VERA HERZ PAPERS, 1947-1951
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Appendix A. Memoir of the Spitz Family

The following memoir of the Spitz family, written by Vera Spitz Herz, is housed in the donor files of the United State Holocaust Memorial Museum.

One Family's Odyssey

by Vera Spitz Herz

"Things are where things are, and, as fate has willed, So shall they be fulfilled."

(Aeschylus:Agamemnon 67)

Not very long ago, an advertisement caught my eye. More than that, it grabbed me. I could not say, to save my life, what the ad was selling. But the tagline was - "Life was a lot simpler when my parents took care of me."

That sentence echoed in my mind, and saddened me, because it reminded me (as if I needed a reminder) how painfully short those carefree, happy childhood years were, when my parents could, and did take care of me. When they could no longer do so, it was not through their own fault. They were wonderful, loving parents. The right, and the possibility to take care of my brother Andy and me, was along with nearly all other rights taken away from them.

In the madness, evil, and hatred of the times, every effort was made to take the most important right of all, - the right to live - from us. Miraculously, fate, luck and a series of accidents preserved us.

It was March 19th, 1944. The Germans arrived to occupy Hungary. On that day, life as we knew it, ended forever.

Naturally, we were aware of all that happened since 1938. We followed Chamberlains' travels to Munich, and realized the dangers built into the situation. But our lives did not change drastically, until the German occupation

There were changes of course, but not different from what the general population experienced. There were shortages of many items, and there were the usual, "taken for granted" discriminations. One was the "numerous clauses" which restricted to 6% the number of Jewish students at Universities. Later that number kept shrinking until it was 0%.

Since the very beginning, in March 1938 when Austria ceased to exist, my father and a few of his friends used to gather, and listen to Hungarian language broadcasts from

England. Though it was strictly "verboten," they kept up this "illicit" activity, to get some idea what was happening, because we were fed the strict Nazi line, and heard only of "glorious victories, cheering crowds" on the Hungarian newscasts. We heard on these broadcasts from England, some very disturbing, hard-to-believe news about the fate of the Jews in the German-occupied countries. But they were so fantastic that we thought it had to be "propaganda." Even later when some Czech, and Polish Jews, refugees, reached Hungary and told of the horrible atrocities against the Jews by the Germans, people found it hard to believe. The Germans were believed to be cultured, practical, well educated people and gassing and burning people by them just wasn't believable. Yet, on that March day in 1944 when the first news of the German occupation started to spread, it was a frightful day.

The Jewish community was awaiting with great apprehension what the next days would bring. The new regulations came fast enough. By April 5, every Jew, any age or sex, was to wear on their outer clothing on their left chest a yellow star about 10^{cm} x 10^{cm} in size. It had to be sewed on, not pinned. No one was allowed to enter a street without it. But, even with it, one was not free to roam at will. There were strictly prescribed hours during which a Jew was allowed to go outside at all. If I remember correctly, it was from about 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. only. Well, it wasn't exactly a happy situation because Hitler found many willing followers among the Hungarians, some tried to even out-do the "masters" so any Jew who happened to run into a "good clean Aryan" who had itchy palms, that poor Jew was the helpless victim in those one-sided fights. And even those that didn't want to "dirty their hands" with a Jew, could at least hurl some verbal insults at their victims, who were highly visible with the yellow stars.

By the end of March, they closed our parochial schools. There was a new government. In early april they disconnected the telephones in Jewish homes and businesses. Lawyers were disbarred and prevented to work as attorneys. Physicians were not allowed to treat non-Jews. By April 21st, they closed, and took possession of all Jewish businesses.

At the end of April the order of moving into a ghetto was announced, then on the 9th of May, they designated the western part of the city as the ghetto. The mayor who publicly objected to this move was forced to resign and was quickly replaced, naturally with someone who had no objections. May 15th was the deadline to move into the ghetto.

Those who happened to reside there but were not Jewish, were removed. In their place, Jews from other sections were moved in, leaving behind all, but some clothing. The exchange from Gentile to Jew didn't go on a one-to-one basis. Where one family lived before, now two, three or even four had to move in. We lived originally in what was to become the ghetto, so we were spared the move. We would have had to take in some people anyway, so rather than strangers, we welcomed some relatives, cousins of my father's to share our apartment. Two families, non-Jews, longtime residents in the building, were moved out. With one of the families, we were quite close, so their moving out, the others moving in, created a very tense, emotional, and insecure atmosphere. Once the moving in and out of the people was completed, they erected a tall wooden fence, encircling the whole ghetto. The

one doorway leading out was watched by armed guards. The ghetto was sealed May 16th.

Heat, tension, confusion, fear, uncertainty, bewilderment, and hunger was now the order of the day. Men were taken out daily for hard labor. Road building, clearing rubble (especially after a major bombing raid on June 2nd by the Allied Forces) and similar work was assigned to them. Father was among them. But at night, he still listened to the BBC, which by now became an offense punishable by death. But there were so many wild rumors circulating that we had to know how the war was going. There was general black out at night and behind the dark shades, at the lowest possible volume, with someone standing guard outside the door we listened to the Allied News. That didn't give us much hope either. On May 26th father received the summons, to a Forced Labor Camp. He had to report in 4 days. May 30th was the heartbreaking day when father left his family, his parents, for an unknown destination, and an uncertain future. We kept writing to him, not knowing if he will ever read our cards.

One day we received a postcard from him. I still have this now fragile card which meant the world to us. In the card he wrote: "So far I wrote 6 cards to you, and miraculously I received one from you. Words cannot express how worried I am about you. I'll be all right, as long as I hear from you. Please write, because one card may get through of the many. My dear children, please look after your mother. Please give my love to my dear parents. To you, my dearest ones, all my love."

