# Life after Surviving the Holocaust

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I was asked to write a follow-up to the anthology, Doctors in Peril. My contribution in that book, "Surviving the Holocaust," ended with my return to Budapest in August 1945. Now I will begin at this point. However, before beginning I have to give a brief background, starting with the day when Germany occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944.

My not yet fifteen-year-old brother and I (then nineteen) were staying in Budapest where we were going to school. We tried desperately to join our parents in our home in the country, but Jews were not allowed to travel. We were not even permitted to enter the train station. Soon the deportation of the Jews in the countryside began, and our parents were taken to Auschwitz. We never saw them alive again. Our turn to be deported from Budapest came in October 1944. I participated in several death marches, first in Hungary and later in Austria. My brother was in a different group and eventually succeeded in escaping. Fortunately for me I stayed through the entire ordeal with our friend, Anna, who became my surrogate mother.

From November 44 till March 45 we were digging tank traps against the Red Army. When the front approached we were marched to Mauthausen lager in Austria and finally to Gunskirchen camp where we were liberated by the US Army on May 4, 1945. After liberation, Anna and I contracted typhus, and as displaced persons, we waited for our return home in a Displaced Person's camp. One day our camp was taken over by the Russian Army, which immediately marched us out of the camp on our way home to Hungary. However, that was another death march. We were given no food, and we were shot at when we scrambled for potatoes in the fields. After ten days, Anna and I succeeded in running away. We finally arrived in Budapest on our own in August 1945.

**Life after the Holocaust.**

We didn't know who we would find alive in this city of ruins and decided to go to Anna's ex-mother-in law. She welcomed us in tears and gave us the good news that Anna's son and my brother were alive and well. She referred to my brother as "the boy who has no parents" - a statement that I ignored and registered as "the boy whose parents are not yet back." I continued to listen to her recounting the situation in Hungary, specifically in Budapest, which had suffered three months of siege and street fighting. This beautiful historical but also modern city was in

ruins. Not a single windowpane was unbroken, and not a building was undamaged in the city. Most houses were missing their front walls, but people lived there anyway, and the apartments looked like stages with open curtains. The stores were empty, but you could buy potatoes from trucks that brought them directly from the villages. Street vendors cooked corn on the streets, and some restaurants were fully in business, although only black marketeers could afford to eat there. Money was worth nothing, and everybody bartered. My brother, now sixteen, supported himself as an electrician. He was a wizard with re-installing electricity in ruined houses and had plenty of work.

The two of us finally met and hugged and cried forever. We avoided talking about our parents, and for a while we went to the rail station regularly to meet the trains bringing home deportees. At one point we felt that we couldn't bear yet another disappointment, and we stopped our futile trips.

Also I could hardly walk. I had a huge abscess under my right knee from an infected wound on my foot. It had to be opened and drained. It kept draining for six more months. We talked about our immediate future. My brother still had two more years of high school to finish. I decided to get a job as a pediatric nurse. I started looking for work as soon as I could walk again. However,

one day my dear little brother returned with papers of enrollment to medical school. He was radiant: "Don't look for jobs. You want to be a doctor. The *Numerus Clausus* (closed number for Jews) is over. There is no tuition. Only fools don't study today. We'll survive, we survived worse."

He was right. We did survive. Soon I found myself shaking hands with the dean of the medical faculty as he was welcoming his freshmen. My desire to become a doctor had originated during deportation when I attributed superhuman powers to the doctors among my fellow prisoners, who were never panicky, who put their patients' interests before their own, and who sacrificed their own lives for their patients. I was certain they shared a common secret that made them invincible. I wanted to learn this secret. The inauguration ceremony was special because the freshmen were of all ages, between nineteen and 45. Since 1919 the *Numerus Clausus* had made it practically impossible for Jews to study medicine in Hungary. At 21 I was only two years older than the youngest freshmen, but there were new students 20 years older. At this festive moment I was not the only one with teary eyes.

The following weeks were more prosaic and were filled with trivial problems. There were three thousand freshmen at the school. The classes were held on different locations and in

double shifts. Between classes we took the crowded tramways, hung out on the stairs, and raced on the sidewalks. In the anatomy practice the time was too short so we "borrowed" the joints to study ligaments at home. Once I almost gave my technically oriented brother a heart attack when he found a human foot in my bag while he was hoping to find some food there.

