

The following is the prepared text of a talk given by Esther Bakonyi to the congregation of the Jewish Center of Northwest New Jersey on April 15, 2007. The actual talk contained several asides which are not part of this text.

My Gift to You: Recollections of a Hungarian Jewish Child During the Holocaust Years

Yom HaShoah, 15 April 2007 / 27 Nisan 5767

My name is Esther Bakonyi. My husband and I have been members of the Temple for about five years.

As the Jewish religion mandates, every year we have to remember and talk about the Jews' liberation from Egypt as a birth of the Jewish nation. We also commemorate many sad events, including the destruction of the first temple.

It also became the tradition, and is being observed at all Jewish temples, to remember the events of more than fifty years ago. For most of you, this is history. History means that we read and hear about events, study them in school, but there are few instances when one can actually hear about an event from someone who actually witnessed it or was a part of it.

I am a survivor of the Holocaust, and I believe that it is my OBLIGATION to tell you about my recollections and reactions. There are very few people who are still alive from that generation, and the numbers are decreasing each year. Therefore, I feel that those of us who are still alive and remember, should share our memories. There are an increasing number of theories, advanced by governments, stating that the Holocaust never happened, pretending that it is part of the Jewish propaganda to justify the existence of the State of Israel. The cruel truth is, that if a lie is repeated often enough, it may become the truth. So I am here today to give witness, especially for the benefit of the younger generation that yes, it did happen, and that you will remember, many years from now, that you actually heard someone talking about her personal memories.

I was about five years old at the time when my native Hungary was taken over by a Nazi-friendly Fascist government on March 19, 1944, and the systematic roundup of the Jews began.

Historic Background of Jews in Hungary

No historical event can be presented in a vacuum. Therefore, I need to give you a very brief history of the Jews in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and later in independent Hungary. Hungary had a large Jewish population going back for at least 8-9 centuries. Because Catholics were not allowed to deal with money, the Jews in Western Europe filled a very important and singular role: at least until the Reformation, they were the bankers, the money dealers, even the originators of the letter of credit. In others words, Jews ensured the existence of commerce.

Let us skip a few centuries.

The Jews who settled in Hungary, and prospered during the Monarchy, which lasted from 1863 to 1916, were loyal to the emperor, and the emperor was loyal to them. Hungary had a rather *assimilated* Jewish population, spoke the language of the country, and in essence, was instrumental in the creation of a solid middle class - which did not exist in Russia or Poland. Since Jews generally could not join the ranks of hereditary nobility, the Church, or the high level military, the only avenues open to them were commerce and the various professions: medicine, education, arts, music, literature. Jewish education, to the extent it existed in Lithuania or Poland, was not known in Hungary. But there was hardly any prep school not run by the Church where the professor of Hungarian History and Hungarian Literature was not Jewish.

After the First World War, the Monarchy collapsed, and after a short Communist regime (with unfortunately many Jewish leaders), Hungary joined the ranks of the losing nations and eventually became an ally of Hitler's Germany.

My Hometown

I was born in Debrecen, which is the second or third largest city in Hungary, about 160 miles East of Budapest. An interesting city: hard core Hungarian artisans, a very large multi-discipline University, offering education in medicine, liberal arts, agriculture. Although Hungary's state religion was Catholic (no, they did not separate church and state), the Protestant religion was well recognized, and about 70 % of the population in Debrecen was Protestant. It had many fine prep schools, formed after the German-style

Gymnasium, which was an 8-year education after grade school, and the graduates were ready to enter universities.

Debrecen and neighboring provinces had a fairly large Jewish population. It had at least two Jewish elementary schools: one for the Orthodox, and one for others. Of course, there were traditional religious schools for boys, the *cheders*.

I remember at least three large synagogues: There was the majestic large Temple with its stained glass windows, an Orthodox *shul*, and the Status Quo smaller *shul*.

For girls, there was the Jewish Middle School, where my sister Agnes went in 1944, that was her last year. There was an excellent Jewish Gymnasium – for boys only. Girls could enter, as so-called *private students* after graduating from middle school and successfully passing entrance exams in Latin and Algebra. My sister was studying for these exams in 1944.

