

# Hope and Survival: My Mother's Experience

by Debbi Montrose

It was the spring of 1923, in a small Romanian town, and a long-awaited baby girl was born late at night, in the middle of a very special holiday. The girl's whole family would from that time on view this special night as "the dawn of a new day and the dawning of a new life..."

These are the words that begin a story that was one of my mother's favorites growing up. It is the story of the night she was born, and it was just the beginning of what would become a miraculous life story filled with laughter and tears, joy and pain, and ultimately, survival.

My mother Alice Kern, born Alicia Luci Koppel, was a Holocaust survivor. When I was growing up, I did not know about her experiences during the Holocaust, but I always knew there was something different about her and our family. One day, when I was older, my mother decided she could no longer keep silent about the pain and suffering she had been holding onto for so many years. She had not wanted to "burden" anyone with this grief. It was a gentle suggestion from a radio talk show host that allowed my mother to pour out everything, and she later published her writings in a memoir titled *Tapestry of Hope*. As I continue to tell you about her experience I will include some quotations from the book so that you can absorb my mother's own words.

My mother's childhood in Sighet (SEE-get) was a lot like other childhoods: she played with her friends, enjoyed going to the movies, and took piano lessons. Her parents, Elise and Heinrich Koppel, ran a delicatessen. Alice had two older brothers, named Zoltan (Zoli) and Oscar (Ossi). Zoli was studying in Paris to be a doctor. My mother remembers the way her mother would beam with pride about this fact. Ossi was closer to Alice's own age. She recalled following him "like a shadow" to his Boy Scout meetings, and that unlike many older brothers, he was never annoyed by that.

Alice, Ossi, their parents, and Granny all lived in one house very close to the home of Alice's Aunt Sara, Uncle Joel, and their children, and Alice's cousins Syl and Joetta. Alice would often share that she grew up next door to Elie Wiesel, who after surviving the Holocaust himself would go on to become a Nobel Peace Prize winner. Like Elie and most people who lived in Sighet, Alice and her family spoke a combination of languages: Hungarian, Romanian, and Yiddish. This was due to changing borders and governments. While this mix of languages and cultures could have created tension, people in Sighet were for the most part able to live together harmoniously. My mother often looked back on her childhood as a "beautiful and peaceful coexistence." Unfortunately, this all changed as Alice reached young adulthood.

In 1939, Alice turned 16, which she recalled as "a magic age." In the outside world Nazi Germany had been accumulating more territory, and in September they invaded Poland, igniting the Second World War. This event was not far from Sighet, but it did not immediately affect the people living in the region because Romania was not yet involved in the war. For my mother and her friends, that year was merely an exciting time to carry on typical teenage flirtations and dating.

But by 1941, the war was escalating. Hungary, a neighboring country allied with Nazi Germany, had regained control of Sighet. The government leaders faced increasing pressure from those who were pro-Nazi to issue laws that began to make life harder on the Jewish population. Similar laws had first been enacted in Germany when the Nazis initially took power. They were then later implemented in every country the Nazis occupied or collaborated with. These antisemitic laws removed Jewish people's citizenship and cut back on their ability to participate economically, educationally, and socially. For example, they did not allow Jewish people to hold certain jobs or shop at non-Jewish stores. This also meant that non-Jews could not shop in Jewish-owned stores, which created real difficulties for Alice's father Heinrich in running his delicatessen. Ultimately, my mother said that the pressure, discrimination, and financial hardships just "became unbearable."

Then, one day in the summer of 1941, Alice's father suddenly died while at work. He was only 52 years old. Alice recalled dropping her fork and bursting into tears when her mother informed her of her father's untimely demise. It was her first brush with death, and sadly, it would not be her last.

Granny, Alice's beloved grandmother who so often told her stories at bedtime, died not long after Alice's father. Granny had been such an important part of Alice's life, and though she had been ill for some time, it still came as something of a shock to Alice. My mother later wrote, "I could not see how I could live without her. She was always there when I needed her. I felt a great loss." Perhaps it was experiencing these initial difficulties at a young age that would eventually give my mother the strength to persevere when her life began to take an even more challenging path.

As time went on, the tide of the war shifted and the Nazis began to lose. The leaders of Hungary recognized this and tried to negotiate a separate ceasefire with the Allies. However, the Nazis did not want this to happen, so they invaded Hungary in March of 1944. This meant that Alice, her family, and the other Jewish people in Sighet were now directly under the control of the Nazis and their policies.

