

This is a letter students in Leoben, Austria sent to Judita in April 2003. The students posed a series of questions to Judita about her life to inform a show that they eventually wrote and performed about her life in honor of the unveiling of the memorial in Eisenerz, Austria, where 250 Hungarian Jews were murdered while on a death march.

Judita's responses are in bold.

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April 4, 2003

Dear Judita,

We are 26 fourteen-year old girls and boys attending the 4<sup>th</sup> class of the new Bundesgymnasium and Bundesrealgymnasium ([BG/BRG NEU](#)) Leoben (Styria). Our school is a UNESCO school that received the "Peace-Pillar Award," which is the highest UNESCO award, twice, because of their international contacts and projects. Most of us have also been living in the old mining city of Leoben (about 29,000 inhabitants) situated at the so-called "iron road," housing huge steelworks and a well-known brewery along with the famous University of Mining, Metallurgy and Materials.

Why do we address you? In one of our German lessons we read your impressive speech given in front of the "Kreuzstadl" in Rechnitz, which deeply moved us. We can, by all means, imagine that it will be difficult for you to recall that shocking past. For our project, however, we would need some further information as we intend to act out some periods of your life on stage.

In June 2004, it is planned – as you might eventually know – to unveil monument that should remind us of the massacre on 250 Hungarian Jews. On that occasion we will perform a 20-minute word and music dance theatre whose text we are going to write ourselves and which will then be set to music by one of our school teachers who is a well-known e-music and jazz composer. The choreography will be compiled next year (we will be in the 5<sup>th</sup> form then) by a choreographer of the opera house in Graz who then will also supervise the dancing rehearsals. A singing teacher of the art school in Leoben (Leobner Kunstschule) will be in charge of the auditions.

The red thread of this multimedia project, which will be sponsored by the European Union and the Styrian Government, will be knitted out of your memories. For that we would like to post some further, more detailed questions.

**My dear young friends, I am extremely impressed by your effort to do a study project on the Holocaust and I am also very grateful to you. I belong to the almost extinct species of Holocaust survivors and although I am determined to talk and write about this terrible era as long as I live, that might be not for a very long time and so I am delighted that you, as young as fourteen are willing to learn the facts and spread the truth in this creative form of art.**

At first we would ask you to close some of the gaps concerning your time in Budapest.

1. For how long did the Hungarian Jews have their voting rights and which party would you have voted for in those days?

**I am not quite sure, but most probably the Hungarian Jews lost their voting rights after WWI in 1919. I was born 5 years later.**

2. Did the population of Budapest know about gasing (gas chambers) in the German concentration camps?

**If the general population knew about the gas chambers, they did not believe it, ignored it or flatly denied it. (My husband who is not a Jew and lived in Czechoslovakia did not know about it all and also his friends did not.) The Jewish population had all heard about it but hoped that these were just frightening rumors and subconsciously chased it out of their mind. We still believed that the Germans will use us for work but could not believe that a cultured nation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would engage in systematic, organized mass murder of an entire ethnic group. The Jews of Europe lived in collective denial.**

3. Which standard of living did you have before the war and when were you dispossessed of your property?

**My family owned a medium sized farm, we grew wheat, rye, grapes and apples, farm animals, vegetables, etc. My father was a Doctor Juris (attorney at law), my mother was a housewife. My brother and I went to classical gymnasium (with Latin, etc.) and we studied in Budapest since there was not this type of school in our own little town. In 1940 our good neighbor, an Aryan, ‘bought’ our farm for \$1 so that it should not be taken away. Of course after the war it was taken away for real by the communists.**

4. Did you have your own room and did you have to live in a ghetto?

**Before the German occupation I had my own room in my parents’ house and there was no ghetto in Hungary as yet.**

5. Did you have to wear the “Star of David”?

**The Star of David became mandatory from April 5, 1944, just 17 days after the German occupation. I was 19 and I felt it was an embarrassment for the entire population to bring back those medieval customs and laws from times when they burned “witches.” I wore it with a certain pride and scorn, because it wasn’t my shame but theirs and so everybody could see at least that I did not belong to this despicable group who enforced those shameful laws.**

6. Was Yiddish spoken with your parents?

**We did not know how to speak Yiddish. We were quite assimilated. We spoke Hungarian and I was raised on Hungarian fairy tales and Hungarian lullabies. We wore normal civilian clothes. We did sorts like bicycling, swimming, hiking, ice skating as all other young people. We went to the concerts (classical music), to theaters, to the opera. We were Hungarian citizens and we felt at home in Hungary despite the Jewish laws restricting activities in official posts, business and the cultural world and first of all, universities. Therefore, after my Matura<sup>1</sup> I took a school for Kindergarten teachers.**

7. Did you strictly keep to certain rules (Sabbath, Synagogue attendance) and which holidays were celebrated appropriately?

