

THE MAKING OF A PHYSICIAN

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The last year of World War II was the year the war reached my family.

In March 1944 the Germans occupied Hungary, causing an endless series of earthquakes in Jewish lives all over the country. I was nineteen. Just two hours after the news of the occupation, my fifteen-year-old brother and I were turned back at the railway station: Jews were not permitted to use the train or leave the city by any means. We were living with family friends in Budapest, going to school. In this frightening situation all we wanted was to go home to our parents to face whatever would come. It never happened. We exchanged letters full of love, anguish, and hope, promising each other to survive and meet again "when it was all over." We never saw our parents again. They were killed in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

My personal Holocaust started when all Jewish women between sixteen and forty were ordered to report to work. We were to bring sturdy shoes and warm clothes and food for three days. The huge crowd of young women looked like a summer camp gathering. As we set out for the march to our first destination, I felt tough, strong, and determined to take any hardship and survive.

The awakening came in brutal shocks. Everything was a shock the first time. The first night, crowded in a building with a bombed-out roof, standing room only, the October rain pouring on our heads, running down our backs, collecting at our feet up to our knees. The first body, a girl beaten to death, paraded in front of us in a wheelbarrow for enlightenment. The first of thousands of lice in my clothes. The first shooting spree by the guards, just for fun.

The march toward Germany showed more and more evidence of its real purpose, and it was not to get workers. They did not want us to work. They wanted us dead. Some of us gave up. All you had to do was sit down by the roadside and you were shot to death. We got no food, we all had dysentery; we were hopeless and confused. We spent our nights in the open in a softball field, in the

hold of a cargo ship, in pigsties where the pigs had just been evicted. The inventiveness of our captors was inexhaustible.

Whenever we arrived at our night place, there was one single solid semblance of normalcy, of purpose, order, and hope: a Red Cross flag and a makeshift tent and two or three doctors with their bags. They were prisoners like the rest of us, they got here by the same painful marching, but somehow they still had the energy to help others. They cleaned wounds, gave advice, comforted. I felt they must know a secret hidden from us ordinary people that gave them strength in this desperation.

One day a young doctor was removing a bullet from a prisoner when the order came for a head count. The guards rounded everybody up, but the surgeon just kept operating. The commandant walked over to him and ordered him to join the roundup. "I am almost done," he replied. "I must stop the bleeding first." The commandant said jokingly, "I'll give you a choice. You can do as I say and I'll let you live, or you can finish and then I'll shoot you." The doctor finished the suturing, dressed the wound, and was shot dead on the spot.

I didn't think I would ever have the courage to behave like that, but I made myself a promise: If I survive, I will become a doctor. This dream faded through the coming months. The starvation, the cold, the lice, the beatings, and the shootings killed some two hundred people each day. My mind was reduced to a simple thought: to survive, one hour at a time.

And I did survive, one of sixty of the original five thousand women sent to "work" nine months earlier. I went to Budapest and found my brother, who had also survived; the rest of our family had been killed. Strangers were living in our home. We stayed in a shelter for returned prisoners. I was planning to find a job to support the two of us after I recovered from some wounds.

One day my brother brought home my papers for medical school. He had enrolled me secretly. After the war everybody who wanted to study was accepted. My dear little brother beamed at me. "Isn't this what you wanted to do? We'll survive, don't worry. We've survived harder times!"

Five years later I received my M.D. Did I learn the secret of the doctors in the camp? I don't know. I learned patience, curiosity, self-discipline, and compassion. I have been a physician for forty years now.