyu had Évi and Gyuri stand in front. She did not know that in Auschwitz, for example, this would have meant death.

In Strasshof at this time, however, it meant work for us in the townships of Urreisberg and Eisenbergerant. Anyu and I worked in the forest. Lali, my ten-year old brother, carried water. After a showing of power tool operation, we had to fell trees, cut them in one meter length pieces, clean them and place them in order. How we managed to do this is just one more question that remains locked in mystery. We stayed in the corner of a building on a large floor with hay as our bedding. Our dream was to have a room with a door for the five of us and no one else. Would we ever see that day?

There was not much food. The children supplemented it with whatever they found outside. One little girl got poisoned by some wild fruit and Gyuri also claimed he ate from it but he did not get sick. There were 67 of us in this *lager* (camp). In September, they moved us to three different places.

Nineteen of us were placed on the farm of a local baron to help with farm work. The second group escaped and were soon liberated. The third group did not survive. We stayed in a house and slept in bunk beds on hay. Even though we were reasonably well fed, by this time we began to suffer the consequences of months of deprivation. Vitamin deficiency had caused Évi's scalp to be covered almost completely by scabs. Only months later in Debrecen did good food and proper medical care cure the condition.

Winter came very quickly in Austria on the farm in the forest. By November we could not work outside. Our German task master told us that we would be moved on. He also told us that as the war was almost over we should try and escape and hide in the forest and he would try to help us. But Anyu would

not get involved in anything like that with us children and her aunts in the bitter winter.

*T*hey took us back to Strashof. From there, we went on to... someone through a small window could surmise ... Germany. Fear gripped everyone. After many days we finally arrived in Bergen-Belsen, where we were kept in large barracks on three-level bunk beds. We were immediately overrun by lice. Once we were permitted to take a shower. Anyu was happy to take us there. We were under the shower heads and when the water did not flow instantly, we feared that gas was coming. However, the water finally came. After the war, we found out that gas used to come through those pipes in 1942-1943.

We all waited daily at the barbed wire fence and gazed at new camp arrivals. This is how we spotted Apu. We were very fortunate to have this accidental meeting since we were all still in relatively good condition. Anyu made sure that we stayed that way.

There were people with us who did not have enough strength to walk, as they were all skin and bone. They were surprised to see us children for they thought we were all supposed to have been killed. Once, I saw the dead being loaded on trucks. We were usually prevented from looking at such sights.

We had very little to eat. First we got a small piece of bread and black coffee for breakfast. For dinner we were fed *dörgemüze* (dry vegetables by dictionary definition) unpeeled, unwashed carrots used for animal feed in an unknown liquid. There were a few small pieces of potato thrown in this goo which we all fished out and gave to Évi who would not eat anything else.

Even Gyuri took great pride in spotting the potato pieces and giving them to Anyu who fed them to Évi. Later, we did not

get any food at all during the day. The tall Lali could only walk by holding on to the bunk bed and he fainted many times and Gyuri repeated endlessly, "I am hungry, I am hungry". We got our light black coffee at night. Anyu used to wash us with this coffee on alternate days. She even washed our hair with it. She truly made a superhuman effort to ensure that we would all survive the hell. Many of those that did not have an 'Anyu' got sick and died of the lice infestation and the dirt.

Every morning we had to stand in the cold for hours for head count (appel) in front of the barracks. The nightly cadavers were piled nearby. To this day, the stench from the crematorium is in my nose.

By March, we heard the incessant artillery fire. To us, this was the sound of hope. Around April 10th, we were piled into rail cars again, 80 to 100 people per car, everyone carrying months of dirt, deteriorating health condition and packed off into the unknown. On April 16th, the train came under the heavy air attack that I have described earlier.

We had arrived in Theresienstadt and were kept at the Dresden Barracks.

Compared to Bergen-Belsen, this was heaven. We were given lots of food - too much in fact. Some people could not take it, got sick and died.

Clearly this was the end of the war because this camp used to be very brutal and earlier, many of our people were shipped to Auschwitz from there for extermination. We also had many cases of *fleckfieber*. If someone had any kind of fever, he or she was taken to the temporary hospital under a tent because it was assumed that it was the *fleckfieber* and therefore the person must be quarantined. Anyu did not want us to be separated and if any of us got sick, she hid us or begged the doctor not to report it. We knew him from Bergen-Belsen. Both Évi and I developed a fever but Anyu explained that this was

a normal childhood condition. Thank G-d Anyu was right and the fever subsided within a few days.

A group of *heflings* were brought to the *lager* and I do not know how they had survived to this late date. They did not even have the strength to eat. Still, when they saw the food vat, they rushed to it, turned it over, and withdrew again into their private world.

*I*n July, after a long journey in military wagons, we arrived back in Debrecen. Russian soldiers were in charge on the train. The young girls and women had to hide. While they left us alone, the refugees of other nationalities had no peace. They had taken everything away from everybody whether it was useful or not.

We returned to Szeri Néni's house in the ghetto. Anyu's sister's husband had returned and lived there along with other young men we knew from Derecske. We could not go back where we lived before the round up began because, naturally, it was occupied by non-Jews. They had kept the house and everything in it. Anyu was cooking for the men and there was enough for all of us. The JOINT gave us clothing. Évi got medical care and I was in the sanatorium for many months.

Slowly it became clear to Anyu that only my uncle Ármin had survived from her family. The horror she feels to this day is indescribable.

*W*e were waiting for Apu to come home. Others thought we were lunatics for keeping our vigil. Every day for many weeks, Anyu, along with others, went to the railway station in the hope of seeing Apu, or others, come back. After a while she went less often.

In fact, she was busy in the kitchen with her arms elbow deep in dough when our neighbour, a young man, unexpectedly rushed home on a bicycle yelling: “Mrs. Schönfeld, Mrs. Schönfeld, Mr. Schönfeld is coming home!” My mother rushed out into the street, we children with her, to see my father just emerging from around the street corner, walking slowly, with cane in hand.

Who says we do not live in the age of miracles?

—VERA KOPPEL



The Schonfelds, circa 1947