**My family observed the main holidays like New Year, Yom Kippur, Chanukah, Passover, Bar Mitzvah and my mother lit the Sabbath candles. We were Neolog (Reform) Jews.**

8. Did your family wear orthodox clothes?

**We did not wear Orthodox clothes, nobody wore yarmulkes, payot, or wigs.**

9. Were Jewish pupils discriminated against by classmates?

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<sup>1</sup> High school exit exam.

In small town Aryan (Gentile) boys used to bully Jewish boys. I went to a girl school in Budapest and never felt any discrimination from either teachers or classmates.

10. What did you usually do in your spare time?

I loved to read and read everything I could put my hands on. From 12-15 years I mainly read classical Russian, French, German, and English novels, later I began to read modern novels by Hemingway, Thomas Mann, Werfel, Sinclair Lewis, Remarque, etc. I also tutored students with poor grades to have some money for my cultural needs and for the movies.

In regard to the death march we would like to know the following:

11. How did you experience work (forced labor) at the "Ostwall"?

We arrived at our camp on the Austrian border on Nov. 23, 1944. It was bitter cold and we were housed in little round barracks called Finnish Zelthausen. They were 6m in diameter. The walls and roof were of cardboard and the panels were fastened together with clamps. There was a hole for the chimney in the roof but we had no chimney or stove so we stuffed the hole with straw against the rain, snow, and wind. We were lying on straw thinly spread on the hard bare ground. Thirty women slept in each tent and we used our body heat to prevent freezing to death. At 4 AM we woke at the screaming of our guards: *Aufstehn, los, los.*<sup>2</sup> We put on our shoes and stumbled out to the "Appelplatz,"<sup>3</sup> formed rows and lines and stood there for 2 hours until the guards and their helpers did their headcounts. Then we formed lines for the "coffee" (a mug of lukewarm bitter black liquid) and our daily bread (all 25 dekagrams of it). Then we lined up for our spades or pickaxes and began our march to the ditches. We walked about 6 km. On arrival we started to dig which was very hard because the ground was frozen stiff. When it rained or snowed our soaked clothes weighed us down, adding to the weight of the tools carried on our shoulders. At lunchtime we unwrapped our bread but I never dared to eat it all up because I always kept one bit of it hidden until the next supply arrived next morning.

When we finally arrived to our camp in the evening, we had to stand in another line to be body searched whether somebody didn't try to smuggle in something valuable, like a piece of potato left in the field, a piece of newspaper, a cigarette or a pencil stub. The culprit went without his evening soup for that. When we got into our tent, we took turns in fetching the huge soup cans for our 2 tents, for 60 people. The glorious moment when we consumed our only hot meal was brief and far from satisfactory, it left us hungrier than before. Then, at the light of a single candle, we undressed and inspected our clothes for body lice which we killed one by one. A competition sprung playfully from this disgusting activity: who killed more of the beasts? My record was 138 for a single t-shirt. The lice adored knitted fabrics. The loops were perfect for laying eggs.

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<sup>2</sup> "Get up!"

<sup>3</sup> Roll call

We worked on our zoo until the candle lasted. And we were dead tired. But if you skipped one day you found double amount the next day. And you became anemic from the loss of blood the animals sucked off you. You couldn't get up for Appel<sup>4</sup>. You died in 2 days.

