

RG-50.944.0082

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Summary

Gabriella Dénes Goldmann, born Dénes on February 25, 1930 in Szombathely, Hungary. Her father, Dr. Imre Dénes (1896) came from a family of ten siblings. Her grandfather, Sándor Deutsch was an employee of the Jewish Community who managed to secure a higher education for most of his children; the four sons had law degrees.

Her mother, Olga Braun, was born in Burgenland, Austria, and German was her mother tongue. Gabriella's grandmother did not speak Hungarian, therefore Gabriella learned German very well.

Gabriella had an older sister, Ilona, born in 1923.

Her father opened his law practice in 1930 in Szombathely. The family lived first in 8 Kőszegi St. for a short while, then in 12 Wesselényi St., in the center of town.

Gabriella's father volunteered at age 18 for service in WWI and became an officer. When anti-Jewish persecutions began, he was convinced because of his military service that nothing could happen to him and his family.

She said that anti-Semitism became palpable after 1938-1939; she was sometimes called "a stinking Jew" on the street when she went to the Jewish school on Sundays. Once, boys threw stones after her. In Szombathely, a border town, there were Jews who had fled there after the *Anschluss* [March 1938] in Austria. Anti-Semitic leaflets and posters also appeared, inciting against the Jews.

The family was not religious. The majority of Jews belonged to the Neolog community. There was a big synagogue in town. The Dénes family celebrated the high holidays, and participated in Jewish cultural life, but religion was not a part of their everyday life.

She attended a Jewish elementary school. She and another Jewish girl, Gabi Heimler, were the only Jewish girls accepted in the Catholic high school, the Orsolya Kanizsai School for Girls in 1940, because they were very good students, but they were the exceptions. Anti-Semitism was kept out of that school. Her sister, however, dropped out of the same high school, complaining about anti-Semitism, which Gabriella did not find credible, not then and not during the interview. She had two teachers who converted to Catholicism: Magda Szemző who taught literature and was her homeroom teacher and Etelka Veszprémi, the gym teacher. She was with them later in Auschwitz.

She said that there were about 100 converted Jews in Szombathely.

The anti-Jewish legislation affected their life: as of 1941, her father could not have Christian clients. He was also called up for forced labor to nearby Kőszeg, but went home on weekends and did not serve all the time.

Her sister was influenced by Zionist friends and desired to immigrate to Palestine, but her father did not allow it. Her parents believed that the Hungarian government would protect them.

She remembered that after March 19, 1944, after the German occupation, they had to wear the Yellow Star. Soon [May 12] she, her mother and grandmother, and her sister had to move to the ghetto, established in the center of town. They shared an apartment with Lili Hirschenhauser, a milliner, who was the only one who later escaped from the ghetto (but was

caught and killed in Slovakia), and János Neumann, a well-known gynecologist and his family. The Catholic bishop came to the ghetto to hold a mass for the converted Jews. She remembered that her father was not in the ghetto, but was arrested and imprisoned on the basis of false accusations. A letter written by a Christian lawyer, Dr. Dezső Heim, found between the interviews seems to contradict her memory: Heim asked for her father's release from the ghetto in order to provide him, Heim, with paperwork dealing with the ownership of his office and house. In any case, her father was not with them, but called up for forced labor, from which he escaped and remained in hiding for the rest of the war with his sister's help in Budapest.

They stayed in the ghetto for several weeks. They still had food. Teenagers like her gathered together in the ghetto. She remembered András Weiss (RG-50.944.0081), but said he was in a shock, because he had no connections with Jews before.

When they had to leave the ghetto, the women were taken first to the Jewish school, and midwives performed body searches on them. It was brutal and she said that she never forgot and forgave the brutality that she experienced before leaving Hungary. She remembered that they also searched an eight-year old girl, and her sister became so upset that she yelled at the midwives.

Their next stop was the motor factory, which had a rail line. They spent a few days there under very crowded circumstances, sleeping on the ground. Many Jewish men were taken for interrogations and tortured to find the valuables they had hidden. One young woman, wife of a banker gave birth there, because the gendarmes did not let her be taken to a hospital, and she and the baby were put on the train the next day. Waiting in the motor factory, they believed that they would be taken to Germany for work. Her mother did not adapt well; she was hard of hearing and could not comprehend what was happening to them. Her sister, seven years older, took charge.

In the train there were about 80 people, and barely any water in summertime [July 4]. Her grandmother became insane because of thirst. A child died of a perforated appendicitis. She had a little cup and tried to collect rainwater in it, but a gendarme knocked it out of her hand. They arrived in Auschwitz in a morning. She was not sure whether it was Birkenau or Auschwitz. Before they got out of the train, she saw a sign: Oswiecim. They did not know where they were and had never heard of Oswiecim/Auschwitz.

Old people, among them her grandmother, and small children were put on a truck, and, as they later learned, transported to the gas chambers right away. A prisoner, a woman from Nagykanizsa who worked at receiving the new prisoners approached them for food. This prisoner told her to say that she was 17. She, with her mother and sister and 30-40 other people walked to the point of selection, where Mengele was standing. When he asked her age, she said she was 17. She never saw her friend, Évi Braun again who was her age.