Even though the government did not deal aggressively with the Jewish population prior to 1944, there were many laws against Jews: certain areas of commerce, professions, and civic participation were closed to Jews, and entrance to universities was restricted to the percentage of the Jewish population; consequently, many Jews went to Vienna or England to study. Most of Hungary's Nobel Prize winners are Jewish, and many of them completed their studies outside of Hungary.

My sister and her classmates, seen with their school bags on Sundays and thus visibly Jewish, were tormented and called names on their way home.

My Personal Memories

Up to now I have given you a very brief background of my world before the Germans came on March 19, 1944. Now I would like to share with you my *personal* memories. These are my personal recollections - some of them exist only in pictures in my mind, or feelings. Of course, I did not understand what was going on around me. To tell the truth, I am sure that most grownups did not understand it either. First of all, Jews were not allowed to keep their radios. And, as I recall fragments of conversations, the general

sentiment was that it cannot happen to us. Sure, they are killing the Jews in Poland, but not us! We are Hungarians! We are Hungarians of Jewish religion - just like the next-door neighbors are some Catholic or Protestant Hungarians!

I was five years old. I was always friendly and the grownups probably felt sorry for me - maybe they knew that my fate was sealed. So they treated me like a toy, took me on errands, showed me interesting things - one neighbor even taught me to play chess. Also, I had many new children to play with, since Jews were no longer tolerated in the town parks, we were playing in various families' homes.

So the Germans came. The Nazi government ordered every Jew over six years of age wear a six-pointed star of bright yellow, visibly placed on an outer garment, and no, you could not cover it. The next step was to round up all Jews from the city and from the provinces, and move them into one area. Which meant that you had to leave your home with few belongings, and move into the designated area, the GHETTO, where several families were crowded into one apartment. The displaced non-Jews of course were moved into the vacated Jewish homes.

I have two personal memories from the Ghetto,

As I said, Jewish families from the provinces were also moved in. We lived with many families in a small tenement-like house: only very old men - the younger men were in the forced-labor division of the military - lots of women and children. There was a woman with four little girls. A *country woman* who, much to my Grandmother's disapproval, walked barefoot during the week. Came Shabbath: Mrs. Eisner wore a pretty dress, and her four little girls wore very bright, flowery dresses. At the end of Shabbath, which was pronounced by my Grandmother when she saw three stars, Mrs. Eisner grunted at the girls: *Take it off.*

I will never forget this. To me, it represented a tremendous faith and optimism, that no matter what is going on, there will be the next Shabbath, and you will have to protect your Shabbath clothes. To me, this country women's faith and fight for survival is the example of the Jewish strength. My other memory is about my uncle Marcel. He was in the forced labor division. At some point he may have been close to Debrecen, and somehow

he managed to come into the Ghetto, guarded by an army private, to see my Grandmother. I remember playing outside, when he came, and he went inside the apartment. Through the window, I could see him with my grandmother, both embracing and crying. My uncle cried for us, because he knew where we were going, and my Grandmother was crying for him.

The private, in a shabby uniform of a low-ranking soldier, was leaning against a wall, his hands making a fist, with white knuckles, and was crying with visible tears.

We never saw my uncle again.

Then came the time when we were all rounded up and first transported to the brickyard outside of the town. The yard had one large closed structure, and many open sheds for the drying of the bricks. Naturally, most people crowded into the closed structure, so at least to be protected from the elements rather than lying in the mud in the sheds. I do not remember how long we were there, maybe a day. Then my sister Agnes, who was about 15 years old at that time, had this tremendous urge to get out of there, and somehow convinced my father. So we moved down to the muddy sheds.

The people from the building were put on the cattle-car trains that day, and we never saw them again.

Our turn came. I remember the cattle-car wagons, and remember standing there reaching up to knees of the grownups - we could not sit down, there were so many people. It was hot, and doors were shut closed. Some places, where the train stopped, if the guards were decent, the door was opened for a few inches, and locals could hand in water, in some places for money, in some places for free. I remember looking up to the small windows when the train was in motion, and saw the light poles running by.

We were locked into the cars. As I heard later, there were about 90 people in each car.

Then came an air raid, probably from the Allied Forces. The train tracks were destroyed. I remember being let out of the cattle car, and we were standing in the bright sunlight. Somebody mentioned that one woman was hurt by the flying splinters.

At any rate, our train was turned back.

