

Surviving in Budapest

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March 19, 1944 - German troops invaded Hungary

By March 1944, most of the Jews of Europe had been murdered. The mass murder of Jews started in Poland three years earlier, followed by the murder of the Jews of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, Belarus and the Ukraine and occupied parts of the Soviet Union. Hundreds of thousands were shot, concentration camps were established for the specific purpose of murdering Jews, camps, some of which are now scarcely remembered because evidence of their existence had been erased: Chelmno, Majdanek, Belzec, Placow, many others, and ultimately the largest death factory, Auschwitz.

I was 9 years old, when German troops invaded Budapest. I spent the day with a friend and his father visiting a sculptor's studio and learning how bronze sculptures were cast. It was a beautiful sunny spring day, and we had no idea of the momentous events that were unfolding. My parents, who had heard the news were anxious about our safety and were very relieved when I returned home.

The Germans suspected that Hungary was a fickle ally ready to pull out of the war or change sides. Hungary also failed to prove its loyalty to Nazi ideology by tackling the Jewish question, eliminating Jews from Hungary. Though Hungarians had enacted anti-Jewish measures, between 1938 and 1941- three pieces of legislation based on the Nuremberg Laws - they refused to hand over Hungarian Jews to the Germans to be killed, or embark on a programme of themselves murdering the Jews. 1600 Jews, who were not Hungarian citizens were deported to Galicia in July and August 1941 and were murdered there. But Jews who were Hungarian citizens were not touched. So, Adolf Eichmann and other experts on the mass murder of Jews arrived with the first German troops to set up programmes to wipe out Hungarian Jewry, making use of the lessons they had learned in Poland, Russia, and other German occupied territories.

Anti-Jewish measures were introduced within days of the German occupation¹. From 5 April, *Hungarian "Jews"* were required to wear a ten-centimeter canary-yellow *star* on outer clothing in public places. There was a scramble for yellow material and a good business in manufacturing these stars. Unlike the yellow stars in other countries, these

¹ <http://www.claremontmckenna.edu/hist/jpetropoulos/arrow/holocaust/holocaust.htm>

On March 29, the Hungarian Council of Ministers also formed the three aforementioned anti-Semitic decrees that stripped the Jews of whatever they had left. The laws excluded from all basic necessities of living. They forbade them from the professions of law, the press, motion picture and theater. They could no longer ride in cars, taxis, trains, buses, and ships; the only mode of transportation left to them was the streetcar. Eventually, even telephones and radios disappeared from Jewish households. However, the Jews no longer cared about simple pleasures such as listening to the radio; they were more concerned with staying alive from day to day. Because the government froze or restricted their bank accounts, the Jews could only have a nominal amount of money, which made even buying a meal nearly impossible.

were plain yellow, without the word “Jude”. I believe that my mother, who was handy with needle and scissors, cut these out in regulation size and sewed them on our coats.

In the subsequent weeks it became dangerous for Jews to leave their homes in the evening. I was a member of the synagogue choir, but my parents deemed it too risky for me to go out at night to rehearsals. Jews were not allowed to have bank accounts or own valuables. My father cashed in the small savings accounts set up for my brother and me when we were born and used the money to buy a gold watch for each of us. He asked a lifelong friend, who was not Jewish to keep these watches for us until the war was over, but the friend refused to do this. People could be arrested, or shot on the spot for helping Jews, or at least that is what he thought. My father was deeply disappointed that even one of his closest friends was not prepared to help him. You could no longer trust your friends and neighbours. We lived in a comfortable middle-class suburb of Budapest, where my grandfather had established one of the best delicatessen stores in Budapest. Our family had been part of the community of the ninth district. Everybody knew my grandfather, my grandmother, and my father. The closest friends of my grandparents included the district commander of the police, who was not Jewish, and a general in the Austro-Hungarian army who was. The general was proud of his baritone voice and loved singing Schubert songs to my father’s piano accompaniment. For two generations, we were part of this district of the city, Jewish, but also patriotic Hungarians.