Of course, separating families didn't help morale and about this time, air-raids became common, which caused further tension. But strangely, though the falling bombs represented the same danger to us as to the general populace outside the ghetto, we were greatly encouraged and cheered by the British bombing raids. We knew that the German's back had to be broken, the question was only, whether it'll come soon enough to save us, or not. I remember one particularly long and severe air attack. We would usually go down into our coal cellar and huddle there until it was all clear.

The pilots or bombardiers were pretty accurate. No bombs fell our way. They did demolish the railroad stations and railroads. We feared every new day, as we knew that they must have some plans for us, although we still didn't believe that the plans they had might be the "Final Solution." Life in the crowded, hot apartments with little food, little privacy, and little, if any hope, was a strain on everyone.

With all the physical hardships, what was even harder was that father was not with us anymore, and we worried about him very much. He had a Rheumatic Fever damaged heart, a consequence of a childhood "strep" infection, and a duodenal ulcer. How would he survive whatever was in store for him? And what about grandmother in Erdobenye? That tormented mother very much. There was no way to make contact. What we didn't know then, that grandmother and several of mother's sisters were no more. Our days were numbered too. We "lived" in the ghetto 5 weeks, when on June 16th early in the morning the Gendarmes woke the ghetto residents. They would be comparable to sheriff's police here. But in

Hungary, these men were of a low class in every way. Brutal, mean, anti-semitic, with their cock-plumed hats, they acted as Gods. Their duty was to prepare us for removal. They made sure that no one took any valuables with them. About one change of clothes, a few small items were all we could take. We had no idea of our destination. All available trucks, horse-drawn carts, carriages were mobilized for the day. We were loaded on to these vehicles and the strange procession began. Lining the streets as we left the ghetto, were crowds of people. Many cheered, and jeered, some watched silently.

They took us to the outskirts of the city near where a railroad line passed. We were out in the open. Nearby, there was a brick factory. The luckier people occupied, as their "residence" the kiln, the others settled in the open. It was chaos. No facilities to wash oneself, or one's clothes. No toilet facilities. One would just go far enough away form the 12,000 people, and relieve himself. This arrangement, though horrible from the first, became a nightmare when a great number of the people developed diarrhea. It was no wonder.

Out in the open, in the summer heat it became unbearable. Some people committed suicide. The physicians among us were not allowed to aid them. So they finished their death struggle in the dirt. Some elderly people just died from stress or natural causes. But there was nothing natural in that Hell. It was madness. We slept on the ground, and were lucky when it was dry. But one day it rained, and we were stuck in the mud. One day was as horrible and hopeless as the next.

We were fed twice a day, food, that was, as an added little touch of whimsy, cooked in the bathtubs - removed from the ritual bath in the city (Mikvah). We used to see allied planes passing above us, toward a bombing mission. We were happy to see them and hoped for a miracle. There were those, the optimists, who believed that they must stay there, in that Hell, as long as possible because they reasoned, as long as they are not removed, something, anything might happen to reverse their fate. Others, while suspecting that removal could mean death, opted for that, figuring, if die we must, why go through all this agony and total degradation. I belonged to this latter group. When they at long last, after about 10 days, began moving in freight trains on the rails, and the news spread that we are about to be put into them, my mother, brother and I were among the first groups ready to go. My father's brother, his wife and 3 lovely daughters did everything possible to delay removal. Because of that, his family perished because by a strange twist of fate, the first two transports with 3,000 people were sent to Austria.

Of course at the time we knew nothing at all, but I remember thinking that if I have to live like that, I'd rather die. Perhaps our thinking was not motivated by bravery, but hopelessness. "Where no hope is left, is left no fear." The decision was a matter of life or death. So much at the time was a matter of luck, or coincidence, or a well-turned out mistake. Nothing made sense. Logic, reason were abstracts. All the subsequent trains went to Auschwitz. The first two trains, it was learned after the war, were part of a contingent of Jews that Adolph Eichman attempted to trade for trucks and other supplies with a Jewish Rescue Organization in Budapest. 3,000 Jews from Györ (another city near Budapest) were

supposed to be transported to Austria and "laid on ice" until the deal with the Jewish Rescue Committee was closed. Due to a clerical error the Jews from Györ wound up, - no - ended up at Auschwitz. The train from Debrecen, which was destined for Auschwitz travelled on to Strasshof in their stead. The numbers of the two trains were simply interchanged by the Nazi's to compensate for the mistake.

So now, we were inside the cattle trains, only they don't transport cattle that way.

We were squeezed, as "few" as 70 and later as many as 80 and more to a car. Ours, was fortunately the less crowded one, if you can image uncrowded conditions with 70 people in one tightly shut freight train. The group contained men, women, children, all ages. A bucket was put in for a latrine. This was July, and the heat unbearable. There was no room for everyone to sit down at the same time. We had to take turns. There was no question of laying down. No privacy to use the bucket. The stench was indescribable. So was the thirst. There was no water given to us; if we tried to call out, begging for water when the train was stopped somewhere to put water in the engine, they yelled back; "Drop dead, dirty jews." Some people became unbalanced and began to act strangely, some became hysterical and some died. In cars where someone died, the rest of the people were even more unfortunate. For the seals were never removed during the journey, not even to remove a corpse. In those cars, in addition to the accumulation of human waste, the odor of death was added. In our car, fortunately no one died. My mother and some others fainted, but were revived. We had no idea where we were taken. Through the cracks we saw, after awhile German language signs, so we knew we left Hungary. It was like a scene out of a horror movie.