We ended up in Vienna. In some very low-class district, in an empty school building. The classrooms were equipped with double bunk beds, separate rooms for men and women. The grownups, and that included my 70-year-old grandmother, and 15-year-old sister, were working six days a week clearing the city after the daily air raids. My father was put to work in a cement factory, doing extremely heavy lifting.

We, small children and the very old women, remained in the school. The food came around mid-day: bread, some soup in large vats, and some spread which was red and sweet. Children were privileged to get the leftover spread from the pickling papers and, most of all, carry the empty vats out of the gate. I remember being chosen quite a few times. Then one day, as I left the gate, I saw a few local children on the other, sunny, side of the street, playing with a doll carriage. I did not understand why, but I became awfully sad. From that day on, I never asked to be chosen to go outside.

A few words about our life there, which lasted for about nine months. My Father died in December of 1944. He was buried with the still functioning *Chevra Kaddisha* of the Viennese Jewish congregation.¹

My mother and sister worked with a Czech roofer, who was kind enough to allow my mother and sister to sit a few hours of *Shiva* after my father died. Also, they took me with them to work the day after my father died. I remember going on the crowded underground very early in the morning, my mother and sister in their allocated wood-soled shoes and gray blanket with the yellow star - and I remember a woman with a small child standing next to us. The child was holding a stuffed toy animal. The woman took the toy from the child's hand, and gave it to me. I remember hearing the screaming from the child.

Sunday afternoons everybody tried to keep life as normal as possible. I remember that once in while we put on a show: people sang, recited poetry, and did whatever they could to make life seem as normal as possible.

¹He is buried in the Jewish Section of the cemetery, with several other people in the same grave. In 1948 the son of one of the buried erected a stone, and included my father's name on it. When we went to Vienna in the 1960s, there was no sign of the stone, and I only had a vague notion where my father's grave may have been.

At times they put a large brown paper on the big refectory table, made it into a makeshift Ouiji Board and danced a glass on the paper, asking the question - when are we going home?

Well, the next thing was that families with children were rounded up and transported to another location. I think there was no question where we going from there.

That is when the Russian liberators came.

We were free to go.

Some people decided not to go back to Hungary. My Grandmother insisted on going home. After all, Marcel will come back, where is he going to find us?

So we started walking home. Several families, mostly women and children. We slept in empty homes along the roadside, where the occupants had fled from the Russians. Sometimes the burned food was still on the stove.

We were safe from the Germans. For the most part, during the days we were safe. Sometimes we were given rides on army trucks. However, the first forces of the Soviet army were not the elite Russian soldiers. . . . To put it delicately, no female was safe from their desires.

One night, we were staying in yet another vacant home. We were with another family we knew, a mother and three grown daughters, and the oldest girl's fiancée, my sister's former Latin teacher. Some troops broke into the house and looked for *barisnya*, the Russian word for women.

The fiancée, the only man around, hid out of fear. My Grandmother, who came from the northern part of Hungary close to Slovakia, knew a dialect close to Russian, so she so bravely told them off. Then the men, cursing and breaking things, left.

Eventually, we arrived back in Hungary. My Grandmother kept checking every returning group of forced-labor members - I don't think that she ever

gave up hope. [My uncle never came back. We don't know where or how he died.]

These are some of my memories.

These are the memories of a five-year-old child. You know the history. You have heard others giving their recollections - our own Eric, Margit Feldman, and you also saw the magnificent tribute paid by the creators of *Paperclips*.

And now I want to give you one more picture. Let me take you to Lakewood, New Jersey. Lakewood has a huge, very orthodox community: large homes, large families, most young men are learning in Yeshiva. It is Simchas Torah, the only night the Torahs are removed from the Temple. The men, all dressed in black, with their little boys, are dancing around the Torah; the women, all elegantly dressed, with their little girls in holiday clothing, are on the side, quietly enjoying the scenery.

My sister and I are there also. I look around, and the tears are flowing from my eyes. These people are the children or grandchildren of the survivors of the Holocaust. They are happy, elegant, reasonably well off, educated. If only Hitler could see this. This is the Revenge - we are the survivors.

We are not victims. We survived.

My memories are specks on a large painting. But no painting is complete without the scaliest details.

As I said, we were twice on the way to the final solution. We were saved by the miraculous hand of who guides our destiny. Sometime I wonder, why me. Why did I survive?

Maybe to be here and tell you my memories. Please try to remember.