My life changed with the German occupation of Hungary. Jewish children were no longer allowed to attend public schools. I had never experienced anti-Semitism before. Some of the children in the school were Catholics, other Protestants, and some Jewish. We were all part of the same school, and part of the same suburb of Budapest, which had the best football team in the country, one of the best in the world. I had often been involved in bitter fights at school, more in the planning than the execution, but I never thought that these fights had anything to do with me being Jewish. My archenemy, the leader of the other gang, was the son of a colonel in the Arrow Cross fascist militia, a smart boy with beautiful manners. Now I had to leave school. My schooling ceased for the next ten months, until the Germans were driven out of Hungary.

Then Jews had to move into specially designated Jewish apartments². Ours was one of these, but we were not allowed to have the entire apartment to ourselves. A family who lived in our building was moved in with us into our three-room apartment. Two families,

²http://www.claimscon.org/?url=compensation/budapest_persecution

The order of 5 April 1944 to wear the yellow star was the beginning of effectively publicly marginalizing all Jews. On 3 May orders were issued to register apartments and houses in Budapest belonging to Jews, to prepare to concentrate Jews in selected buildings within the town. These were called “yellow star houses” (sárga csillagos házak). The order to concentrate Jews in Budapest was issued on 16 June 1944. It regulated labeling the houses with a yellow Star of David in order to easily identify them.

Following an eight-day deadline no Budapest Jew could live outside a “yellow star house” (sárga csillagos házak). Each Jewish family was allocated only one room. Up to 200,000 Jews moved into 1,948 houses. As the housing was low standard and buildings were constantly being evacuated for German or Hungarian authorities, living conditions deteriorated continuously. Most of the Jews had to leave their belongings in their former apartments, leaving them without basic furnishings so that they often had to sleep on the bare floor. They were only allowed to leave their houses between 2 pm and 5 pm.

one kitchen, one bathroom, three rooms, the place was crowded. The two families didn't get on. The boy from the other family was a big bully, a crybaby, and a thief. At least this is how I remember him. It was difficult for the two families to get along. But we still had a roof over our heads, were not starving, and were not in immediate danger.

Although we might have thought that we were safe, my father's cousin, Olga, Jewish and a socialist came to Budapest from Losonc, (Lucenek) now in Slovakia, and was arrested at the railway station. She was never seen or heard of again. I have fond memories of having stayed with her and her mother in the country. My great aunt Paola, my grandfather's sister, had fled from Vienna to Budapest. The Nazis had beaten her husband to death. She found refuge in my grandparents' home. When the Germans occupied Hungary, she had to report to the German Embassy as a German subject and had disappeared, no one knew what had happened to her, she was almost certainly deported and killed.

My father had to join a Jewish labour unit. He had served in the Hungarian army in the early days of the war, and then in the unarmed Jewish forced labour unit with the army that occupied Yugoslavia but by 1944 he was back home again. Forced labour units were set up five years earlier, mainly for Jews, but also for Jehovah's Witnesses, Romany, and left-wing dissidents. These units were unarmed, ill equipped, and many served on the battlefields. Sadistic army officers oversaw some. Over the five years my father was conscripted and then released a number of times. My uncle served in one of these units on the Russian front and died in a field hospital.

May 15, 1944³

Ghettos, enclosed areas within cities, were established throughout the country and by July 9, within 56 days of the German occupation of Hungary, the Hungarian authorities deported 437,402 Jews, virtually the entire Jewish population of Hungary outside Budapest. They were taken predominantly to Auschwitz Birkenau, where all the elderly, the infirm, the children and many others were killed on arrival. These included my great uncle and aunt from Balasagyarmat in the Nograd district, where I spent some delightful summer holidays, my relatives in Losonc, my mother's cousin in Bekescsaba, and all our close and distant relatives living in the country outside Budapest. Very few of those deported to concentration camps survived the war. It was the largest and fastest deportation of an entire Jewish population.

Had we lived at the end of the tram line, in one of the outlying suburbs of Budapest, I would have been one of those taken to a concentration camp and would not be here to tell

³ **June 4, 1944**

Allied troops liberate Rome. Within six weeks, Anglo-American bombers could hit targets in eastern Germany for the first time.

June 6, 1944

British and U.S. troops successfully land on the [Normandy](#) beaches of France, opening a "Second Front" against the Germans.

the tale. Had I been five years older I would have been conscripted into a forced labour unit and would have been unlikely to survive.