My legs were swollen like an elephants. No food, no water. After 3 days and nights, the train stopped and suddenly the doors opened. We have arrived. We got some water and tried to stand up on grossly swollen legs. We found out that we were in a distribution camp. Later, there in that chaos I saw again and for the last time, my paternal grandparents. I have no idea how they survived the trip, or how they got separated from their son, Joseph, my uncle who wanted to wait. He was 90 and she, in her 70's. Grandfather, who up until then was "sharp as a tack" was bewildered and confused. He couldn't understand why all this was happening, why they took him from his home to a foreign land, or what they wanted of him. In this distribution camp they separated the old, the unable to work, from the rest. There was nothing we could do. My grandparents were taken to one of their "elimination" camps and were killed (and years, and years later I still agonize: could we have, by some miracle, saved them?).

We were sent to a small village in Austria first to work in a stone quarry. But since the group consisted mostly of women and teenagers and were not able to produce, (in spite of the fact that armed guards kept yelling "Schneller, Schneller" (faster, faster)) and we must have looked like the jews building the Pyramids in Egypt. They requested another group. We were sent to the outskirts of Vienna, to work in a factory, that made parts for anti-aircraft artillery cannons. We had the night shift. Prisoners of war of other nationalities, and Austrians worked the day shifts. We lived in big brick buildings, turned into barracks.

About 200 people were in one large room. But there were bathrooms and water to wash, and something to do, even though we tried not to do our best and thereby help the Germans. We made parts for the large units on a lathe machine. At least I did. My brother was a kind of in-plant messenger and my mother a "finisher." She had to file the edges on some parts. When the foreman showed me how to work the machine and I caught on quickly, he asked me "Were you doing this kind of work at home?" (Oh, sure, all my life! I was 14 years old.)

They fed us just enough to stay alive, never enough to feel full. Soups, vegetables, some bread, once a month a slice of horse salami. My brother and I were always hungry. Sleep was difficult in the daytime because some who shared our "room" had not exactly the same schedule, also there were daily air-raids, and then, "everyone to the basements." since we lived on the factory premises, and it being a war factory, we felt we could be priority targets. The name of the place was Ostmarkwerke. We settled into a sort of routine, even learned a little sabotage. Each piece I made had to be measured by a gauge, to be perfect to the millimeter. As I learned the "tricks of the trade," I could produce parts not exactly the perfect requirement. As they could check them later and get me into a lot of trouble, I used to put them among the day's production by the Austrian worker and put his among mine. The non-jewish POW's did as much damage as they could by "accidentally" breaking something on the machines, and making them inoperative for fairly long periods. People who supervised us at work were quite fair. They were all Austrians. Away from work was a different story.

There we were under German supervision and one of the punishment, for various "wrong doing" was the medieval lashing. Ten, fifteen, or more depending on their mood. Over the next 10 months or so, the bombings increased both in quantity and effectiveness. Several buildings of our factory complex were hit. Sometimes in bright daylight, it seemed as though it turned night. That is how dark the sky became with smoke. Our spirits were lifted. The building we "lived" in was somehow always spared, no bomb fell even near it. Whether by sheer luck or by designs, our building now became known as the safest place and now the non-slave labor force, the Austrians and Germans came to that building during air-raids.

We knew that they were hurting. Windows were blown out of all the factory buildings and now we worked in the draft, in the cold, with freezing hands that almost froze to the cold metal. After a while of this, I became very ill. I had a fever and excruciating pain in my ears. I reported for sick call. You could have all the pain in the world, it did not matter. There was only one criteria; fever. If you had it, you were sick, maybe. No fever, no illness. Well, I had fever so they told me that in a few days they'll be taking a group into Vienna to the hospital and I'll be going with them. After about 2 agonizing days, we did go out among people for the first time, on a bus, to Vienna. In the hospital, a great many waited for the help of the few. In the midst of it came an air-raid. Down to the basement again. I never got to see a doctor, but by some miracle the terrific pressure created by the puss in my ear perforated the eardrum at great pain, but at least created an outlet for the puss to the outside, rather than to the brain. I had middle-ear inflammation. This was pre-penicillin era

and the usual treatment was to surgically open the eardrum. Well, in that basement, nature did the operation. When they gathered us all up, it was time to return to Ostmarkwerke. During the bus ride back, there was another air-raid. Everyone had to leave the bus and run for cover. When it was over, I discovered with terror that I was lost. I got separated from the group somehow and there I was, with a yellow star, ragged clothing, wooden shoes (German issue) without a "pfennig." I never for a moment thought of escape. There wouldn't have been much chance for success. I had no food ration card, no papers, besides, I knew that my mother simply would not be able to go on without knowing my fate. She was in bad enough shape anyway. Besides the hard work at night, she took on work from men who were there alone, to wash their clothes during the day, mend their things, etc. For this she got paid with food from their rations. This was for us, Andy and me. Just as mother gave us part of her food too. She ate barely enough to live, but couldn't bear to see us always hungry. So my only thought on that memorable day when I got lost in Vienna, was to get back to my family. I asked every one I could in my school-learned (not very conversational) German how to get back. I didn't know where the place was, only the name. Some people said they never heard of it.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, (it was pitch dark by then) I was directed back and I had trouble getting in! It was a highly important war factory and those who had business there, had photo IDs, which naturally I did not have. By the time I got back to our "high-rise" bunk, my mother was hysterical and thought she lost me for ever.

