

A Chance for Survival

by Eva Aigner

Eva was not supposed to be my name! I was born to my parents, Morris and Gizella Spiegel on June 17, 1937 in a small Czechoslovakian border town called Kosice (ko-sheets-say). After my birth, my dad went to register me at the local city hall. When it came to writing my name, he wasn't sure if it was supposed to be Eva Erika or Erika Eva, so he chose Eva Erika, and, of course, it was backwards from what my mother had wanted. As a result, all my life my mom and my family called me Erika, even though my legal name was Eva. This became confusing in later years when I went to school. They called me Eva at school and I wasn't used to that, so I would argue with the teacher that I was Erika!

My birth came at a difficult time in history. By 1937, Hitler had already gained power in Nazi Germany and implemented several anti-Jewish laws. Then in 1938, when I was one year old, Nazi Germany invaded the part of Czechoslovakia, known as the Sudetenland, and began establishing anti-Jewish laws there, too. By the following year, they arranged for their Hungarian allies to take charge of the rest of Czechoslovakia. This is where my hometown, Kosice, was located, and by the end of 1939, we were under the control of the Arrow Cross, a Hungarian fascist political party that shared Nazi racist ideology.

Despite the chaos of the moment and fear of the future, my family was my world. In addition to my parents, I had an older sister, Ibolya (ee-bowl-yuh), and doting grandparents on my father's side who practically lived next door. My grandfather was a skilled metalworker, who created the chandelier that hung in the synagogue in Kosice. I have a vague memory of all the brass plates and wall hangings he made, and I remember my grandmother and cousin constantly polishing them.

I was quite young when we left Kosice, but I do recall the apartments were all on street level with a cobblestone courtyard. All I remember of the courtyard is green bushes and a metal stand on which my mother used to hang the rugs and beat the dust out of them. Ibolya used to push me around in my baby stroller and even chase me around the courtyard. We had such fun together and I looked up to her very much. It was a happy early life, but by the time I was two years old, in September of 1939, the Second World War had begun, changing my life forever.

That year, anti-Jewish laws similar to those enacted by Nazis in Germany, had been implemented in Hungary. Due to these laws, Jews were no longer allowed to run businesses or to own property in Kosice. My father, who was a milliner (a person who makes caps and hats), had his business license taken away and couldn't get another job. He was concerned about being able to provide for our family.

In the fall of 1939, my father's brother, who lived in Budapest (the capital of Hungary) encouraged my father to move the family there, where there were still opportunities for work. My mother insisted that she would not leave without her sister. Linka Neni (Aunt Linka), my favorite aunt, was a widow with four young children.

My parents supported her financially and emotionally, and even though my father had no idea how he would support all nine of us, we all boarded the train to Budapest together. At the time I did not realize what a sacrifice this was, but as I have gotten older, I understand how good both my parents were to do this.

After we arrived in Budapest, my uncle helped us rent an apartment near the Jewish district. There were two bedrooms, a kitchen, a salon (living room), a small windowless room, and one bathroom. Linka Neni and her four children had the biggest bedroom. My parents, Iboyla, and I all shared the salon as our bedroom. To afford the rent, we rented out the second bedroom to an older woman. The windowless room became my father's workshop.

My father was able to find employment from a non-Jewish man who owned a hat shop. While they would not hire my father to work *in* their shop, the owner gave my father the material he needed and then paid him based on how many items he made. Fortunately, my father had brought three sewing machines with him when we moved. The whole family pitched in to help: my mother and cousins learned to run the sewing machines and Linka Neni helped with cooking and caring for the household. Although there were ten of us crowded in this space, later on we would look back and realize how spacious it was.

Like many four year olds, I wanted to be helpful too. One day, when my father went to lunch, I picked up the huge tailors' scissors and started to cut up the fabric. You see, each day my father would create the pattern pieces by drawing them out on the fabric with chalk, and I thought I would follow these patterns to cut them out. When my father came back, he was horrified. Not only was it dangerous for me to use the huge sharp scissors, but my father did not know how he would be able to account for the lost material. My father was very upset with me; it was the only time I got into serious trouble with him.