Over the next two months, things proceeded very rapidly. First, the Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators forced Jewish people to wear a yellow badge in the shape of the Star of David (a symbol of the Jewish faith) with the word "Jew" written on it in Hungarian. Then, they enforced a curfew on the Jewish population that did not allow anyone in the community to be out of their homes after a certain time. Next, the Nazis established a ghetto. This was a small area of the town that they blocked off and forced all 14,000 Jewish people from Sighet and the surrounding countryside to live in.

The house where Alice lived with her family was already located in the area where the ghetto was created. While they were allowed to keep their home, for the time being, they were forced to share it with others. Alice, her mother, and her two little cousins (Syl and Joetta) occupied one room in the middle of the home. Other whole families were each given one of the remaining rooms. Alice found it difficult to watch other people live in her home. She was upset at the lack of respect and care some people displayed towards items that did not belong to them. She was especially saddened to see this in the salon, the special room in which Alice's mother had so lovingly displayed the family's treasures and where Alice had played the piano. But now those days were gone, and soon my mother and her family would be forced to leave their beloved home behind.

In May of 1944, the Nazis ordered all the residents of the ghetto to gather on the streets and stand in rows of five. Everyone was told they were being sent to a work camp. This was one of the many lies the Nazis told. Many people brought with them the most valued possessions they could carry. Once they were all gathered in the square, the Nazis ordered them to start walking. As the day progressed, and people's arms and legs grew tired from carrying and walking, they left behind some of those treasured items. Alice's only blanket, made of beautiful imported silk, would be among them, although her mother managed to hang onto her purse and the loaf of bread she had baked very early that morning. As the march continued, hundreds of people silently endured the hot and dusty road on foot, and their shoes became covered in dirt because they were not allowed to use the sidewalks.

Eventually, they came to a sudden halt. Alice, her mother, her cousins, and the others were ordered into the old Orthodox synagogue in a part of town Alice had hardly ever visited before. As the sun set that night and rain began to pitter-patter on the roof, Alice noticed her two young cousins fast asleep against her mother's shoulders, while her mother "just sat there motionless," unable to take in all that had occurred that day. Alice herself fell into an exhausted sleep, one in which there were no dreams, no recollections, just a painful emptiness.

At dawn the next day, Alice and the others were awoken by a sharp, commanding voice ordering them to once again organize themselves into rows of five and prepare for more walking. As they continued towards the center of town, they passed all the places of Alice's happier times: the movie house, the candy shop, and the promenade where she had flirted with young men. These happy memories kept Alice from dwelling on the horrible reality of her situation.

Finally, the march came to an end at the train station. Alice, her mother, her cousins, and the other hundreds of Jewish citizens of Sighet were forced onto cattle cars — train cars that were normally used to transport cows and other livestock. The Nazis forced about 60 people onto each car, and since there were no seats, everyone had to stand pressed close together. There were no windows, either, only cracks at the top of the boxcar where some small amounts of light and air passed through. People began to fight for space, for a way to rest. There were no bathrooms, only a small bucket in the corner where everyone on the train would have to relieve themselves, in front of the others. Alice remembered many other trips on a train, and how exciting they had been, but "now it was a horrible nightmare, frightening and filled with anxiety for the future."

After two long nights, the train came to a halt at its destination, Auschwitz-Birkenau, near the small Polish town of Oswiecim (ow-SHVAYN-chm). It was still the early hours of the morning, so there was not much light as the heavy doors of the cattle cars were pulled open. The prisoners were told by a man in a gray and blue-striped uniform to get down from the train. The men were separated from the women and children. My mother recalled that "everyone seemed to come alive" in the chaos. She said that the man in the uniform even offered his hand to help. They were then ordered once again to form columns of five and to "Hurry! Hurry!" as they walked on in the darkness. Alice grew apprehensive, noticing the way girls ahead of her were being ordered right and left. In just a few moments, the Nazi officer ordered Alice to the right, while her mother and cousins were sent to the left. Alice tried to turn to go with them, but a soldier pointed his bayonet at her and forced her back into the column marching to the right. This was the last time Alice would ever see

her mother or young cousins. My mother recalled that “the pain of leaving, of being separated from our loved ones, of being cruelly uprooted and torn away from our lives and homes, left us numb with shock.”