While the Jews of the countryside were moved into Ghettos and from there taken to concentration camps, the Jews of Budapest were forced to move into apartment buildings in parts of the city where many Jews lived, buildings designated for Jews only, a step towards establishing a ghetto in Budapest. My grandparents exchanged their spacious four-bedroom apartment for a small two roomed one designated for Jews only in one of these building, and we, my mother, brother and I moved in with them. There was a strict curfew for Jews, who were only allowed into the street for a very limited time during the day. Those found there outside the hours of the curfew were arrested, killed, or sent or concentration camps. We children spent our days in the courtyard catching flies. We had fly-catching competitions. It was a hot summer.

July 9, 1944⁴

Hungarian troops, on the instruction of the Regent, Miklos Horthy, the Hungarian Franco, or Mussolini, intervened and stopped the deportations. By then, it was clear that the Axis powers, Germany, and its allies had lost the war. After the battle of Stalingrad, the Soviet army was unstoppable, moving though Poland and threatening Germany. The Allies were moving north through Italy, landed in France and began their attack on Germany.⁵

Whether the Hungarian government intervened and stopped the deportations because of the appeals of church leaders, or because it was contemplating pulling out of the war, or switching sides, or because there was a touch of decency in the soul of an otherwise ruthless fascist dictator is subject of debate. At any rate, the Jews of Budapest, me, included, were safe for the time being.

October 15, 1944⁶

The Hungarian government of Miklos Horthy was overthrown. Horthy asked the Allies for an armistice. The Fascist party, the Arrow Cross, Hungarian nationalists antisemites and allies of the Germans, and took over. Arrow Cross thugs, many only teenagers,

⁴ **June 22, 1944**

The Soviets launch a massive offensive in eastern Byelorussia (Belarus), destroying the German Army Group Center and driving westward to the Vistula River across from Warsaw in central Poland by August 1.

⁵ **1944.** Hitler's once mighty empire crumbles on every front. On the West, Wehrmacht could not stop the Allied while in the East the Red Army moved without stopping to the eastern border of the Reich and plunged into the Balkan. In August, the Soviet offensive forced Romania and then Bulgaria to switch from Germany to supporting the Soviet Union. This event made a third door to *the Reich lay open and a new front had to be created in Hungary and Croatia by German divisions. The situation gave the SS an opportunity to grab the last power for them as Hitler's praetorian guards. But in the end, they must pay it with the greatest defeat for the Waffen SS.*

⁶ **August 1, 1944-October 5, 1944**

The non-communist underground Home Army rises up against the Germans in an effort to liberate Warsaw before the arrival of Soviet troops. The Soviet advance halts on the east bank of the Vistula. On October 5, the Germans accept the surrender of the remnants of the Home Army forces fighting in Warsaw.

randomly attacked Jews. For the next ten days Jews were prohibited from leaving their homes.

The building we were living in was raided by Arrow Cross youths; they lined up the men in the courtyard facing the wall. The boys of the Arrow Cross militia strutted up and down with their guns. However, the caretaker of the building, a printer and old time socialist, intervened by approaching the district commander of the Arrow Cross and getting him to call off his teenage hoodlums. The men, including my grandfather, were saved. The brave caretaker was murdered soon after this.

While the Arrow Cross militants raided the building my mother, my brother, and I, were hidden in the pitch-dark basement. We lay concealed under gray rugs that blended in with the firewood stored there, invisible when the Arrow Cross militia came to search the basement for hidden Jews and shone their torchlight on us. I, aged nine, wanted to take to these Arrow Cross thugs and attack them with my fists. My mother didn't think that this was a good idea.

On October 20 the death marches of Jews to concentration camps resumed. Early in November my mother had to report to the brick works, which was one of the main collection point for Jews. My mother's destination was Lichtenworth, a holding camp outside Vienna. It was a journey of 220 km, a long walk for middle-aged women with heavy packs, unused to such effort. She and her group stopped off in Kophaza, a small country town in Hungary. They were placed in the empty pigsties. My mother's life was saved there by the kindness of the woman, whose pigsty she was billeted in. This woman got food left over from a party at the canteen of the German officers for my mother and the other women who were sheltered there. This additional food sustained them and made the difference between life and death. The husband of this woman, a Hungarian soldier, was a prisoner of war in Russia. She hoped that someone in Russia would repay her kindness by being good to her husband. My mother never forgot not only her kindness, but also the dignity and respect with which she treated her downtrodden women prisoners. My mother kept in touch with this woman after the war and found out that her husband had survived the war and had come back from the Russian prisoner of war camp. They had very successful children who went to university. One of them became a doctor in Sweden.