For several long weeks by the way, I lost all hearing in that ear, puss was pouring out, making my hair stick together. It was a mess. Good thing that once a month they took us to a public bath. Things returned to fairly normal, except for the happy discovery that more and more, when we asked for another quantity of raw material or steel rod, necessary to our work, the foreman said that there was no more. This was good news. Since there was less and less work now, but more and more bombings, therefore more damage in the streets, they found a new use for us. We were ordered out onto the streets of Vienna to clear the rubble, clear bombed streets and the like. Well, it was a change, and we thought it was better to be out on the street, than work those heavy machines. We must have been a strange sight. They got rid of their own jews, then they "imported" some from elsewhere. So we moved bricks, cleaned the streets and were working right near St. Stephan Kirche (Church) when we met, for the very first time, with some human kindness. This happened time and again, not just once: a woman would either on the way to, or from the church quickly press a bag in the hand of one of us and walk away rapidly. There was always some wonderful treat in the bag, something we haven't seen for a year. Such as apples, nuts, a few small rolls, some pastry. It was "a gift from heaven." The Austrian people themselves were on strict food rations so it was touching to see this kindness. Once a woman told Andy to follow her, just a short distance home. Andy though scared to death, did. She lived a block away, took Andy home, stuffed him full of food and gave him more food to take with. She redeemed her bread ticket and gave Andy almost a week's bread allowance. We really celebrated that night, not only that for once we ate like human beings, not slop, but also, that strange as it was, there were some human beings left on Earth.

It was almost Spring (1945) and the little news we had access to, was good. Not only what we over heard during air-raids in the factory basement, or I have seen in headlines in newspapers, read by the Austrian workers. In some cases one or another kinder soul would secretly speak a few words to one of us, saying something to the effect that it wouldn't be long now, we'll be free. Of course, the Allied successes were great news but the one nagging question remained, Will they let us live to survive, when they realized the end was near? No, they didn't intend to let us stay alive. About early April we were suddenly ordered to get ready. By now everything around us was in ruins in the factory compound. There was literally not one building left but the one we were living in. The more religious ones, but even the others, began to believe this to be a sign. Hope rose.

We were put into trains, but not the way the Hungarians did at the beginning of our ordeal. It wasn't a long trip. The destination was Strasshof, a small Austrian town which had a very large receiving distributing camp facility. We were to be sent from there to Theresienstadt. That is in Czechoslovakia and that is where we were going to be eliminated. Countless numbers were put to death there. Trains arrived there, full of people daily. While we were awaiting our turn, locked already in the trains, almost ready to roll, a sudden air-raid came. It was a fierce, frightening attack. The main objective of the raid seemed to be, without a doubt, the railway, and we were sealed in trains on the rails, while bombs fell all around us. It was indescribable. There was not much panic among us, by now we knew pretty well our fate. There was some crying, but no panic. After a long time, it was quiet. Then there were voices. They opened the doors and ordered us to get out and go back to the barracks. The station was a sight. Rails that lay on the ground, now stood upright, toward the sky, like exclamation points. It was obvious that no train would leave from there now or for a long time. This is how we were saved from the ovens of Theresienstadt or Auschwitz. But our troubles were not over yet. Now we could hear the sounds of fighting nearby. The guards were nervous. They no longer fed us. Everything seemed more and more disorganized. At night the skies were lit up with fired ammunition. We heard the booms of cannons and the yak-yak of machine guns. Then, the next morning, a strange, unbelievable discovery: We were not guarded! The Germans were gone! We were too numb to grasp: we were free! So we cried and laughed and danced, and then started to think. What are we to do with this freedom? We were still starved, so the first order was to find some food. We returned to the bombed out station. There, a marvelous discovery: a long convoy of trains, out of Hungary, aimed for Germany filled with various treasures. Paintings, furniture, all sorts of things. We were not interested in that. Several trains were filled with food. Miraculous? Yes. Potatoes, jars of jam, jelly, sugar, and the like. Now for the next few days everyone was getting sick on the potatoes, cooked on hastily improvised outdoor brick "fireplaces," topped with jam and jelly. We ventured into the village. It was a ghost town. Houses were open, with no one there. They all fled the advancing Russians. It was eerie to walk through people's homes, not finding a living soul, and seeing that these people voluntarily left their homes and belongings, much as we were forced to do back in Hungary.

The next day we met some people. Strangely enough, they were Hungarians, running away, ahead of the Russians. They told us horrible stories of plunder, cruelty and rape by the

Russians. Most of our people were confident though, that while all that might be true of the Russians, when facing the Hungarians, (their enemies), but they would not treat us, victims of the Nazis, that way. We were wrong. As it later turned out, it didn't make any difference to them. We were regarded pretty much as were those who left their homes to escape the advancing Russians. We were Hungarians and we were in Austria. The reason for our being there didn't interest them. They arrived that evening. There were some of our people who went out, ahead, to greet them as our liberators. It was premature. They didn't come as liberators, more like avengers and conquerors. There was nothing to rob us of, most of us were in rags. I long ago wore out my wooden shoes (canvas upper, wooden sole) and helped myself to a pair of man's shoes in one of the abandoned houses, that was all I could find in footwear. I was not out greeting the Russians. By this time I guess I learned to expect the worst, and hoped to be pleasantly surprised, to be wrong, rather than be a sunny optimist and be bitterly disappointed later. So it was for this reason, not for some divine foresight, that I was spared what was to follow. Before the Russians arrived, remembering all the stories about them, I climbed under our wooden bunk bed and, hiding in the corner, was covered by the odds and ends of our belongings, the few that we had, and some we picked up in the abandoned houses. An old washbowl, "ruck sack," etc. It was lucky that our bunk was in the corner. That night, they came and dragged every woman out, and raped them. My mother showed them her leg, which with varicose veins, during the year badly ulcerated. It was fierce looking, purple and crusted in places, and they lost their appetite for her. I was never found. I felt the beam of a flashlight on our meager bundles, under and behind which I was crouched. The first crisis passed. The Russians never assumed any responsibilities for us, as for feeding or clothing. They said we should go back to our country, not that they would provide any means for it, though. Well, we were anxious to do so, because the screaming, the horror of the previous night gave us enough incentive. Our food that we found in the trains was gone, for me to go out, even to the latrine, was highly dangerous, and could only be attempted with a cap, Andy's clothes, and dirtied face, so we decided to make preparations to leave. There were a few men for whom my mother washed and mended. They were old acquaintances from home, so we decided we'll go with them. They were without their wives and families, we were without a man, so because of the common misery and their feeling sorry for us, they agreed to take us along. They went out and got a wagon from one of the farm houses. Horses could be found roaming around; strange as it may sound, but it was true. They got 2 horses. Well they were not "Secretariat," in fact, they were both injured in the fighting, but they had four legs, and were better than pulling the wagon ourselves as Tevie did in "Fiddler on the Roof." We started out for Vienna.