As the first rays of sun began to emerge for the day, Alice and the other women were pushed ahead into a huge cement building that stood in front of them, where they would be further separated from their old lives and their former selves. Here, the women were ordered by many other girls in gray cotton dresses to undress and place all their belongings neatly on the floor. Alice now had to give up her mother’s purse, which she had been clinging to since they had gotten off the train. Then they were shaved “from top to bottom” and given their own gray sack dresses and clogs for shoes. Alice realized they were all now indistinguishable from each other. They stood there until a voice shouted at them to march, once again, in columns and rows of five. They were now entering the main camp at Auschwitz. My mother was just 21 years old.

Marching into the camp’s main gates, Alice heard an inner voice tell her, “Do not think, just follow orders.” She later viewed this as the first step she took to cover her pain. As time went on, she would develop more and thicker layers of protection to shield her childhood memories from the Nazis’ cruel treatment and attempts to rob her of anything that made her human. Alice and the other women were quickly and harshly introduced to the realities of their new life at Auschwitz when they first arrived in their barrack. This was a low, clay building, windowless, with bunks all along the walls creating a narrow walkway between them. Alice and the others quickly sat on the low bunks, still in a daze. The *blokova*, the supervisor who had power over all the women in this barrack, came in and shouted at them to behave or else be sent to the crematorium. Alice and the other newly-arrived prisoners did not know what the woman meant, and they could not understand why she would be so furious.

That first night was an introduction to what would eventually take on some sort of routine around which the prisoners’ days would revolve, a dull repetition seemingly with no end. The next day, my mother recalled, “A piercing voice called out, ‘*Zähl-appel* [roll call]! Everybody out and in columns of five!’ We stood there with the hot sun beating down on our bald heads. This was torture in itself. Finally, a German woman in her clean uniform came around and counted us, while the *blokova* ran behind her to double check. On and on it went: 5, 10, 15....Standing there and being counted was very important. We had no name, no age, no country. From then on, each of us was only a number.”

It was months later when these numbers would forcibly be tattooed on the prisoners’ arms, a physical, permanent scar that my mother would carry for the rest of her life. In Auschwitz, the only camp that tattooed its prisoners, my mother became A-7903. This number was shouted at every roll call, every order, every selection, all meant to reinforce that Alice was no longer Alice. For my mother, the tattooing itself was not physically painful, but an emotional, psychological pain. The idea that prisoners no longer even had a name was yet another way the Nazis attempted to break their spirits. Even so, my mother recalled, “One had to cling to every hope.”

Many months would pass in this hellish place. Alice and the other prisoners would be given measly rations of what could barely pass for food. She once received a piece of cheese with worms in it. While she could not bring herself to eat it, others immediately did. She was forced to work physically-demanding jobs, such

as carrying huge rocks from one side of the camp to the other, seemingly with no logical purpose. She also had to work in the barracks where they sorted through the enormous piles of clothing confiscated from the endless transports of people that came into the camp daily. Many of these people were immediately murdered upon arrival. Alice and the other girls who did this work had to cut up the clothes, roll them, and braid them into balls which would be used by the Nazis for military purposes. Working in dimly-lit barracks from sunrise to sunset was numbing. Alice later wrote that she and the others “never knew what was ahead of us,” and over time, their “ability to feel was being lost.” It became increasingly difficult to hold onto hope as their bodies began to show the signs of their inhumane treatment.

By late 1944, the Nazis were close to losing the war. As a result, they decided to evacuate Auschwitz and its satellite camps. They wanted to use the remaining prisoners as forced laborers in factories inside Germany. In early January 1945, Alice and the others in her barrack were among those evacuated. They were ordered into their usual rows of five and forced to march on the glittering snow for hours on end. Constantly driven forward by the soldiers and guards shouting “*Schneller! Schneller!* [faster, faster],” they were eventually pushed into open cattle cars, where many of the prisoners collapsed. My mother recalled that “The anxiety of possible death during our sleep did not let us really relax . . . since we were sitting there and nothing was moving.” The only solace was the falling snow that they were able to scoop off themselves and eat. Suddenly, late that night, the train started moving, speeding along this time to get away from the fast-advancing Allies. Eventually, Alice and the others found themselves in Germany at a new camp, Bergen-Belsen. Here, Alice and the others were once again forced to strip, shower, form rows of five, and wait for further orders. Alice found that one of her friends from Sighet, Heidi, and her mother had also survived what later became known as the “Death March” from Auschwitz. Even though they were all “exhausted, dehydrated and semi-delirious,” Alice felt that this reunion would at least mean they were all together to face what came next.