12. How often and in what way did you think of your parents during that "Kreuzweg" (Way of the Cross)?

I thought a lot about my mom but forced myself not to think of my father. He was such an honest, correct, and proud man. I couldn't imagine him being humiliated or mistreated by those barbaric thugs. But I often complained to my mother. She was always a tower of strength in bad times and she valued life highly. Once, when I was really down, I began to hallucinate or "hearing voices." At that time, I did not know about those mental symptoms and was convinced it was my mother's voice. She said: "My sweet little heart, don't cry. You will survive and after many years you will look back at this horror and it will be just an episode in your life, when you were 20. And you'll tell about it to your friends and your children as if you told about a nightmare. You will be all right."

13. Did you still believe in God in those days?

At one point I stopped to believe. It was Appel<sup>5</sup> time. The guards were looking into each tent chasing people out. In one of the Zelthouses a young doctor was operating on a fellow prisoner amputating his leg. The guard ordered the surgeon to get out for the Appel. The doctor, Laci, answered: "I can't live him now. He would bleed to death." The guard said playfully: I give you a choice: You can follow the order and go to the Appel, or I let you finish and then I shoot you." Laci didn't even look up from his work. He finished the surgery, tied up the bleeding vessels and dressed the stump while the guard was watching with great interest playing with his gun. All of us standing nearby in the Appel were holding our breaths saying silent prayers. Laci straightened his aching back. The guard asked him: "Are you done?" Then we heard a shot and saw Laci falling to the ground. After that I lost my faith (I wasn't the only one).

14. Wouldn't death have been easier than going through all that?

It probably would have. But, strangely enough there were extremely few suicides being committed in the death camps or death marches. One form of self-destruction was called "He lay himself down on the straw." This person did not go to work, he no longer got his daily bread, only the morning coffee and the evening soup. He/she got too weak to kill his lice, he lost the strength to go to the latrine, he remained motionless for hours until somebody noticed that there were no breathing sounds. When a closer inspection revealed death, he was dragged out of the Zelthouses, somebody recited the prayer for the dead and then a report was made so he shouldn't be missed at the next Appel. For myself, I didn't want to die for several reasons. 1) Our family promised each other that we will do everything in our power to stay alive so we can meet after the war. 2) I did not want to do a favor to the Germans to make it easier for them to get rid of me. 3) I was curious to see life without Jewish laws. I was curious to see the end of war and I wanted to see our liberators marching, may it be the Red or US army. 3) I wanted to survive to bear witness to this horror, to tell about it for all those who were killed and couldn't speak for themselves. I told myself: as long as one of us will be still up and walking, I'll be the second one up and walking.

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<sup>4</sup> Roll call.

<sup>5</sup> Roll call.

15. Do you personally know other living participants of the death march and are you still (or were you) in contact with them?

**I returned to Budapest on August 7, 1945. By then I had no contact with the others who had set out for work from Budapest together with me on October 23, 1944. We were so often subdivided, separated, sent in different direction, selected for gas chambers, died of starvation, exposure, shot or beaten to death, that it was impossible to keep in touch. After my return home, I began to search for my family and found my 16-year old brother alive. He had run away and was hiding in Budapest with false papers, without money, family or friends, while the SS and the local Nazis were hunting Jews in the streets and shooting them into the icy Danube, tied 2 and 2 together.<sup>6</sup> My family's friend with whom we were living while going to school was luckily with me all the time and she became a surrogate mother to me. She died 30 years ago of natural causes. Otherwise, I joined an organization of survivors and we meet and remind ourselves about the places where we were together without knowing it.**

Furthermore, we would love to learn more about your personal suffering in the Austrian concentration camp Mauthausen so we – that is some of us – know the camp only as a museum.

16. What was the daily routine like in the camp? Where and how were you put up?

**We were housed in the Zigeunerlager or Zeltlager (camp). The tents were meant for 2-300 persons but at least 10x more were pushed in. We were sitting, squatting so tight that it was impossible to walk between the bodies. There were 2 narrow passes left free for the Lagerfuhrer<sup>7</sup> and the food to be brought in. There no latrines, no water, no light bulbs, no straw or bunks or other accommodation for living people. True we were barely living. Two daily events broke the monotony: the food which was brought at random between 9 AM-9PM. It was a grayish dishwashing water and 1 kg bread for 10 people. The bread was marbled with green mildew, lucky for me because I hand out to the people who tried to cut out the nasty stuff and Anna and I ate it happily. The Lagerfuhrer walked over the little aisle and occasionally hit somebody of his choice over the head causing prompt death. Another routine: the KaPos (Kamerade Polizei) pushed wheelbarrows through the aisle and we called them about dead bodies in our immediate vicinity. The KaPos threw them out on the wheelbarrow and pushed them out of the tent. I was unhappy because I could have used the dead person's blanket or jacket but they were crawling with lice.**

17. What kind of crimes against humanity did you experience during your short stay which did you hear about and which did you see with your own eyes?