In the fall of 1943, two major events happened that would deeply affect me for the rest of my life. The Arrow Cross sent my father to a slave labor camp in Jaszbereny (yaz-BEHR-ay-knee), Hungary, 55 miles away. We did not know it at the time, but we would never see my father again! During the journey to Jaszbereny, my father and the other men had to sleep on the ground. At the camp, they were forced to build roads and dig ditches. They lived in wooden structures under poor conditions and received very little food. My father would write to my mother to ask about us, and to ask that if we had extra food, to mail it to him. We did not have much ourselves, but I remember my mom mailed homemade baked goods and whatever little we had. We did not know if my father ever received these packages, because each letter he would ask for more food. At some point, we stopped receiving letters from my father.

The same year he was sent away, I started first grade in a public school. I loved school, and was happy to go there. But that all changed when one morning the teacher said to our class; "all Jewish children stand up, and leave the class." It turned out that we were no longer allowed to say the Hungarian National Anthem with our classmates because of our Jewish religion; that was why the teacher had told us to leave the room. When we were allowed back in the classroom, the rest of the students made fun of us, yelling out loud hateful racial slogans. Some of my classmates threw things at us. I went home crying and I told my mom what had happened. She put me on her lap and tried to comfort me. She said to me; "We are good and God loving, law abiding people. I will do everything I can to protect you and your sister, but sadly this is the law right now." After that incident, Jewish children were no longer allowed to attend school. I felt very sad.

In March of 1944, more anti-Jewish laws were enacted in Hungary, including one that required all Jewish people to be marked with a yellow star of David on their outer clothing. Every time we stepped out into the street, people knew we were Jewish. Some of our own neighbors stopped talking to us or they said discriminatory slogans against us. We also had strict curfews placed on us and were not allowed to go out on the streets after dark.

In June of 1944, the Hungarian authorities established a ghetto in Budapest, but it was not initially like other ghettos, separate areas of a town where Jewish people were isolated. In Budapest, the ghetto was dispersed; individual homes and apartments throughout the city were designated as Jewish homes. They called these “marked housing,” and our apartment became one of these marked homes.

There was now a big yellow star marking the entrance of our apartment building. Other Jewish people were brought in to live there, and the non-Jewish people were given other, better places to live. As the Arrow Cross moved more people into our already crowded apartment, the windowless room which had been my father’s shop housed another Jewish family. The elderly lady who had rented the other bedroom was relocated, and a Jewish couple moved into her room. Now we had 13 people with one bathroom and one kitchen to share among us all. There was not enough space; we felt crowded, and cooking was difficult, but we managed. We lived in these conditions for five or six months.

In July of 1944, while we were living in the overcrowded apartment, we received devastating news that my father had been killed in the forced labor camp. A friend of my father’s, who had also been at that camp and had escaped, came to see us. He brought my dad’s pocket watch with him and gave it to my mother. When he told her about my father’s death, she was screaming and crying so loudly that the neighbors stood in the courtyard to see what was happening. My sister and I were terrified when we saw my mother like this. We never had total confirmation of how my father died, but we were told that the men were locked into the wooden structures where they slept and the buildings were burned down. I was still too young to really understand it all, but I remember my mother and sister sitting *shiva* (the Jewish tradition of sitting in mourning for seven days after the death of a loved one). It was such a traumatic, sad, and somber time for us all.

My mother was now the only one left to take care of all of us, and yet she was also trying to regain her emotional strength after the loss of my father. In early November 1944, things became worse. Nazi Germany had now taken over control of the Hungarian government, and they put the Arrow Cross in charge. Over the next several weeks, the Arrow Cross committed mass killings throughout Hungary and deported hundreds of thousands of Jewish people to concentration camps. Those of us living in marked housing in Budapest remained, but we didn’t know what would happen.

One day, without any warning, the Arrow Cross soldiers marched into the marked housing where we lived, and told us to pack as many belongings that we each could carry because we were going to be relocated. They had decided to change the Budapest ghetto to be like other ghettos, a smaller, separate, and contained place within the city. We were taken to this newly established ghetto area, which was mostly inhabited by women, children, and older people. All the remaining able-bodied men were taken to be slave laborers in the war effort.

The ghetto was surrounded by brick walls and barbed wire fencing. We were pushed into small quarters and slept on the floor with people laying wall-to-wall. Most of the time we had no electricity or running water. We were constantly hungry, and often went scavenging for food. My sister and I once found a piece of moldy bread that was crumbling to dust in a cupboard, and we were eating it when my mother grabbed it away for fear we would get sick. We were upset with her, because to us, moldy food was better than no food at all.