It was there, in Bergen-Belsen, that Alice contracted typhoid fever, a life-threatening infection that can be caused by bacteria or contaminated food. This illness nearly killed her. Slowly, Alice recovered as best she could in such a place. Then suddenly, one day in April of 1945, she woke up from a fever-induced sleep to find a soldier speaking to her. But he was not German, Alice was sure, because he was speaking English. At last, Alice and the other surviving prisoners were free! British field servicemen had been sent to evacuate Bergen-Belsen, not knowing what they would find. They helped to liberate the camp and set about cleaning the place. They also forced the surrendering Nazis to properly bury the dead. Alice found that while she wanted to hate the Nazis who had murdered so many people, she could not find the energy. “All I wanted was to live and forget,” she later wrote. While my mother chose to take this approach, each person deals with trauma in their own way, and it is important to remember that not all survivors felt the way my mother did.

After a few weeks, survivors were offered a chance to register to return home or to a new place. Alice was still very weak, but she managed to walk over to the registration desk. She recalled that “a person behind the table gave us a small card and our name was given back to us. From that day on we were called by our names—we had become persons again.” This official return of their names was the first step in the rehabilitation process for survivors. As survivors began the slow road to recovery, Alice and the others experienced the kindness that had been unimaginable for many years prior. They were given clean, fresh clothes and toiletries, and there was plenty of good, unspoiled food to nourish them. Slowly, Alice began to regain her strength. She was determined not to be the picky eater she had been in her childhood.

Unfortunately, liberation did not always guarantee long-term survival. In the midst of this physical healing, Alice also experienced more grief. She watched two people close to her die in the months after their liberation. At first, Alice found it difficult to process this. She was crying on the inside, but her eyes were dry. The wall that she had built for herself as a protection would eventually come down, but it was not easy.

In the summer of 1945, Alice and the other survivors who had chosen to go to Sweden were collected for transport by the Swedish Red Cross. My mother experienced her first ocean voyage crossing the North Sea. While on the ship, looking through the porthole at the beautiful waves and the sun, Alice was deeply moved. She secretly hoped that all her other wishes — to find her brothers Zoli and Ossi, to find a man and romance, and hopefully to raise a family of her own — would come true as well. They soon arrived in Helsingborg, Sweden, where they were taken to an old schoolhouse that had been converted into a hospital. As time passed, she and the other girls began to recover their strength physically and emotionally. Alice was able to maintain correspondence with her brother Zoli, who had relocated to Spain after the Nazis had taken over Paris. Unfortunately, there was still no word on what had happened to Ossi. He had been sent to a work camp in Budapest in 1941, but after that, my mother did not hear from him again.

While in recovery, Alice met a caring, older couple, Gurli and Aldor Anderson, who had no children of their own and wanted to help these young women as much as possible. They offered comfort and love, but Alice found that even though she wanted to accept and return their feelings, she still found it difficult to open up to others and accept their love. My mother knew these two people were “gems,” and she appreciated all their help and kindness, but she chose to go with some of the other girls to a special home where people went to gradually regain their physical strength and health after an illness. There, she eventually met her future husband (my father), Hugo Kern, an avid photographer. He was visiting the home to take photos of people so that they could send the pictures to relatives who survived or might be looking for them. Hugo was also a Holocaust survivor. Alice recalled that he, “like the others, was struggling to find his way back to love and trust.” Alice and Hugo shared an initial attraction, and Alice felt that this was a man she could trust, who would protect her. In each other, they were able to find someone who understood their pain and could accept them unconditionally. By December of 1946, Alice and Hugo were married.

Alice’s two wishes had mostly come true — she had found her brother Zoli, and she had found love with a good, kind man. In 1948, my parents were able to immigrate to the United States, thanks to the help of a sponsor for refugees in Longview, Washington. They settled in neighboring Portland, Oregon, because Hugo’s brother and his family lived nearby. My mother worked for some time as a seamstress for a local swimsuit manufacturer and then babysat for some of our neighbors. Alice and Hugo eventually started a family of their own and would have four daughters, including me. Many years later, my mother would help to organize efforts to create a Holocaust Memorial in Portland, which now stands in Washington Park. In the 1990s, my mother, my sisters, and I all traveled to Europe so that my mother could show us where she had lived, and where she had survived. For me, the impact of this trip is hard to put into words. I wanted to be there to support my mother, whose purpose was so strong. This trip was filmed by a Portland filmmaker for a documentary entitled *A Journey To Remember*. The film, my mother’s memoir, and her role in helping to establish a permanent Holocaust Memorial in Portland are part of my mother’s legacy, may she rest in peace. My sisters and I hope that you will help to carry on her message of love, hope, and courage.