The living conditions seemed to me at that time fully adequate, but looking back they really were awful. The organization that cared for the deportees assigned a school as a shelter to university students who had no family, no income, no means of support, and who were poor as church mice. We slept in bug-infested beds on straw sacks minus sheets, covered with rough horse blankets. Once a week we had hot water for showers. There was no glass in the windows and no heat. Our meals were free and consisted of cornmeal, black replacement coffee, and bread. There were six girls and sixty boys living in our dorm. Most girls were too finicky and gave up studying rather than living there. When it became too cold to study, we gathered in the only heated room in the building, the doctor's office. We didn't do a lot of studying. Late into the night, we had heated discussions about the future, the future of the world, the country, and our own. The solutions were communism, zionism, no politics, humanism, democracy, etc. We never discussed our past, the

deportations, or our lost loved ones. We lived in a collective denial. It was an overwhelming task to grieve for our parents, grandparents, and other relatives at once. None of us could handle it so we just ignored it. At the time it seemed the only way to survive the pain. Little did we know what a high price we would pay for it later. I am eighty years old, and I still feel like an orphan. I have been grieving for my parents all my life, because I didn't grieve at the time of their death. At the shelter, grief was substituted for with stormy relationships. People were falling in love like leaves in the fall. Unfortunately, most of the love was not returned. Because the relative numbers were beneficial for the girls, each of us got several marriage proposals, but none led to weddings. Otherwise, our little community lived together quite in harmony. We helped each other the best we could. When we had to dress for an oral examination or a date, the others put together their outfit from the best they had. However, the effect of a well-dressed person was ruined by the fact that all our clothes and our hair were penetrated by the intensive smell of Carbol, a disinfectant used non-stop in the building for the returning deportees.

At the lectures I could not pay attention because of my nagging hunger. Hunger kept me from concentrating while I tried to study for my tests. At school I became more and more aware of the girls

who were nicely dressed. I had my clothes from UNRRA gift parcels, and everything was unmatched and the wrong size. I had no winter coat and no shoes of my size but a pair of man's shoes stuffed with newspaper. For the awful smell, everybody began sniffing around me asking, Where is this stench coming from?

During winter, the school was closed due to shortage of coal. I got a job in the country to teach English. My pupil was a Jewish jeweler who wanted two hours of English daily for room and board and the possibility to give lessons to others who would pay me in commodities like cooking oil or flour. Finally, I could eat as much as I wanted, and I stopped feeling hungry. I got another proposal of marriage, and I almost accepted in a bout of quest for family. Before I could give him a definite answer, the proposal was withdrawn. Thank God.

During the summer of 1946 my father's brother, who had been missing since 1938, suddenly arrived in Budapest. He had fought in the Czechoslovak Legion under British leadership and now returned to his country with the victorious liberating divisions. He told us that the surviving members of our father's family lived in Czechoslovakia, and we should join them. Thus my brother and I registered for so-called re-emigration and left Hungary in October 1946, I transferred to the Slovak University

in Bratislava.

Bratislava was undamaged by the war; Hitler kept the Slovak state safe and prosperous. They collected fortunes from the deported Jews, and yet they enjoyed now all the benefits of peoples who won the war, as they belonged to the victorious Czechoslovakia. They still hated the Czechs, the Hungarians, and most of all the Jews. My roommate wrote in her diary: "I found out that I was assigned a roommate who is not only a Hungarian but also a Jewess. Why is this happening to me?" Later she wrote: "My Jewess is not so bad. She does not stink; she takes a shower every day, even when there is no hot water. She is very quiet, undemanding, and she studies all day long. I think maybe we could even be friends some day."

Anti-semitism was everywhere. Colleagues and professors equally and passionately hated the Jews. Several of them tried to convince me to convert. Another problem was chauvinism. Everywhere were announcements prohibiting speaking Hungarian. My own mastery of the Slovak language was poor, and while preparing for my exams I had to use the dictionary all the time. The hostility around me filled me with scorn: "I'll show them yet! I'll show them what I can do!" So I kept studying hard and passed all my tests with excellent grades and in record time.