They went to the shower, were shaved, but not tattooed. There were no uniforms or numbers either. They were dressed in clothing left behind, and were laughing at the appearance of each other: her sister had an evening gown. She said they could not grasp what was happening to them. They noticed the smell, and her mother speculated that some kind of glue was produced in the camp.

They were in barrack B3. They spent three weeks in Auschwitz; they could not wash, slept on the floor, had very little food, and long *Zehlappels*. Their *Blockälteste* a Polish prisoner, was

hostile toward the Hungarians who lived well while the Poles, spent years in the camp. Her two teachers, Magda Szemző and Etelka Veszprémi were in the same barracks, praying a lot. Other women from Szombathely were: Irma and Eli Popper, Margit Weiss and her daughter, Mici (relatives of András Weiss), Ella and Olgi Gunsberger.

After three weeks, they had a selection again. She and her family were put on a train, but her sister was in a different wagon and was sent to Bremen to clean up rubble, and later to Stutthof and Bergen-Belsen, which she barely survived.

From then on, she, Gabriella had to take care of her mother. They were in Hessisch-Lichtenau [sub-camp of Buchenwald], close to Kassel, Germany and worked in an ammunition factory. The circumstances, she said, were survivable; they slept in beds, had blankets, and the work was not very hard, although she had to work the night shift as well. They were always hungry, and everybody lost lots of weight. Speaking German well was an advantage. She talked to the foreman and asked for easy work for her mother. Most of the guards were old Wehrmacht soldiers, a few SS. They also had a very well-intentioned SS commander. The Kapo, a Hungarian woman from Kolozsvár [Cluj, Romania], Mancsi Pál, liked her and treated her well.

Once, when her mother did not show up for work, she found her in a transport that almost had left, and only the Kapo saved her. She had a lot of problems with her mother who demanded better food in the kitchen, had conflicts with other women, and sometimes just left her workplace.

Late March 1945, the camp was evacuated. They traveled to Leipzig by truck, but, at the end, they had a foot march for two weeks. Many prisoners died. Ukrainian police guarded them, and shot those who could not keep up. As they learned later, the SS commander did not follow the order to have the women killed, but wanted to hand them over to the Americans. After the war, the SS commander was tried, but the former prisoners testified for him, and he was not sentenced.

She did not know where they marched, only remembered that they crossed the river Elbe twice. On April 28, 1945 they spent the night in a barn and her mother decided to hide there and refused to walk any further. She had to stay with her mother. They were found but not executed. Later, people from the farm found them too and gave them food.

They ended up in a town, which must have been on the demarcation line, because first the Russians, then the Americans appeared. Answering interviewer's question, she said it was likely Riesa. In that town they caught up with about 20 other Hungarian women, some of them from Szombathely. Neither the Russians, nor the Americans took care of them. The Russians sent them home. They traveled via Brno and Bratislava to Budapest.

They registered with the JOINT, and received food and clothing, and some money to get home. They stayed with her mother's relatives, who already knew that her father was alive and back in Szombathely.

It was middle of June 1945 when they arrived in Szombathely. She said that she was not a child any more, but became an adult after the camp experience. She was the youngest survivor in Szombathely. She wanted to leave for Palestine, but her father did not allow it. He did not want to hear about Zionism. He joined the Social Democratic party. He was practicing law again, and reclaimed his house as well.

Gabriella studied in the summer and passed an exam of the fifth grade of high school. She met her teachers again, who also survived and continued teaching. Magda Szemző raised her nephew, Dénes Görög, whom she had hidden in a convent in Kőszeg.

There were few survivors. Among each other they talked about their experiences, but no one asked her in school where she had been, what had happened to her. Nor did anyone ask what had happened to the classmate, Gabi Heimler.

Her sister contracted typhus in Bergen-Belsen and was barely alive at liberation. The Swedish Red Cross evacuated her to Sweden where she had a long recovery. She married a Swedish citizen and remained in Sweden.

Gabriella married István Goldmann when she graduated from high school, at age 18.

Her husband was in forced labor in Kőszeg, but the local mayor told a forester to hide him and another laborer. At the beginning of 1945, German soldiers discovered them and sent them with a transport to Guns kirchen. Her husband was in good physical condition because he was sent there late, and survived. His mother died in Auschwitz. In the 1960s, at her husband's wish, they visited Auschwitz, which was very hard for her, even though Auschwitz was much different than in 1944.

She went to law school, but was expelled in 1949, because she came from a bourgeois background, and was the member – at her father's urging – of the Social Democratic Party. She moved to Budapest with her husband. He worked in the leather business. She had various administrative positions. Her daughter was born in 1952.

She hated the Communist regime.

In 1956, they left Hungary. They lived for four years in Sweden, then in Vienna, Austria for the rest her life.

She said there has always been and still is anti-Semitism in Austria. The Austrians were not interested in what happened to the Jews after they robbed them.

For a while, she was a *Zeitzeuge* who went to schools and talked about her experiences to the pupils, but she had the feeling that she was unable to bridge the gap in their knowledge and spark their interest. She thought, however, that her speeches were somewhat useful because the Holocaust should not be forgotten.