Sometimes, food would be brought into the ghetto. This was thin soup and bread, and only one ladleful at most per person. If someone was at the end of the line, there was often no food left, and they had to wait until the next day. Because I was small, my mother would sometimes have me wind my way through the people to get a portion. More and more people became very sick because of malnutrition, unclean water, and poor hygiene conditions.

In December of 1944, members of the Arrow Cross woke us up in the middle of the night, shining flashlights in our faces. Though they had already taken all the able-bodied men, they were now searching for any remaining people who looked like they could work. My mother was in her 30's and still capable of physical labor, so she was selected at gunpoint and taken away. We didn't know at that time, but she was then forced onto a cattle car and was sent towards a concentration camp. My sister and I were devastated; our father was already gone, and our mother had been our only security. In that moment, my sister Ibolya became my protector and mother figure.

Sometime later, after our mother was taken away, some women came through with Red Cross armbands, and offered to take the children to safety where there would be lots of food and nourishment available. My Aunt Linka encouraged us to go to these better conditions, but Ibolya said, "I'm not going anywhere! If our mother ever comes back, how would she ever find us?" As it turned out, these children were later deported by the Arrow Cross to concentration camps, where they were murdered.¹

Two weeks later we were again woken up in the middle of the night by the Arrow Cross with their flashlights. In the chaos, we were separated from Aunt Linka. We were told to leave our few meager belongings; since it was ice cold outside, my sister grabbed our one and only blanket. It was getting close to the end of the war, and the Hungarian Nazis were trying to get rid of as many Jewish people as they could. The Arrow Cross marched us down to the riverfront pathway of the Danube River. I don't know the exact number of people in our group, but it was hundreds. The people, who included women, elderly, very ill people, and children were ordered to remove their shoes and turn around to face the river.²

We started to hear gunshots. As my sister and I stood crying in the line up, a miracle occurred. We didn't know at the time that our mother had managed to escape the train heading for the concentration camp.

1 The International Red Cross had been allowed to set up 60 children's homes in Budapest where 6,000 to 7,000 Jewish children were under the protective custody of the Red Cross. But, when the Arrow Cross took power, they began deporting all Jewish people in Hungary. Through the efforts of various individuals, about 2,000 Jewish children were spared from this fate.

2 Many years later, a memorial was erected in Budapest on the spot where these atrocities occurred. There are bronzed shoes and an explanatory plaque in memory of the thousands who were killed here.

When the train had slowed down to put water into the communal barrel, the guards had to open the doors. My mother leapt from the still moving train and started to run. One of the German guards yelled at her "*Halt!* (Stop!)." My mother threw herself down to the ground and grabbed this man's boots. Fortunately, my mother spoke German. She begged him to let her go. She told him that her husband was already dead, that she had been forced to leave her two girls behind, and that if she didn't get back her children would never survive.

This was a man of feeling, a righteous man. Likely, he did not believe in the Nazi ideology because he said to my mother; "I have a wife and three children waiting back in Germany. If I openly help you, I will get punished or killed. But I will try my best to help you. When I turn toward the train with my gun, run if you can into the nearby woods." As he turned away, my mother ran and hid in the woods. Nobody chased her. She then immediately tore off the yellow star from her clothes and started her journey back to Budapest.

She walked only at night, and hid during the day. She dug potatoes out of the frozen ground to feed herself, and swallowed snow for water. After several days' journey, she snuck back into the ghetto, only to find out from others that our section of the ghetto had just been emptied out.

She heard rumors that people had been taken to the riverfront. She scrambled down to the river where she could see a long line of people. Unbelievably, she recognized my sister's crying voice. My mother pulled out the only precious possession she still had, her wedding ring, and approached one of the guards. She handed him the ring and asked, "Please let these two girls out of the line." The guard accepted the ring, and replied, "Jewish children cannot wander around the city!" and he escorted the three of us back to the ghetto. I can only guess that with her light-colored hair and no star on her clothes, the guard did not think she was Jewish. Regardless of what he thought, we were safe and reunited with our mother!

My mother, Ibolya, and I remained in the ghetto until January 18th, 1945 when the Soviet troops liberated Hungary from the Nazis. Now the Soviets occupied the country. They opened the gates of the ghetto and told us we were free to go. The guards were gone! We did not want to believe it at first; we thought it was a trick or a lie, so we waited until the afternoon until many of the other neighbors had left. When we left, my mother and sister had to carry me, because I was so sick and weakened by dysentery (a bad infection of the intestines) that I could no longer walk. It took us the rest of the day to walk the sixteen or so blocks back to the apartment where we used to live.