**Crimes against humanity? The lice, the starvation, the collective dehydration, the unattended epidemic of the lice Typhus, the routine killing of individuals by bashing their skull in, the starving infants whose dehydrated and starving mothers could not nurse. Then the chronic starvation that I felt in my bones and brain, in every cell of my body, not in my stomach. It altered my ability to think. I could not remember a single song or poem. The greatest shock**

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on the murders on the banks of the Danube River, visit <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/31/shoes.asp>.

<sup>7</sup> Camp commander.

**and the most painful was when I couldn't recall my mother's face. That too was a crime against humanity.**

Our last questions deal with "the days after"

18. Could you integrate easily after your emigration? Were or are the Americans still anti-Semitic? **I was liberated in May 1945 and it took another 3.5 months until I arrived in Budapest which was my first destination. I had to find my family before thinking of emigration. Our homeland, Hungary, received us returnees as if we had committed a crime by surviving. I enrolled in Medical School in Budapest and continued in Prague where I met my husband, also a medical student. We married, have 2 children and 4 grandchildren. In 1966 we got fed up living in a communist dictatorship and got out of the country, first to Sweden and then to the USA.**

**I had emigrated several times before I landed in America. After the war, I first arrived in Budapest. I moved to Czechoslovakia in 1946, continued medical school in Bratislava. The Slovaks were deeply anti-Semitic and so I transferred to the famous Charles University in Prague. In spite that the Czech language was new to me, I mastered it in no time because the Czechs were so nice to me, they had suffered during the German occupation almost as much as the Jews, albeit their survivor rate was much higher. I adjusted fast, married a Czech gentile and began to learn the Czech fairy tales and lullabies. In 1966 we had enough of another dictatorship (communist this time), so we managed to get out of the country, first to Sweden and 3.5 years later to USA.**

**The Swedish people and authorities were so far from anti-Semitism that I had to explain to them the history of anti-Semitism, also that it was invented centuries earlier when Hitler was not yet even born. Sweden was unbelievably good to my family and myself.**

**The hardest adjustment was in the US. Not because of anti-Semitism, far from it. It is a punishable crime to make anti-Semitic or hateful comments against any ethnic or religious group or even denying the Holocaust. The teaching about the Holocaust is mandatory for the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade. But I was 46 years old, had to go through the medical training program and pass seven, 3-day written and oral tests. I worked in the hospital 120 hours a week (including weekends and nights) and it was hard. Finally I got all my diplomas and licenses and became a US citizen. I feel at home now, finally.**

19. Will you ever be able to come to terms with all your traumatic experiences? **I am 78 years old. By that time I did come to terms with my experiences except for this: to this day, I cannot reconcile with the murder of my parents. During the year 1945 my brother and I used to go meet the trains bringing the liberated Jews home. By then we knew that our parents were sent to the gas chambers in Auschwitz but we still went to the station the next day again and again. And one day we felt we couldn't take this roller coaster of hope and disappointment anymore and we stopped going.**
20. How old were your children when you told them about these horrible happenings and what do your grandchildren know about that?

**My children had always known that they had only one grandmother, while others had 4 grandparents. I told them that my parents died during the war. Later, as they learned about the concentration camps and the occupation of Bohemia by the Germans, they understood more and when they first heard the word Holocaust I told them how my family was killed because we were considered an unclean race. They learned very soon that racism is a crime and a sin and no self-respecting person would sink so low as to adopt such an attitude. My grandchildren are much more exposed to the history of the Holocaust and are very much interested in it and they are proud that I survived.**

21. Where and under what circumstances did your family members (relatives) die. Are you still in contact with other relatives in Hungary, the US, or other countries people in those days emigrated to?