I was again on the bottom of the wagon, and all the junk was piled on me, to be safe. The others were out in the open. One of the horses, the more seriously injured, died on the way to Vienna. The other got us there. Vienna was in terrible shape and the people were starving. They wanted to buy our horse at any price, to slaughter it for meat. By now there was an embryo Jewish Organization set up in Vienna, and we put ourselves into their hands. Our friends sold the horse. The Jewish Committee was set up at the Rothschild Hospital. We were told that they would get us back to Hungary, but there was no way of knowing when a train would leave. Naturally there were no scheduled trains, no time tables, and even

if a train left, it could then be put on a side rail for days, if more important trains had to pass. Well, we did get to Sopron. It is a Hungarian border town. There was a Jewish Organization which gave us some food and some money. There were countless lists circulated, photos, shown by desperate people, survivors, who tried to locate someone who had any knowledge of their family. "Have you seen this woman?" or "child?" were asked around after faded, or torn photos were shown. Everyone was asked to document where, in which concentration camp they were, and write down as many names (of fellow inmates) as one could remember, so that some semblance of a record could be made of what became of so many. We spent several days in Sopron, again waiting for a train to Budapest. Here too, the train could leave any minute, or any day, or next month.

Finally, a train, full of russian soldiers returning back East came, and we were put on it. Mostly, these were freight trains and a strange chaos prevailed. We didn't need a ticket, one couldn't get food on the train. We had some food, given us by the Jewish Committee. This time I had yet another strange mode of travel. Not on the bottom of a wagon, but under tons of spent shells they were taking back to be melted down. Perhaps not entirely under, but among and in between the shells in a kind of tunnel. It was necessary, because there was a young Russian soldier, who smelled like the perfume counter in a big department store, who struck up a conversation (of sorts) with us and gave us some bread. He also offered wine which we politely declined. That evening he came back looking for me. Fortunately I was in another car with friends, or perhaps in the lavatory. He became angry and told mother that since I accepted the bread, and he was nice to us, he expected me to be nice to him. We knew what that meant so I had to "disappear."

The trip to Budapest, although only some 200 kilometers, took forever. Well, at least days. Sometimes we were put on a side rail for long hours. But finally, we have arrived. We were a sorry sight. We haven't had a bath in God only knows how long. My hair which I couldn't very well wash or even comb under the shells, hiding, was full of lice. At the station there were representatives of the Jewish Committee, and they took us to be cleaned up and "de-loused." We arrived on May 1st, 1945.

For the Russians May 1st was a celebrated holiday so we came home to parades and music. We were not in the mood for parades. We have not yet fully awakened from the long nightmare. Somewhat dazed, and disoriented, and not used to the "New Order" we returned to Debrecen, the city we left so long ago.

Our business, our apartment was totally destroyed. Both were in the line of heavy street-fighting between Germans and Russians and suffered direct hits. I went back to our home. Among the rubble, found a few photographs, otherwise, no sign that we ever lived there. So that was that. We found a place to stay. Began to see a few returning concentration camp survivors. We realized that we, the survivors were the minority. Most of the people were gone. It didn't feel like home anymore. We looked at everyone with suspicion. "Were you one of those that cheered when we were tossed out of our homes, our homeland, as some unwanted garbage?" The ones that came to us with smiles, telling "how

sorry they were about all that has happened to us, of which they heartily disapproved," of course, "they hated to see it all happen" those disgusted us, because we knew that in most cases, they were false, and had no more love for us now than before.

When we finally got news that my father was alive, in Germany, in a "D.P. (displaced person)" camp and sent word to us to join him because he saw no future for us, under Communism in Hungary, we got ready to leave again. This time, voluntarily.

All told, it took another year before we were all together. It was 1946. What we didn't know was, that there'll be four more years in a D.P. camp in Bavaria, (Eggenfelden) before we finally could start a new life. Andy and I arrived in New York on the ship "General Hershey" March 11, 1950. It was a somber, subdued arrival.

Alone, my brother and I felt defenseless, already lonely without our parents. We were in the incredibly small minority, the truly lucky ones when the whole family, the four of us survived intact. And yet, here we were alone, our suffering, and our parents' far from over.

We were powerless to change events, still, and again. The "why?" of my parents' long delay in being able to leave Germany is like a plot of a "B" Movie of the time. Politics, a sick kind of love, betrayal, revenge, suspicion, injustice was all part of it.

Little did we know when we first stepped on American soil in 1950, that our beloved parents will be separated from us for five more long years.

