

My name is Agnes Hertzner and I am a survivor of the holocaust. I was born on February 28, 1929 in Budapest, the capital city of Hungary. Its divided by the beautiful Danube river. My parents lived in a middle class neighborhood. My father was a traveling salesman. My mother was a seamstress. According to my mother, before I reached age three, I used to sneak down to front of my apartment building, on the sidewalk, and tried to entertain the people who gathered around me. I danced and sang for them. When they threw money to me I was really pleased and would run with it upstairs to my mother to buy groceries (so she told me). Until one day, the police thought I made too much commotion on the street and they took me back upstairs, scaring me and my mother. My mother decided to show me how entertainment really should be done. We went to a children's playhouse, sat in our seats and waited for the play to begin. But guess what, according to my mother, when the show began I got up and stepped out to the aisle and tried to imitate everybody on stage. Ushers came and took us backstage where the director asked my mother my age. Her answer was "she will be 3 on February 28". The director said "Bring her back when she has reached the age of 3". That's how my career began as a child actress. It lasted ten years. I traveled in summer stock, played in theaters and made one movie. I went to parochial schools and managed to finish the required schooling. I have two sisters and one brother. I was the second child of our family. With this little background maybe you will understand how my personality and character developed. Usually I mixed in with people of different

backgrounds. I always felt that I was like everybody else, a Hungarian whose religion happened to be Jewish.

1943

I believe it was in ~~1942~~ when the Germans occupied Hungary as our ally. Actually what it meant is that we were in war against the Russians, English and Americans. One of the first things they did was to spread lots of propaganda and it was always about the Jews. The government used the Jews as a scapegoat for every bad thing that happened to the country. All of a sudden I became the enemy. I couldn't understand how my friends and neighbors suddenly could change and believe that even I was their enemy. I remember it well when the Germans occupied Budapest. It was on a Sunday. My mother, older sister and I were going to visit a friend of the family who was a young man named Oscar Szabo. He was seven years older than I. We got to know him through my older sister's crowd. Oscar was gentile and he was drafted by the air force. He was in boot camp about the same time when the Germans occupied Hungary and was not able to come out to visit us. We respected his opinion and wanted to talk to him about our situation.

The air force airport was a one hour train ride from Budapest. After we reached the train station and bought the tickets, policemen and soldiers surrounded us and asked for identification papers. We noticed that the authorities were separating the Jewish people from the rest. As I was looking around us, I noticed that one of the policeman who was standing by the back door was older and kinder looking than the rest. I went up to him and tried really hard to be very nice and started to make conversation about his

family to find out if he had children and try to make him feel sorry for me. I remember telling him that if he would let my mother, sister and me go, we would even leave our package of food with him. It had been a gift we were taking to Oscar. We were really scared and feeling bad. As he turned his back to us we quietly sneaked out and hurriedly headed home while trying not to attract any attention to us. On the streets I heard shots and I saw confusion and beatings. I could not believe my eyes as to what was happening, but it was. That day there were thousands of Jews were either killed or deported, including some of my aunts, uncles and cousins. It was the beginning of the horrible nightmare which lasted until 1945.

Everyday it seemed, a new announcement was made trying to keep Jewish people busy with new directions, orders or laws. We had to make out of yellow material the star of David. We were given its exact measurements, the directions about its size and where to sew it on our coats and dresses. Then a Jewish district was created by picking on each block certain apartment buildings on which were placed a large star of David on the front for everyone to see. After that, Jews were not allowed to live anywhere else but in these marked buildings. If you happened to live out of the district, you had to find someone that you could trade your apartment with. If you could not make such an exchange and were left without a place, you were deported to a labor camp. We were lucky the apartment where we lived became one of those Jewish apartments. But I remember some of my friends were not so lucky and

did not find decent gentile people who were willing to trade their home for theirs.

The janitors of the apartment buildings became very important to the government. They had to keep lists of all the people that lived in there and have them available for the Arrowheads<sup>cross</sup>. The arrowheads by the way is what the Hungarian Secret Service were called. The Arrowheads<sup>cross</sup> came into the courtyard and all the Jews were ordered to go downstairs and be subjected to a roll call. Sometimes they would take the men to labor camps from morning till night. I remember when we were told to hand over all our radios, record players and telephones. My siblings and I stood in line in the school gym waiting all day to give everything to them and get a receipt . This was necessary to prove that we had followed the law.