When we entered our old apartment, we were shocked to see that it had been ransacked and all our belongings were gone. The walls were riddled with bullet holes, and all we found in one corner was a pile of our pictures and some documents, like our birth certificates. My father's *tallit* (prayer shawl) had been maliciously ruined by the ransackers, but his *tefillin* (prayer box and straps) and the velvet prayer shawl cover, which had been embroidered by my mother, had survived. These items of his became precious keepsakes for us.

Right after the war, we stayed in the old apartment and we, like many other families, struggled to find enough food. It was decided that I would have to beg the Russian soldiers for food to survive. My mother braided my hair with a scrap of yarn at the end, and I would go up to the soldiers with a sad face and say "*day mne khleba*" or "give me bread" in Russian. The Soviet soldiers were missing their own children so much that they would

pick me up, and hold me close as if I were their own child. They would then give me dark Russian rye bread. Sometimes this bread was so hard we would have to soak it in chicory coffee before we could eat it. But I was so proud that I had been able to provide a little something for the family!

We continued to struggle as the months passed, and my mother, being our sole provider, had to find some way to pay for food, rent, etc. Before my dad was taken away, my parents had wisely removed tiles off of the back of the ceramic stove in the apartment and hollowed out a hiding spot for a few valuables. Fortunately, no one had discovered it! My mother used these last few possessions to barter for food to feed us, and to purchase coal and wood to heat our home. As time went on, my mother found a way to sell warm chestnuts, popcorn, and cobs of corn from a cart on the street corner as people were going to work. She earned a few pennies this way, until later, when she was able to get a job sewing in a factory.

After the war, the Communist party rose to power in Hungary. While I was able to finish my elementary and high school education, I could not receive higher education unless I joined the Communist party. So, after high school, I decided to work at a state-managed furrier company to learn bookkeeping. It was here that one of my colleagues introduced me to my future husband, Leslie Aigner, through a blind date. Leslie was a Holocaust survivor of Auschwitz and three additional camps. He had lost his mother and younger sister to the gas chambers, as well as many other members of his family. While our first meeting felt a little awkward, we found that we had so much in common. We fell in love, and after only 59 days we were married!

We had only been married for six months when, in October of 1956, the Hungarian revolution broke out against the Soviet occupation and against communism. The situation was dangerous, because a person never knew when they could be suspected of treason, picked up, and disappeared. We were living under fear again. As the revolution continued, there were many food shortages and we had to stand in bread lines. Sadly, we also experienced antisemitism and discriminatory comments again. Although it was not legally allowed, we decided we needed to take the risk and to leave the country.

On Christmas Eve, 1956, my husband, his father, step-mother, and I boarded a train toward the Hungarian border with Austria, a country that was not under Communist rule. In difficult and frightening conditions, we escaped over the border into Austria. We had purchased white sheets from a local farmer and used these to hide ourselves in the snow as the Russian soldiers shot flares into the sky at the border to locate escapees. From a small town in Austria, we managed to get to the American consulate in Vienna, the capital city. We found we had an affidavit of acceptance to the United States provided by my husband's step-brother, who was also a Holocaust survivor and had immigrated to Portland, Oregon after the war. We were able to board the very last transport ship of Hungarians who entered the United States. President Eisenhower had allowed a final, additional 5,000 Hungarians to immigrate to the U.S., and we were among this group!

I will never forget the wonderful feeling of arriving in the United States, and settling in Portland. The reality of living in a free country is something I never take for granted. It took time and a lot of mistakes to learn the English language and a new culture. After doing odd jobs, I was able to go to cosmetology school, on a working scholarship. My husband also found a job in his trade. We eventually created a beautiful family together. We have a daughter and a son, four grandsons and two great-grandsons. My husband and I are proud to say that our children are college educated, an opportunity which was denied to us. And our

grandchildren are following in their footsteps!

For many years, my husband and I did not speak about our Holocaust experiences, but in 1989, when Holocaust deniers surfaced, we could no longer be silent. Together, we shared our experiences of discrimination during the Holocaust with many school and adult audiences. Our hope was that by sharing our personal history, we could teach about the consequences of hate and discrimination. We also were involved in the creation of the Oregon Holocaust Memorial in Portland's Washington Park, and had a hand in the legislation which resulted in mandatory Holocaust education for students in Oregon. Now that you've heard my experience, please bear witness, and share this with your friends and family so that this never happens to any people again.