

2. The Story of the Boy Erwin Katz

"Never teach history without also telling a story" (Yehuda Bauer)

The most dangerous enemy of memory is abstraction.

In this sense, it is important
to remember the "Victims of National Socialism"
not so much in anonymous and politically aseptic ways,
but to learn again, for example, to tell stories:
the story of this father, Shlomo Wiesel,
this mother Lena Donat,
this girl Eva Heymann,
or of this boy, Erwin Katz ...

'The Holocaust is not six million,
but One and One and One and One ...' J. Miller

adapted from Christoph Münz

Many years have passed, since I, together with my old friend from flat-sharing and college days, Petr Abeles, visited the Jewish cemetery in Frankfurt. There, on the gravestone of his just recently deceased mother, Hilda Abeles, née Katz, was written – to my confusion at the time – not only her name, but also the names of her parents, Samuel Katz, Gisella (née Halpert) and her younger brother, Erwin, with an additional small inscription:

*In memory of those
who have no grave*

Who was this little boy Erwin who died in 1944, at the age of ten, in Auschwitz? Petr promised me that he would ask his now 84-year-old aunt, Jolana, the oldest sister of his uncle Erwin, about the story in more detail, and she told him about her little brother:

"Our family lived in Huklive, a small village on a country road in the wooded Carpathian Ukraine. This region lay at the easternmost tip of Czechoslovakia, a country created after the First World War. In our small village we spoke Rusyn, Ukrainian or Yiddish.

Our parents in those days owned a small farm that lay beside the road. The farmhouse consisted of two attached dwellings. My father's brother lived in the other half of the house. We were on very good terms with this uncle and his family. We had two horses, six cows, chickens, sheep and a dog. In addition, we owned some fields and meadows where, for our own use, grain, potatoes and fodder for the animals were grown. In the long winter months, when there was nothing to do in the fields, my father often took his horses and went with some men from the neighbourhood to cut wood in the surrounding forests, or he got employment for a few weeks in one of the many sawmills of the area.

When Erwin was born into this poor but sheltered world on December 12, 1933, it was cause for great celebration for the whole family. Father who, as it happened, had his birthday on the same day, had now finally got the longed-for "son and heir." Not that he loved us three older sisters, Jolana, Hilda and Rela any less – our parents loved us above all else – but Erwin was simply a boy, and he was father's pride and joy.

What should I tell you about our brother, the little blond whirlwind with his wide-awake blue eyes? He was lively, intelligent and in my memory almost always happy. And he was very fond of his three big sisters. At noon, when lessons ended in our one-room village school, which was run by a nice Czech teacher from Prague, little Erwin would often stand for quite some time at the living-room window, intently watching the village street. As soon as he saw his sisters he would come running towards us and tell us, wildly gesticulating, what the excitements of his morning had been.

For me there was no better welcome after a long morning in school. I can still see his little face before me, beaming with joy and with wide open eyes.

Erwin had many friends and playmates in the village. He especially liked being with his cousins from the attached house, our uncle's children. They would roam around in the village and its surroundings for hours, completely oblivious to time.

Once – I remember – there was great excitement in our street. During one of their wild games in the meadow behind the house, Erwin had fallen into the local cesspool and would have drowned, had his older playmates not pulled him out of the stinking sewage just in time.

When he was six years old your uncle Erwin, too, started at the village school. By that time we sisters were attending the high school in Mukachevo, the capital of our district, about 60 km from Huklive. We stayed with relatives there, paying rent, and saw Erwin and our parents only at weekends and in the holidays.

Erwin seems to have been really good in school. Mother would often tell us, when we came home, that during the week the boy had again come home from school specially happy and, full of pride, had put a large egg on the kitchen table: a gift from his classmates for helping them with their homework yet again.

We children picked up hardly anything about the major, threatening political events of the time. After the break-up of Czechoslovakia at the beginning of the Second World War, our area became Hungarian again and so we had to learn a language completely foreign to us in our Mukachevo high school.

It was only quite late on, in March 1944 that we Jews were forced to wear the yellow star. How Erwin would have felt about this, I don't know. For us older ones this stigmatization by the star felt very degrading, terrifying even. In our area up until then, there had not actually been any real anti-Semitism.