We were shut out from the rest of the world. I kept telling myself the war will be over soon and we will be free. When Oscar was able to get a furlough, he arranged with our janitor that after dark he would give a signal with the door bell the janitor would let him in. Then he would visit with him, and I would go downstairs and visit Oscar. He would bring us news, food and cigarettes since it was harder and harder for us to get around. Then one day the government came out with some more restrictions for Jews. Everybody had food rationing tickets including gentiles. Jews had theirs stamped in yellow with the word Jew. This yellow stamp meant we were to receive half of the ration that the gentile population received. Also only a few grocery stores were assigned

the right to serve Jews. Then a new curfew was made for us. We could be outside only two hours each day. That was it. If we visited our relatives and could not get back home without being out after curfew, we had to stay there.

On April 30, 1944 an announcement was made on the radio that we were able to hear ,thanks to some of the gentile neighbors that stayed in the building with us. The radio blasted the news that the Hungarian Nazis overthrew the government and the new government would be headed by Szalasi, the head of the Arrowhead party. All day they were blasting those terrible things about the war against the Jews. Those roll calls became more frequent than ever. The Arrowheads would just take anybody they pleased. By their hands we were beaten, kicked, raped and killed. About the same time a man named Roul Wallenberg came to Hungary. His mission was to ~~was to~~ save the remaining 250,000 Jews that were still in Budapest. He represented the Swedish government. At the same time Eichman came to Budapest to arrange a faster pace of deportation for the remaining Jews. Wallenberg started to print Swedish passports for the Jews and also find safe houses for those that were under Swedish protection. I remember going to the Swedish council building, standing in line and never getting in. Oscar heard of our plight and was able to secure those pasports for us. Then we had to find a safe house. Well, it was one of those new apartments. They were high rise apartments with two bedrooms. Twenty of us had only one apartment. The main thing was we were in. All of us were there except for my grandmother who did not have a Swedish

passport. I remember, shortly after moving into our safe house my mother during the curfew hours wanted to go buy some food for us and get back before the curfew. I remember waiting for her downstairs outside of the building door. It was past the curfew time, starting to get dark and she was nowhere to be seen. We thought we would never see our mother again. Then in the dark, someone was running with a backpack on. Oh my God it was her! She had made it. I remember how happy we were that night. We also had some food that we were thankful for. The Arrowheads <sup>was</sup> accepted the passport and safe house for awhile. We tried to go on living. Oscar used to come by visiting when he was able to. Then one day he said he was having a hard time getting a furlough. So if things changed and I got in trouble I had to find another way to get help. <sup>Rescue him</sup> This was because he thought the Germans would relocate the planes to Germany and as well as their pilots and crew. One day my mother said that it would be nice if Oscar could somehow bring my grandmother to the safe house. Since Oscar had gone to Germany it was up to me to find a way if we ever wanted to see her again. You see by that time we were not allowed to go outside anymore. Now there were some young SS solders that were willing to do favors for money. So every morning the people who had money waited downstairs for one of these SS to go out with. You see, if you were with an SS you did not wear your star of David and nobody bothered you. I had been going downstairs daily hoping for some miracle to happen because I did not have any money to buy SS services.

One morning as I was waited, one of the young SS came over to

me and made a remark that he has been watching me and was wondering how come that I had not asked anybody to take me somewhere. I said I would like to, but I did not have any money. He said it was O.k. He would take me anyway. I said I would like to get my grandmother from our other apartment. I remember I was afraid thinking what was going to happen to me, but I just kept thinking of my mother and grandmother and hoped that I would be alright. Well that's exactly what happened. We got back with her safe. You can't imagine my mother's face when she saw her. We were so happy for such a short time. The SS kept coming back. He liked me and daily he took me to buy food. He even took me to the movies. I was able to help other people in the building. I thought that between Oscar and the SS I would have a safety net when we needed it. Well the day came when Eichman was pressuring for more Jews and the Arrowheads<sup>cross</sup> decided not to honor the passports anymore. They stormed all of the safe houses. Everybody had to go with just <sup>one</sup> ~~our~~ coats and one suitcase. We were lined up on the street in front of the building. ~~From four or five buildings~~ came thousands of us. There was no Oscar and no SS around me that day. It was all up to me. My father was a sick man. My grandma was old. My brother was crippled and had a clubfoot with one leg shorter. I could not see them marching to Germany and making it. So I talked one of the Arrowheads<sup>cross</sup> into letting my brother stay there with my father and grandma. They were not able to work anyway. My God I could not believe it but he agreed. Then I went down to join my mother in the lines. After everyone was forced down to the streets, the Arrowheads<sup>with</sup> made us march to a park.

There was a high ranking SS soldier and everyone had to step in front of him. He asked some questions then sent you either right or left into one of the two lines. We did not know what all that meant. As we got closer to him I saw that all older people and mothers with children were sent to the right and the able bodied were sent to the left. In front of us were my older sister, her husband, my aunt and uncle. They were all sent to the left. So then I stepped in front of him and he asked me how old I was. Well, I lied. I had been lying a lot about my age. When I thought it was better to be old, I was older. When I thought it was better to be young, I became younger. So I said I was 10 and I was with my mother and younger sister. So all three of us were sent to the right. After they finished separating all of us, the march began and there were thousands of us. The rumors from ahead of us spread back rapidly that they were shooting and throwing the bodies in the Danube.