**Also my grandparents were gassed in Auschwitz. My uncle, his wife and a 7-year old son Peter, as well. I am lucky I have my brother and a new family through my children and grandchildren. My husband and I are both MDs, also my two children and their spouses are MDs. My life turned out better than expected.**

22. What would you have done differently from your today's point of view?

**That's easy. When Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, our family, including grandparents, uncles and cousins should have sold all of our belongings and left Europe, no matter where to go or just left everything behind. South America, Africa, Australia, wherever. At that time we could have done it, we had our passports and enough money for our tickets. My father didn't want to "run." "This is our home." My grandparents felt that they were too old to undertake such an adventure. We, children, were too young and "should finish school first." As we know, the alternative was far worse. We were chased from our homes, our country, our schools, endured worse pain than homesickness and ended up dead or orphaned. But we were the people who believed in sanity of mind, civilization, humanity and some limits to evil behavior. The pessimists saved themselves by running as long as it was possible. The European Jews died from their belief in human decency.**

23. Did you, at any time, wish to return to your mother country (your old home country)?

**I lived in the same country where we lived before the war with my parents, in Czechoslovakia from 1945-1966. After the collapse of communism in 1989, we returned several times for a visit to Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The only place that I avoided till this day is the little town of Nagyszolos which I last visited in 1943 for my summer holiday after my Matura<sup>8</sup> when we still lived in our house, undisturbed. I didn't want to add another from a year later when strangers lived in our home. These people would not even let my brother look around for a family photograph or my mother's embroidery. My brother picked a handful of dirt from our garden and brought it back in a handkerchief.**

24. What did you feel when watching the film "Schindler's List" by Stephen Spielberg?

**Schindler's List is an excellent movie. I know it is much tamer than reality, but the audience would endure just so much violence. I heard also a criticism that Spielberg used some Hollywood cliffhanger tricks and a touch of love scenes. I don't mind. All the excellent documentaries about the Holocaust did not draw a fraction of the audience that the "List"**

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<sup>8</sup> High school exit exam.

**brought. Everybody went to watch the movie. And some of the reality got stuck in millions of people's minds.**

25. What is your attitude to the so-called, and often quoted, "collective guilt" of the Germans and Austrians?

**Collective guilt? I don't believe in it. Why should 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generation beat themselves up for their forefather's guilt? It was good that the postwar Germany assumed some responsibility for the atrocities committed. Also the authors and the organizers of the final solution had part in the crimes. The occupied countries cannot escape some guilt when they so willingly provided the trains and the personnel organizing the transport of their fellow citizens into the hands of their henchmen? The president of the Slovak State Josef Tiso paid Germany 500 DM for each Jew who was taken to Auschwitz that Germany, just from the goodness of their hearts, provided. On the other hand, there were good people in Germany and Austria who hid and rescued individuals at their own risk. But if we don't assign collective guilt I will happily give my heartfelt gratitude and admiration for collective glory to countries like Denmark who hid their Jews in collective risk taking and cooperation and shipped their Jews secretly to Sweden. The other country was Bulgaria where the people refused to hand over their neighbors to the German SS on the King's personal order and all Bulgarian Jews survived.**

26. What was, despite all your pains, the most beautiful experience in your life?

**After my horrid experiences I am able to appreciate little pleasures more than before. Every time I take a shower I am delighted that the water running down my body is pleasantly warm and not icy rain. And when I find myself out in the street in a windy, rainy, muddy November day I am elated from the prospect that I don't have to lie down on the soaked ground for my nightly rest, but there is a warm, clean, dry place waiting for me, which is my home.**

**But the greatest pleasure, not measurable by any comparison was the birth of my two children. I had them next to my body and kept the light on during the night. I didn't want to sleep through a single minute of this pure, intense, indescribable joy that this live and perfect healthy creature had come from my body, in spite of all the pain and abuse and damage it had been through.**

We do hope that we aren't asking too much by being s "nosy," but we really want to write a good story, and that demands thorough research. The whole class including their head of the project, Wini Hofner, want to thank you in advance for patiently answering our long list of questions. We would be ever so happy to be able to talk to you personally at the unveiling ceremony of our memorial. In the meantime we hope that you can enjoy life in the best of health. We all wish you many happy hours, inner peace, and joi devivre.