In 1948 I had the first group of examinations behind me and qualified for transfer to Charles University Medical School in Prague. The atmosphere in Prague was very different; they too were liberated from the hated Germans after six years of terrible suffering. There were also too many students there because the Germans had closed all universities after bloody student demonstrations in 1939. People were not anti-semitic and were sympathetic to my situation (having no family). As opposed to the Czech-hating Slovaks, the Czechs had no problems with my speaking Slovak; they found it "cute." The two languages are very similar, and I had no difficulties answering in Slovak to questions put in Czech. I was able to exist quite well in bilingual conversation. I first began to learn Czech when I got pregnant with my first child. I didn't want to sound different from her father. I learned Czech lullabies and Czech fairy tales.

At medical school I met my husband, and we married after eight months. He found me a little "exotic," being Hungarian, Jewish, and Slovak. I was driven to him because he was my hero who at seventeen had joined the underground movement and with young single-mindedness, bartered with German soldiers, giving them civilian clothes for guns needed for uprising - even with Estonians wearing SS uniforms. He fought on the barricades during the Prague uprising in May 1945. He got shot at, saved by his

helmet, but he shot many German soldiers. After hearing my story of the Holocaust, he regretted he hadn't killed more. I also was attracted to him because he was not Jewish. It was refreshing to be with someone who didn't carry on his shoulders the doom of the Jewish people. I have always felt very safe with him, very protected, and I wanted my children to be half gentile, hoping that my "doomed" gene will not get into their blood but instead his fearless gene. We got married in 1951. All new things happened in this year - graduation from medical school, first baby, first job, and first apartment. I worked in a children's hospital that belonged to the medical school. My daughter went to a daycare center. In 1952, the trial against the "Conspirational Group of R. Slansky" was published, and it shook our belief in the socialist system and most of all the Communist party. The trial was a spectacular show of false accusations and self-flagellatory confessions and ended with death sentences and executions. The accused were all high-ranking government and party officials. They were accused of high treason and zionism. Similar processes were staged first in Russia and later in Hungary, Bulgaria, and Poland. The scenario was identical; the zionism and the adjective of "Jewish origin" to the name of the accused was an extra touch of the Czech process

We began to fear for our children; should they grow up in a

lawless dictatorship? In 1956 our son was born, and in Hungary a revolution broke out. My brother fled to Sweden. I could not report this fact to the authorities, so I stopped visiting my friends in Budapest. This way I could pretend that I don't know about his defection. However, listening to the Hungarian radio during the uprising, I reported to my colleagues the news as they occurred. Eventually I was fired from the hospital because I was deemed politically unreliable for a teaching hospital.

I worked in the district pediatric center. My daughter's first-grade teacher paid me a home visit to give friendly advice: "Don't listen to a foreign broadcast in front of the children. Your daughter said an English word and said that she heard it in the radio. And don't speak politics in front of the children. They can get you into trouble." The teacher meant well, but we did not want to raise our children by pretending or lying to them. We began to think about defecting. It was not easy because the authorities would never issue a permit to go abroad for all members of the family together. One of them had to stay at home as hostage. At that time most of our friends were discussing the possibility of defection. Our time finally came when my husband got a one-year visiting professorship at New York University. During this time I took the children (aged fifteen and ten) and traveled through Yugoslavia to Sweden. It was not quite legal,

but we got through the official checkpoints, and our passports were filled with legal stamps, except one which we hoped would be overlooked by the border guard. It was, and we continued our trip in my brother's rented car through Austria, Germany, and Denmark to Sweden.

We entered my brother's Stockholm apartment on December 31, 1966, at 11.55 PM, just in time to welcome the New Year 1967 in a free country. Our immigration visa to the US took us three years. We lived as a single-parent family, and the Swedish authorities and people were extremely friendly to us. We all learned to speak Swedish, the kids went to school, and I passed my Examination Certificate for Foreign Medical Graduates. I started to work as a nurse's aid and three months later as a substitute house officer in a pediatric hospital.