How, and why did it happen that way? the story of that is one of those "Truth is Stranger than Fiction" explanations.

The seed of the later tragedy was planted, innocently, by my father, when he made a sensible decision in the D.P. camp we lived in. It was in lower Bavaria the small town of Eggenfelden. Not long after we settled down for the long wait to go to the U.S. father thought that my brother, Andy, and I should start to study English.

We had plenty of time, and in the U.S. we needed to speak English when we arrived to start a new life. Father found an elderly Hungarian woman who lived in London for years before the war broke out, and now lived in Eggenfelden. We started our lessons, and everything went fine for awhile. We paid her with the various food, and other items we received from Uncle Zoltan from New York. After awhile our teacher became ill and was no longer able to teach us, because she was on the down hill course of the terminal illness that eventually took her. We were very sorry to lose her, but did not want to give up our studies. Father made some inquiries and he was directed to a young man as a possible successor to our teacher. He was a so-called, "volk-deutche," who originally lived on the border, so he spoke some hungarian, of course perfect German. He also spoke English quite well, and because of that, he had a job as a translator with the American Occupation Forces, as a civilian employee.

He was perhaps 19 years old, a quiet, bespectacled, blond youth who, by his outward appearance would never suggest the evil, that he was capable of, and the depth of misery he was to cause our family. His name was Wolfgang.

He started to come to our little two room quarters regularly, to give lessons. He had access to the New York Times, and one of the things he used to make us do was to translate articles from it. After awhile, he would stay after lessons and visit, talk about many different things. We had no reason to distrust him, so, when he asked what our plans, hopes were, we told him how we expected to go to the U.S. where father had 2 brothers. That they were working on the papers, and that while the Hungarian quota was very low and the waiting long, Father would qualify for the much faster Chech quota because he was born in Czechoslovakia. As time went by, Andy (my brother) noticed that he was ignored more and more during the lessons while I was given more and more attention. I was about 17 years old, and even though I had no opportunity to have any social life in the years past, or now have boy friends, I had no interest in him. In fact, I found his adoring looks annoying, but didn't think the situation serious. Wolfgang expressed more than once how much he too would like to go to America but being German, his chances, then, were very slim. Once he asked us if we could possibly do something, with the help of Zoltan, perhaps, "take him along" to America. Outside of the lessons at home, I had no contact with him, other than going to the movie with him once, even then, because he suggested seeing the English language movie with him will be helpful to my studies. Well, I guess we knew that he had a crush on me, but he was viewed more a joke than a threat. But we never made this obvious to him. And so time went on and we knew that we should be called soon to the Consulate for preliminary interviews and medical exams. It finally happened and everything seemed in perfect order. We were to get our visas in 8 to 10 weeks, it was the usual time. It was with growing apprehension that we watched 10 and 12, and more weeks go by, people who had their exams with us, got their papers and departed, but we heard nothing. We contacted the HIAS, asked for their help, to find out what is holding up our visas. We didn't find out very much at first. They were very evasive. More time went by and we were getting panicky. I traveled to Augsburg district headquarters for HIAS. There, they asked me some very puzzling questions. What did my father do after the war in Hungary? I told them that he was not in Hungary after the war. He left because he wanted to start over in a free country. "Wasn't he some kind of "Peoples Judge" in Debrecen?" they asked. Absurd as it all sounded, we saw no design or pattern to all of this. Everyone seemed to be leaving the D.P. Camp, but us: It was a terrible feeling. We sensed that something was utterly wrong. We couldn't even find out what it was. We thought that our papers were lost or bogged down somewhere. Next, I traveled to the Counsel General's Offices, where, with the help of the HIAS I got an appointment. That is where, finally some light dawned on the mystery. I found out that my father was accused of being a high-ranking communist, who, as a "Peoples Judge" (In a Kangaroo Court") was responsible for the death, by hangings, of numerous people. It was an "Orwellian" nightmare. I thought, things like this do not happen; my father was not in Hungary at that time. He was glad to be alive and would not hurt a fly. And the irony of it all was him being accused of being a communist, when in fact, was so anti, he didn't want us to live under that regime. He wanted something better, especially, for his

children. But it was no use trying to reason, to tell how it really was, when I would get remarks like "Where there is smoke, there is usually fire." Whoever made the accusation, I thought, did a splendid job. If one set out to sabotage a family's immigration, what better plot, what better plan than to be accused of being a communist. It was worse than being a former Nazi, bank robber, or Camp Commander. The Joe McCarthy era was not yet in full flower, but Communists were definitely not wanted. They would not tell me who the accuser or accusers were. The American system of justice did not apply. Instead of being innocent until proven guilty, father was assumed to be guilty, until proven innocent. The trouble was that while the accuser didn't need proof, the accused couldn't present any that would be judged good enough. It was like fighting windmills, or an invisible enemy. They would not hear of our confronting the accusers; character witnesses would not be accepted as evidence, nor would endorsement from clergy, testifying to father's religious activities, and way of life. Simply, nothing seemed to work, and we felt, that it was hopeless to fight. The head of the HIAS there was a very fine man, with whose help I found out some of the above. He took an interest in us, and although I wasn't 100% sure that even he believed us, he tried his best to help. Finally, he had to admit that for my father to get a visa was at that time out of the question, and even if somehow he would clear himself, it would take a long, long time. The only suggestion he came up with was, that my brother and I, being still legally minors, should ask for separate papers from my Uncle Zoltan, and, not being responsible for "our father's sins" would most likely be allowed to enter the U.S.