As we were marched for hours back and forth on different streets I told my mother that when I saw a chance I would try to escape. I said to her "I have done nothing. I was a good person and nobody has the right to lock me up." I said goodbye to her and when we came to a narrower street I stepped out of the line. I heard shootings. There were others who had tried to leave the line. I don't know how many of us made it because I never looked back. Now I was alone without identification papers. I only known two addresses: the SS who helped me, and Oscars mothers place. I knew that Oscar was out of the country. So I tried for the SS' place. As

I remember, because I will never forget that day, there were a few teenage boys walking behind me. I heard their stupid remarks which they usually make. But they also started to say to each other that they bet that I was a Jew and they laughed. I kept my cool and I told myself to just pretend that I am not a Jew. Finally I reached the SS' place but he was not home. Then I made one of my biggest mistakes. I left a message with the landlady as to where I was going and gave her Oscar's address. I guess I did that because I wasn't sure if I could stay there without Oscar. To go to Oscar's home I had to wait until dark because people knew me there. I didn't want to bring any trouble to his family. So the only thing I could think of is to go in a movie house and sit through a double feature. When it got dark I went to their address. As I approached the place, I was really scared. There was black outs and Oscar's family could not be expected to open their door without you identifying yourself. You would have to give your name and I couldn't do that without jeopardizing the family since the neighbors would know me by my name and that I was Jewish. But what happened was that I put my hand on the door knob and someone opened it. The only thing I saw was Oscar's air force hat. Then I fainted. After I came to I cried and it took awhile for me to tell them what had happened. Oscar's stepfather didn't want me to stay there. He said it was too dangerous for them. But Oscar's sister and her husband, who were the janitors or supers of the next building, said I could hide in their apartment since nobody would come to search there. Oscar told me that he and another pilot took their airplane

and flew back to Hungary. They managed to create a false courier papers. Now he would have to hide also. Next morning Oscar went <sup>as found out</sup> to somewhere. Later that morning Oscar's mother came by saying that there was an SS who wanted to see me. She was showed me my handwritten message. So I had to say I would see him. He came in and told me that he would take care of me and I should go with him. Meanwhile Oscar came back. He came in the room and sat down and listened to what the SS had to say. Then Oscar told me he could not ensure my safety because he himself was hiding. The SS said that he saw my sister, her husband, my aunt and her husband. They were all locked in the freight cars and were waiting for the train to move out. He also said that he can go and get them from the train and take them to the ghetto where they would be safe from deportation. I sat there between them trying to make a decision. Oh God, I was only fifteen years old. I told the SS I loved Oscar and when we could we would get married. He wasn't very happy about it but he left. Then Oscar said he was sure that next day the SS would come back with more of his SS friends because that's what he would do in his place. So he went to look for someplace for us to hide. Meantime I was thinking that so many people from the building saw the SS and me it would probably cause trouble for everybody. I told Oscar's brother-in-law that while Oscar is away I will somehow commit a fake suicide in front of people and after that we would go away. So I wrote a suicide note that said that I don't want to live without my family and I would rather be dead than be a prisoner. I asked them to forgive me and thanked them for everything. I told

myself if I ever wanted to go to audition for a play this was the time to perform. The stakes were high. Not only my life but the life of everyone who helped me was in jeopardy. Oscar's sister and I pretended to have a fight and ended up shouting at each other. Then I took some aspirin and ran into the courtyard. There I did by my famous dying act which fooled them. Oscar found a place for us with the help of the underground. The next day the SS came back and brought with him six other SS men. Oscar's sister gave him my note. He took it and left. Later we found out that he went to the ghetto and gave my suicide note to my mother. My poor mother! She sat in mourning for me. The place Oscar found was a hiding place for 28 Chessidic Jews. They were hiding in an abandoned dry well underneath the apartment.

The person who was taking care of them for money skipped out and they needed someone to take charge. Oscar and I took charge and we were there until the Russians liberated Budapest in January 1945. Oscar and I got married. Because we did not like communism, we left Hungary illegally and walked through Austria to Munich and then to Stuttgart. We were there until July, 1949. Finally we emigrated to the US as displaced persons.

~~Tomorrow is Thanksgiving.~~ It is appropriate for us to remember that from the time of the pilgrims to the present, our country has been sought by emigrants looking to be safe from religious and political persecution and looking for a place where food is available for everyone. And believe me I thank God, ~~not only on Thanksgiving~~ but every day, for the privilege to be an American.