The first few months in Sweden were hard for the three of us. My fifteen-year-old daughter who had known that we were leaving our home for good was homesick and unhappy, but she never complained. Her ten-year-old brother knew only that we came to visit his uncle, and now we planned to visit his father in New York. He felt that something was not right, and he criticized everything in this great city, Stockholm. He found the air polluted, the water and the milk tasting bad, the Coca Cola and the mustard

worse than in Prague, and the streets dark at night. He picked on things that were in Stockholm superior to other cities. I was homesick; I thought that I made a mistake in leaving Prague. I acknowledged that Stockholm was a beautiful city, unscarred from wars. The streets were clean, and there were forests, bodies of water, huge rocks everywhere. The air was unpolluted, the water came from springs, and the long winter nights were bright from cheap electricity and fresh snow. The stores were filled with beautiful goods designed with Scandinavian taste. But I did not belong here. Nobody knew anything about me, I couldn't speak their language. I had the same dream as all the emigrants, night by night; I was back in Prague, and it turned out that the whole escape was just a dream, and I am awake now, and I am at home, very much relieved.

Let me fast forward to a year later. By then I could speak Swedish, worked as a doctor, and had many friends. The dream came back, but with a different outcome. I was back at home again, and I was in a panic. I can't go back to Stockholm. I am trapped here. My God, why did I come back. I am locked here forever. By that time both children spoke the language fluently, were going to school, and had friends. They were happy and active.

Something significant happened to me that brought a new dimension

into my life. The Swedes showed genuine interest in my Holocaust experiences. In Hungary and in Czechoslovakia nobody asked, and nobody told. It was considered indecent to talk about it. But the Swedes wanted to hear it. A psychiatrist asked me to write it down for him since he was doing a study on survivors of the war. I began to talk and I couldn't stop. I felt great relief that it was OK; I was allowed to tell about everything. It was also the first time that I realized that the Holocaust was an outrageous crime, a huge injustice, a man-made disaster, an important historical event that cannot be undone by silence, by a wave of a hand - Alright, it was in the war, we all suffered, shut up, enough already! To be fair I must admit that there was another motivation behind the resistance to listen to Holocaust stories. Friends and relatives wanted to protect the survivors; they wanted to save us from the pain of remembering things that should be forgotten.

Whenever there was a television program on this topic, my family conspired to prevent me from viewing it. My husband acknowledged lately that it had been a mistake. He is the greatest supporter of my Holocaust activities, types my writing, edits them, and accompanies me to school speeches. When I saw the audience's reaction, the disbelief and the pity, I felt my nagging guilty feeling ebbing away. I was lucky, I survived, but at least I am a

witness. I can tell all about it for those who didn't make it. It was an obligation, but also a justification for talking about it for me, for this relief. It's really a therapy I thought. Don't kid yourself, you are doing it for yourself. Since I switched to psychiatry, I have given myself permission to have a good feeling when I talk to teenagers in school.

After I achieved my Swedish medical license, our visa arrived, and we could join my husband in New York. We were a family again. Our daughter started college at New York University, and our son was accepted to Stuyvesant High School of Science. I completed my pediatric residency at the Bronx Lebanon Hospital Center over two tough years. I suffered from the New York humid heat and from the nurses' callous attitude in the busy and overcrowded emergency room. I suffered from seeing abused and neglected children, and I was homesick for Sweden. I was overworked, exhausted and complaining at home. I was too busy, too tired to study for my pediatric board. I entered a residency in psychiatry at Manhattan Psychiatric Center to have fewer night calls and more time to study. I intended to drop out after I passed the pediatric board, but the joke was on me. I fell in love with psychiatry, finished my training, and got my psychiatric board certification (in addition to pediatrics) and happily remained at my beloved Manhattan Psychiatric Center for twenty years until I retired in

1992 to build our dream house in the warmest, bluest sea in St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

My obsessive talking and writing about the Holocaust brought an unexpected result in Austria. In 1993 I participated in a documentary movie about the death marches of Hungarian Jews in the last months of the war in Austria. I was asked to tell my story on location where 48 years earlier thousands of us had been dragging ourselves over the Steyer Alps, starved and sick and in constant threat of being shot or bludgeoned to death. It was exhilarating to be alive and walking at the same spots, among friends, a free person.