October 29, 1944

Soviet troops launched attack on Budapest. Over the next two months, Budapest, once one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, set on the two banks of the Danube, a city renowned for its food, its music, its beautiful women, its opulent shops and colourful night life, was totally destroyed by aerial bombardment and street to street, door to door fighting.

October 23, 1944

Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat, a son of a prominent banking family, came to Hungary with the object of saving the remnants of the Hungarian Jews. He, Carl Lutz, the Swiss consul, and Giorgio Perlasca, an Italian fascist and self-appointed Spanish Consul, issued passports to Jews, implying that the holders of these passports come under the protection of their respective countries. Similar passports were issued by the Vatican to a

handful of baptized Jews. My grandparents, my aunt, my brother, I, and two other children, who had been left parentless when their mother was taken away to concentration camp, moved to an apartment, already crowded, in a building under Swiss protection.

There one day we caught a glimpse of my father as his forced labour unit passed through Budapest and was commandeered to unload barges that we could see from our window. But a day or two later my father's forced labour unit was marched off to a concentration camp. As they crossed the bridge over the Danube my father escaped and tried to find someone to hide him, give him shelter, but everyone turned him away. He knew hundreds of people, had many friends who were not Jewish, but none of them would help him. Hiding Jews was too dangerous; being a man of military age in the streets invited summary execution. 56-60 people were shot into the Danube daily, some 5000 over the weeks, including the rabbi of our synagogue, who served the congregation for 21 years.

Next day my father joined another group of men from a labour unit and was marched off to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria near Linz. From the group, from which he had escaped, not a single person survived.

By November Auschwitz was beginning to be demolished and could not take any more prisoners. Jews still left alive were moved to concentration camps within Germany and Austria. Many of the Jews of Hungary were sent to Mauthausen. On the way, while stopping in Szombathely close to the Austrian border my father ran into my mother's cousin, Bela, from Bekescsaba. It was evident that this man, once a powerful countryman used to lifting heavy loads was dying. He lacked the will to live. Perhaps this reinforced my father's determination to survive and see his wife and children again.

By the time my father arrived in Mauthausen it was already overcrowded with many more prisoners than it was ever planned to accommodate. In March 1945 my father was moved to the sub camp of Gunzkirchen. While marching across the Eisenerz mountain pass my father stumbled and fell just as one of the guards took a pot shot at him. My father was left for dead. The guard thought that the bullet had hit him. As there was no hope of escape, my father got to his feet when the next column of men overtook him and joined them. For the rest of his life my father fasted on the anniversary of this day in March to commemorate his miraculous survival.

Early in November my grandparents, handicapped aunt, my brother and I, and the two children whom my grandmother took in, were taken from the apartment under Swiss protection to the Budapest ghetto. The distance was not great, but my handicapped aunt could only walk very slowly and normally could not have kept pace with others. Had she fallen behind she would have been shot. The policeman in charge of the column of Jews trudging towards the ghetto realised this and placed my aunt at the head of the column to make sure that she didn't get left behind, a small act of kindness by an officer doing a distasteful job with a merciful heart.