And then everything suddenly happened terribly fast:

On the morning of April 18, 1944, they came: a brutal gang of Hungarian policemen, armed with batons and machine guns. The Jews of the village were allowed just half an hour to pack up essentials. For us as children and young people, it was a terrible shock. We had never expected anything that bad.

Your grandfather, however, must have anticipated the entire development. For when I visited our village again after the war – in the hope, unfortunately vain, of finding relatives – a former neighbour, an old Rusynian friend of my father's suddenly came up to me. Joyful, but with tears in his eyes, he knelt down before me and asked me imploringly to forgive him.

I learned from him then that, a few days before our arrest, our father had asked him in desperation please to take little Erwin and hide him because of the impending danger for us Jews. At the time he, friend and neighbour, had refused to help. He was now deeply ashamed of this.

On this day, the 18th of April, after hectic packing, we Jews were first herded together on the village street. When the policemen even took our cattle out of the cow-houses, I sensed this would be a final farewell. Together with the animals we set out for the goods station 7 km away at Volovec. Erwin was very quiet on this march. Visibly intimidated, carrying a small backpack, he walked the whole way nervously holding on to mother's hand.

From Volovec we were taken on by train to the Jewish ghetto of Mukachevo. We stayed there for four weeks.

On the evening of May 18, 1944, all Jews in the ghetto were finally deported to Auschwitz. Crammed together in the most confined space in old cattle cars, we were overcome by a feeling of utter hopelessness, an inconceivable, numbing fear. Where would this journey really be going? What were we to expect at its end? I could not let go of the sinister thought that for all of us there might be no way back.

We sisters moved close together and at some time began to sing – probably to drive away these terrible thoughts. And so this sad place rang with the sound of all the beautiful songs of our childhood, sung in the many different languages of our home country.

Erwin sat in silence beside his mother all the time. At home on warm summer nights, when we would sing on the stone courtyard steps to entertain ourselves, he would always join in at the top of his voice. But here he had probably sensed our real mood, because after a while he suddenly began to cry, and begged us to stop singing. The songs were making him too sad, and he would even be more afraid.

Long after we had stopped singing, we could still hear Erwin whimpering softly in mother's lap, until late at night when he finally fell asleep from exhaustion.

This train journey to Auschwitz was the most frightening experience you can imagine. Packed closely together like cattle, we huddled there on the bare wooden floor without bread and water. During the daytime very little light came through the narrow cracks in the wooden partition of our car. An old tin bucket served for a toilet in the corner of the car. For us sisters this was so shameful and humiliating.

After two days and two nights of continuous confinement we reached Auschwitz late on the night of May 20, 1944. The locomotive gave two short whistles just before reaching the station as a signal for the SS henchmen of the camp that "work" was coming their way. We were driven out of our wagons and had to line up in a queue. We were strictly forbidden to hold each others' hands. There was a pungent smell, as yet unknown to us, in the air.

On the ramp, waiting for us, – I learned the name later – was Dr. Mengele ...

At the selection he separated us, the two big sisters, from the rest of the family. Quickly I handed Erwin the last tiny piece of my bread, but then had to move on straight away. We were already behind Mengele's back, and I do not know why, maybe because we three sisters had always before come through everything together: on a sudden impulse and without the guards' noticing, I pulled our youngest sister, Reli, over to our side.

We never saw Erwin and our parents again.

Over the next few weeks we sisters were allocated to a special detachment for sorting clothing. We had to sift through huge mountains of all the murdered peoples' clothes, to sort out what was still usable. In particular, we had to remove the yellow stars from the many jackets and coats.

One day your mother Hilda happened to see Erwin's little shirt in one of these many piles of laundry. She recognized it immediately by a not very large, but strikingly embroidered pattern. We realized with awful certainty that our brother was dead. Secretly we had hoped all along that the Germans would perhaps have spared him, because his hair was so remarkably fair and he had blue eyes.

Later on we learned from older fellow prisoners in the camp that Erwin and our parents had been gassed on the night we arrived."