My Uncle Zoltan, who was a wonderful, blessed help throughout the years in the D.P. Camp sending packages with clothing, medicines, coffee, cocoa, etc., upon learning of our incredible situation, came over from New York. He tried to speak to the various authorities, and when all seemed futile, advised my parents to let us go, in the hope that later something could be done for my parents. But at least we would not waste any more precious time vegetating in a D.P. Cap. My father was most agreeable, while my mother took it very hard. We had been through so much together, and we were almost unique in that we made it out alive, the four of us, the whole family. And now she had to stay behind in that little Bavarian town, with the sullen, hostile German residents, one of the few Jews who remained.

It didn't take long to get us through the medical exams, the Counsel's interviews, to issue our visas. We were ordered to go to Bremerhaven where we would go aboard the General Hershey, a wartime troop carrier. The light did not dawn on us suddenly about the accusations. It was a gradual realization that there could be no one but Wolfgang, who knew what to do, how to do it, had the opportunity and later we found out the motive. Just before Andy and I had to leave, a young German fellow, a co-worker of Wolfgang and a former friend of his (but no more) told me that Wolfgang did this because of his supposed love for me; He didn't want us to leave. It was incredible, for he came by now and then, to inquire about the progress of our case, and acted most concerned about all our difficulties. Obviously Wolfgang had more to him than met the eye. I was innocently the cause of all the misery, and if he torpedoed our leaving, because he tried to keep me there, it was ironic that he failed in that. He kept my parents there, while Andy and I left anyway.

When the day came for us to leave Eggenfelden it was one of the hardest things I ever had to do. The scene remained etched in my mind of that cloudy, early morning, when we got on the train, and looking back, seeing father, trying to look brave, and calm, while mother, leaning on the station's white-washed picket fence, crying uncontrollably. Father had to support her, practically hold her up, to keep her from collapsing. That scene haunted me for a long time in New York. Every night, when trying to go to sleep, when I closed my eyes, as if on a movie screen, that scene played again, and again...

For my parents, in addition to our leaving them in Germany, doubts tormented them, Will we ever again be together? They were innocently punished again. First, by the Nazis for being Jewish, now for being a Communist, which father never was. He hated Communism. The HIAS promised to keep the case alive, to do whatever they could

In 1951, after a year in New York, I went back to Germany, partly to visit my parents, partly to try again to convince the authorities of the absurdity of the charges. During the year in New York, my brother and I would go every weekend from one end of the city to the other, in search of people who knew us in Debrecen, before, during, and after the war; people who were with father in Germany.

The file grew thicker, containing sworn statements from those many people, all stating that they knew my father, were with him during some of the time when he was alleged to be the "hanging judge" and attesting to his being a very deeply religious man. Being a Communist and a devout, religious man are incompatible, of course. I took all these documents, and hoped that perhaps, they would have some weight, would do some good. My parents now lived in Munich, in a miserable little place. Living in Eggenfelden was no longer tolerable because the D.P. Camp emptied out, people left and they couldn't exist there, the only Jews. We enjoyed our time together immensely. I turned in the papers, had more appointments, but there was no change. We had to think of alternate solutions. Canada seemed ideal. Her physical proximity to the U.S. , similar lifestyle, and identical language with the U.S.; we started to work on getting my parents there. I returned to New York, late Summer, 1951, and by the Winter of 1952, my parents were all set to go to Canada. It was a good idea, if only it worked. But it didn't. Going there only resulted in more heartache, more disappointments. The curse of that false accusation followed them everywhere, it seemed. I had a call from my father, from Halifax, N.S. the Winter of 1952. They arrived safely, but, then, instead of being allowed to go ashore, they were detained in the Canadian counterpart of Ellis Island. I took a flight to Montreal and from there, a small two engine prop-plane to Halifax. It was stormy, and very cold, the flight was awful, and the way I felt was even worse. In Halifax I looked first of all for the local Jewish Community. It seemed the sensible thing to do, since I did not know a soul there. In no time at all, they galvanized into action. I was put up at the home of one of their "leading citizens." Their name was Feinberg, lived in a beautiful home, and they were simply wonderful people. They treated me as though I was a precious relative, or their daughter. Relatives and friends kept coming over to meet me, to offer help, to take me wherever I had to go. In my desperate state of mind, they were a warm oasis. But the kind of help we needed wasn't theirs to give. Just to relieve

the monotony and the anxiety of being in the Detention Quarters, the Feinberg's arranged that my parents were allowed to spend the Sabbath at their house, on their guarantee that my parents will return. I had several meetings with a Mr. Wade, the man in charge of Emigration. He told me that they dug a little deeper into my parent's background, because they felt it odd, that they should want to go to Canada when their 2 children live in America. So the incriminating accusations came to light and that was the end of the Canadian chapter in my parent's odyssey. I think we all were very close to a breakdown at this point. Here they were, so close, and yet as if on the other side of the world. Mr. Wade said he believed in father's innocence, he was most understanding, but did not have enough authority to overturn all the previous rejections. He had no choice but to issue deportation orders. I first went to Ottawa, the capitol, at his suggestion, tried everything; pledged to settle in Canada with my brother if my parents were allowed to stay. But the ill will that started it all wasn't about to die down yet. My parents were put on a ship, under the Holland Flag. In their misfortune, that was fortunate. They met nothing but kindness and warmth going out to them from everyone, from the Captain down. They were non-paying passengers, but they were given one of the finest cabins. The Captain had them at his table, and saw to it that my father would get the proper food for his ulcer. They were treated as honored guests throughout the journey, alleviating much of the pain and misery they felt. At least during those 5 or 6 days, on the Ocean, they could forget for a short time that the ship was taking them back to Germany. They docked in Holland, and my parents were guests for a few days of some Jewish Families who learned of their plight from some fellow passengers. Not only that, but without saying anything to my parents, they took up a collection among the religious Community and before leaving for Germany they presented father with a substantial amount of money. The one bright spot in all the horror was the goodness, the kindness of those people whom we met fleetingly, probably never to see them again, who reached out to help.