So we reached the ghetto. The Budapest ghetto was 0.1 sq miles in area. It housed 70,000 people. On the way to the ghetto, the two children who stayed with us peeled off their

yellow stars and escaped. Perhaps the considerate policeman turned a blind eye. They found the maid who worked for their family, and she hid them. They survived the war and miraculously were reunited with their parents. We, my grandparents, aunt, my brother and I, were billeted in 32 Dob Street, in a small, overcrowded flat with no bathroom. All the tenants on the floor shared the communal bathroom and toilet. Next day, my grandfather discovered that his sister, Roza, moved into the block of flats across the road some days earlier, in 31 Dob St, and managed to get a small room, the maid's room in the same apartment for our family of five. There was an anti-aircraft battery outside No. 32, and the day after we had moved across the road, a bomb hit the building we had been first in. There were just two beds in the room we moved to, one for my grandparents, and one for my brother, aunt and myself, sleeping top to toe. In fact, we spent very little time in that room. Budapest was under constant bombardment, and we spent most of the time in the air raid shelter. The stench in the air raid shelter was at times unbearable, with no toilet, no plumbing, and the water pipes frozen. It was one of the coldest winters in years; even the jars of water that we stored on a shelf in our room froze solid. Our food supplies were exhausted, and we subsisted on three lumps of sugar a day, one for breakfast, one for lunch, and one for dinner. I remember being faint, weak, and lethargic rather than hungry. We would probably not have lasted many more days, had my friend, with whom I had been to see the sculptor on the day when the Germans occupied Hungary, not turned up with his grandmother, dragging between them a washing basket full of food. They too had been turned out of their Swiss or Swedish protected building. We shared our all too small room with them, and they shared their food with us. This kept us all alive.

I have no memory of witnessing any atrocities. I remember looking out from our window on to the store across the corner of the street, where the dead were brought, and bodies were stacked up like timber. I remember people moving corpses on handcarts. I remember being terrified as planes flew overhead strafing the street while my grandfather and I sheltered in a doorway.

17-18 January, 1945⁷

Soviet troops captured the inner sections of Budapest after fierce resistance by the Hungarian and German forces.

On the night of January 17-18, we could not bear the stench in the air raid shelter any more, there was a lull in the bombardment and my brother, and I went up to our room and slept there. Early in the morning my grandfather woke us and took us to a vantage point overlooking the courtyard and gate of the building and pointed out a Russian soldier in a white cape, leaning on his rifle, sheltering in our doorway. Russian troops had driven out the German and Hungarian armies. It was all over; we were liberated. The Russians saved our lives. By the middle of the day the whole population of the ghetto was on the move,

⁷ **January 12, 1945**

The Soviets launch a new offensive, liberating Warsaw and Krakow in January, capturing Budapest after a two-month siege on February 13, driving the Germans and their Hungarian collaborators out of Hungary in early April, forcing the surrender of Slovakia with the capture of Bratislava on April 4, and capturing Vienna on April 13.

pushing handcarts, trolleys. My mother's younger sister, Marta, who had been living outside the ghetto with false identity papers, came and collected us and took us to her cousin's place, just a few blocks away, but it seemed to be an enormous, long journey for us in our weakened, state.

My mother was liberated from the Lichtenworth camp by Soviet troops on 2 April 1945. Of the 2000 women who had been incarcerated there in November 1944 only 400 were left alive. Mauthausen, with its sub camps was liberated on the last day of the war, May 4, 1945, the day before Armistice Day, by American troops. 24613 prisoners died in Mauthausen between January and May 1945. My father was one of the few who survived, ill with typhus, weighing a mere 30 kilos and close to death. He recovered in an American military hospital at a former German air force base in Horshing. My brother and I discussed at times whether our father or mother would be more likely to survive. That both of them survived was a very rare blessing. There were few among our friends and schoolmates who were not orphans and had both parents left.

The chances of us, my brother and I, and my parents surviving were not great. We had agreed before our parents were taken to concentration camps that should we be alive at the end of the war we would make our way to my grandmother's house and be reunited there. Should our parents been killed and had we needed someone to look after us my brother and I had the addresses of our uncle and aunt in America and in New Zealand so firmly drummed into our heads that we remember these to this day.

We were fortunate. We survived as a family. I was young enough not to get caught up in forced labour and eventually concentration camps, lived close enough to the centre of Budapest not to be deported to Auschwitz, and lived in the one country in Europe with a substantial Jewish population that though prepared to deprive Jews of their rights and livelihood, was not prepared to hand them over to the Germans to be massacred.

Written May 20th, 2009.



(L to R) Steven and his brother Janos



Steven Sedley awarded the Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit, for services to the Jewish community and music from Rt Hon Dame Patsy Reddy, Governor-General (2016 - 2021), June 2018.