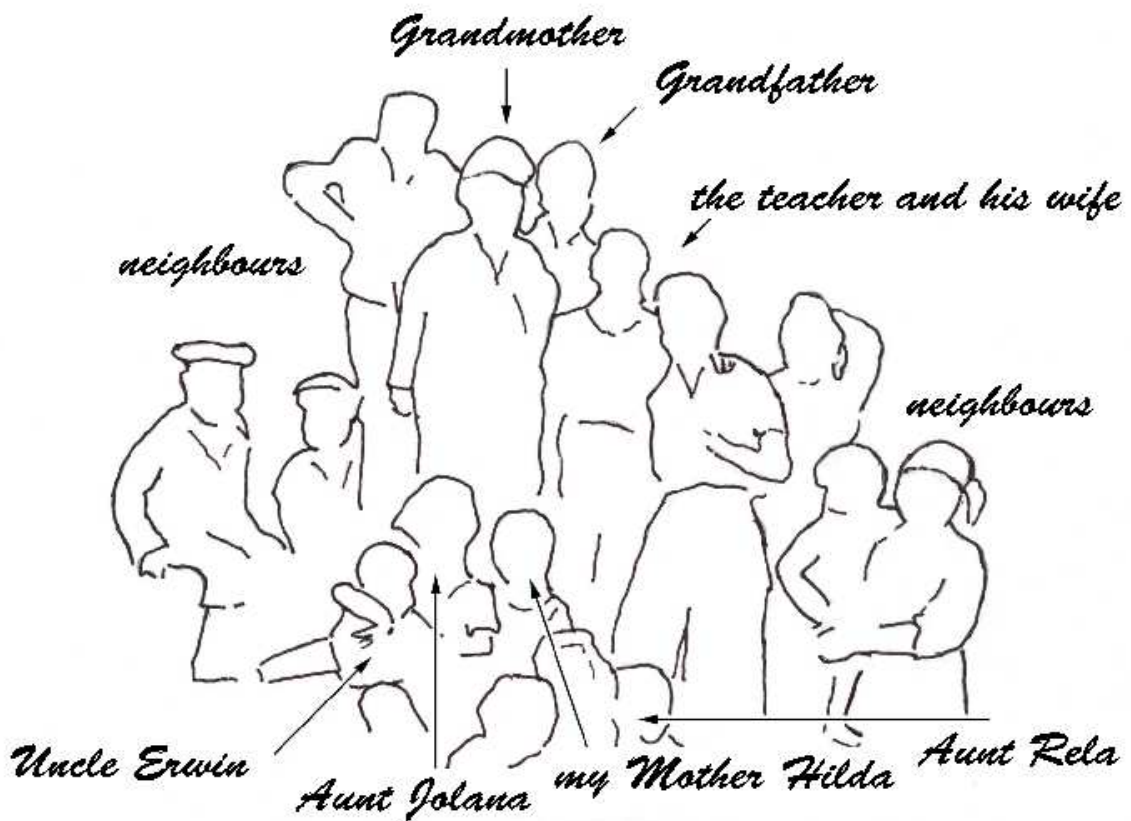
Meanwhile, many years have passed. There are hardly any descendants of the Katz family left, who might remember the tragic fate of little Erwin and his parents. Even the grave with the inscription, mentioned above, no longer exists. When I mentioned this to my friend Petr, he said: "My aunt told me this story and I am retelling it to you." And so it is that I have unintentionally become a link in the chain of memory and I have retold the story of Erwin Katz to my children and friends – and now you know it as well.

"So together we wrest the nameless from anonymity, we fend off the danger that – expressed with some pathos – the cloak of history and of oblivion is spread over them. The form this remembrance of the Jews takes is a challenge oriented towards the future. Thus, remembrance offers some consolation to the person who remembers." (Günter B. Ginzel)

To endure the truth
The highest, one can achieve,
is to know and endure
that it was so and not otherwise,
and then to see
what it means – for today.

Hannah Arendt³

The only preserved picture of the Katz family from Huklive





Gisella and Samuel Katz



Erwin, Jolana and Hilda Katz



Rela Katz