When Gene and I got married in 1954, we went to Germany so my parents could at least meet him. The other compelling reason was, that I never wanted to give up trying to bring my parents out of that "modern day Egypt," Germany. Gene and I started to work on that before we left for Europe. Gene knew the then Senator Paul Douglas, and we told him all, and asked his help. He started to write letters to the Consulate, set up an appointment for us in New York with a CIA Agent, who questioned me at length (for about 2 hours). In Munich, we had several meetings with Consular Officials. Now I had the background on Wolfgang, and the knowledge of his motive. We had dozens of documents from people in all walks of life on Father's behalf. Slowly, ever so slowly, with our over whelming evidence, with some change in the political climate, and with the enormous help of Senator Douglas as well as Congressman Sydney Yates, after mountains of correspondence, the fog began to lift. In 1955, a full five, long years after we first left them at that little railroad station, my parents arrived in New York. They were happy, of course, but by then life had dealt them too many blows.

I don't know where Wolfgang is today, or what became of him. He played a decisive part in our lives, spoiled it for a long time, almost ruined it for good. I guess I should hate him. At first I did not, I was so happy to have our parents here at last. The bonds between

us, forged in all the hard times, were unbreakable. I enjoyed every moment I spent with them and loved them more than life itself.

But now, when they are no longer here, when the bonds between us has been broken by death, I curse Wolfgang, and his memory. He robbed us 5 years of togetherness, 5 years we spent here without them, and they, in Germany, without us. Five Rosh Hashannas, five Yom Kippurs, five birthdays, and all the simple ordinary days, hundreds of them, that would have been made special by their presence. So to Wolfgang I will say with the words of Shakespeare, "You taught me language; and my profit on it is, I know how to curse."

My parents, who finished their journey, will not be dead, as long as I am alive.

"I shall remember while the light lives yet, and in the night time I shall not forget."

(Swineburne)

My Father

Our story would not be complete without adding an accounting of father's tribulations and survival.

In his fate, as in ours, there were those incredible series of accidents, that played such an important part in survival, his as well as in ours.

When father had to report on May 30th 1944 for Forced Labor Camp, along with all the rest of the men who were not yet taken, he was 46 years old. Jews were not "good enough" to serve in the Armed Forces, but they were good enough to be human mine sweepers, or do hard labor. There was a great variety of work to be done, road building, bridge and airport building, etc. These men were not prepared by their previous occupations for the task, but they were willing to do their best to stay alive. Father was not a physically robust man, he had childhood rheumatic fever, which left him with a damaged heart. He also suffered from a duodenal ulcer.

Perhaps because of his extremely difficult, and poverty filled childhood, and the necessity to survive by his wits, father figured out very quickly that his best or only hope was to "disengage" himself from the outfit if at all possible.

He tried to do the work that was demanded of them, but he was sick a lot of the time, so he went on sick calls. Sometimes, they assigned him lighter work, other times he had to do, what they all did. After a few "sick calls" they knew him as the "sick one."

As he told us later, he was also sick with worry. All he knew was that his family, his parents, one of his brother's and his family were removed from Debrecen. He had a little notebook/calendar with him which he used as a diary. Reading the daily entries, it reflects his daily agony worrying about us. This went on form May to about November. During that time they traveled to wherever they were needed. But at that time they found themselves back in our home city, Debrecen.

One day, when father knew that a rather decent "Officer in charge" was on duty, he went to see the officer and asked to be sent to the hospital. Very surprisingly the Officer said, he would agree to father being admitted to the hospital, (by that time he was in bad shape) but he can not go alone without an escort, and they could spare no soldier to take him.

Father had some valuables with him, and went on a "life or death" search until he found a soldier about to go on a 12 hour leave. Father offered him everything he had in exchange for being the escort to the hospital. With that problem solved, he requested the necessary papers, and it was issued.

By then the Russians were very close and father's unit was ordered on a March toward Germany. Sadly, few survived.

Father received the treatment and care he needed in the hospital. The necessity they could not supply there was peace of mind. He dreamt about us constantly, which was only a manifestation of his daytime preoccupation.

One day, the Germans came to the hospital to collect and remove the Jewish patients (There were a few.) They asked the Chief of Staff to identify for them the jews. But that very courageous, humane man, believed in healing, not killing. Risking his own life, he firmly answered the Germans: "There are only sick people here, whoever they are, and they will stay here in my care, until they get well." He knew that those patients will only be "well" if they were within the protective walls of that hospital. They remained there, the few whom that physician was able to save until our city was liberated. Father was now physically better, but still tormented about the fate of everyone who was dear to him. Wife and children, parents, brothers and sisters. He alternated between hope and despair, an emotional state that was to last a lot longer.

In December 1944 our city was no longer at war. Father's first agenda was to go to the Cemetery. He dreamt many months before that his 90 year old father died, and he went to look for the grave. Of course, he didn't find it. His dream was right. His father was dead. But he didn't die, he was murdered, and had no grave. His ashes have fallen over the wretched soil in Poland, in Auschwitz.

This is how father survived the atrocities that has befallen all of us in the middle of the 20th Century. We are witnesses to the validity of what George Sarton wrote:

"The most malicious kind of hatred is that,

Which is built upon a theological foundation."