

Rose SCHINDLER

b. 1929 Seredne, Czechoslovakia
Interviewed by: Rebecca Herman

A Story Not to Be Forgotten

Prior to 1938, Seredne, Czechoslovakia, occupied Russia in 1945, was a small but peaceful town with a *shtetl* - like feel almost like a modern *Fiddler on the Roof*. With only 2,000 residents it was one of those places where everyone knew each other. Jews and non-Jews alike lived side-by-side working and surviving to support their families. The Jews of Seredne were quite successful and owned most of the businesses while many of the non-Jews worked for them. The main street of Seredne was the center of town where shopkeepers both lived and ran their business.

Rose was born into Seredne life on December 28, 1929. "Roysie" as they called her in Yiddish, grew up in an Orthodox environment with traditional codes of conduct and lifestyle and weekly Shabbat services. You were an "outcast" if you didn't follow the same customs as the rest of the community. Rose had seven brothers and sisters. Two older sisters named Helen and Judy, an older brother Philip who was called "Fishi," three younger sisters named Bluma, Fay and Leah and a younger brother named Meier Bair. Rose was right in the middle.

Rose's family lived on the main street where her father, Solomon Schwartz owned a tailor shop. "He was such a good tailor," Rose remembered. They made their own clothes and even grew their own produce. They squeezed ten people, including Rose's mother, Regina, Rose's father and her seven siblings, and quite often guests, in their small home with no electricity or running water.

Rose went to school as it was mandatory until the age of fourteen, and had several friends both Jews and non-Jews. Jewish children usually did not attend high school unless parents were able to afford an education outside of the town. Most of the boys would attend Hebrew School after public school. Going to synagogue was a weekly event for the Jews in Seredne and Rose remembers enjoying dressing up for Shabbat and strolling down the dirt roads on the way to Temple showing off her new outfits. When Rose was not in school or at services, she was helping her mother in the home or visiting her grandmother who lived only three miles away.

When people weren't working hard or going to synagogue, they would enjoy a movie in the town theatre or watch the traveling theatres when they passed through Seredne. Many of the town's activities were arranged by the Jewish Town Council.

Until the age of fourteen, Rose remembers "living a beautiful life" and getting along with all of their neighbors. It was hard for Rose to reflect back on what little childhood she did have, though, since she was so young when it was taken away from her in 1938. When asked if she had had any aspirations during her younger years, Rose

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responded: "What was there to dream?" Rose did not have the same luxury as other children her same age.

Life in Seredne was beautiful until one day everything changed.

In 1938, Hungary and Germany began their invasion of Czechoslovakia. That year was a turning point not just for Rose and her family, but for all Jews in Europe. Restrictions began to be placed on Jews limiting their whereabouts and way of life. Everything in Seredne was visibly changing from the way *goyim* (non-Jews) viewed Jews to rules on where or when Jews could be on a daily basis. Soon Jewish businesses were taken away, including Rose's father's, and were given to non-Jews. Luckily, he was able to take home one of the machines from the tailor shop and some limited materials in order to be able to survive on something. Many of the men, including Rose's father, were frequently taken to work outside of town as slave labor. "We made do with what we had," as did the majority of Jews, Rose commented. Everyone would help one another. "A Jew always finds a way" says the well-known Yiddish saying. Luckily, they had no problem with food because of the farm.

Not only were Jews stripped of their possessions, but also of their pride and dignity. They were humiliated and beaten to nothing. Rose even noticed how her non-Jewish friends and classmates changed their attitude toward her. They were taught to believe that Jews were "Christ-killers" and evil-doers. Jewish children were eventually excluded from public school. Curfew was in place in the forties and yellow stars were enforced.

Rose remembers one day during *Sukkot*, a Jewish holiday celebrating the Jewish people's survival of forty years in the Egyptian desert, when non-Jewish children were throwing rocks at them in the *Sukkah*, a temporary three-sided booth or hut roofed with branches. It was difficult to not respond, but they just let it happen. Jews had to be careful, always on the alert. They learned to ignore the dehumanizing and crude comments. When you saw violent kids, you would cross the street.

The general community did not know much about what was happening in Europe at the time due to the ban on radios. They had a basic sense of Nazism and who Hitler was, though, at least enough to know that Europe was heading down a dangerous path. One family did manage to keep a radio, only listening to it at night for safety. They discovered the atrocities- Polish Jews being killed, having to dig their own graves. Seredne Jews had little to worry though- G-d would protect them. They just prayed every day. They never thought that anything like what was happening in Poland would ever happen to them. After 1938, however, the feeling of G-d's protection was waning and many escaped into the forests. Czechoslovakia was under Hungarian rule until 1944. Hungarian Jews were the last to be deported to the concentration camps, a lucky break which helped Rose and others survive.

It was the morning of April 1944, one day after Passover. Rose was fourteen years old. A drum beat called the townspeople together in the community square to announce

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that the Jews would be transported. "Take what you can bring," they were told. They rushed back to their home to pack, unsure of why or where they were going. Rose's mother told her to wear three dresses and several pairs of socks because they "didn't know when we'll return."

After a couple of days, all the Jews of the district were transported by oxen-driven wagons to the city of Uzhgorod, Hungary where they were dumped along some train tracks near a brick factory. They were forced to build their own shelter and survive on the food they luckily brought with them. Soldiers with guns and dogs guarded them like prisoners day and night for about three to four weeks.

After Uzhgorod, they were rounded up into cattle cars like sardines to be shipped off to Auschwitz. The journey was only a couple of days, but it seemed like a lifetime. There was no room to move, no seats, no bathrooms, no water. The stench was abominable and people were passing out. The scene was "very sad," Rose reflected. No one knew what was going to happen to them. Rose had never before left her little town of Seredne so the experience was almost like a "horrible adventure."

When they arrived at their destination, they were hurried off of the cattle cars and told, once again, to "take what you can." The rest of their possessions were confiscated by the SS officers. A Jewish man in a uniform who worked in the camp came on the train and helped Rose with her things. He asked her how old she was. "I am fourteen," said Rose. The man told her to "tell them you are eighteen" so you will have a chance to survive. They were then ordered to line up. They experienced their first of what would be numerous roll calls and selections. Rose took in her surroundings and spotted a big sign above an ominous set of open black gates that said "Auschwitz." Rose had no sense of where this was or what it meant. "I was in a daze."

Everyone stood silently as the SS walked up and down the lines of terrified and confused people. An SS officer in uniform approached Rose and asked her for her age. As instructed, she said she was eighteen. The man motioned for her to go to the "right," a lucky move. Her father and brother Fishi, who was seventeen years old at the time, were sent in another direction to be taken to a work camp. Her mother, younger brother and younger sisters, who were all under the age of twelve, were sent straight to the gas chambers. Children were useless to the Nazis, because they could not work. This would have been Rose's fate had she not lied about her age.

Helen at twenty-one, Judy at nineteen and Rose were left to support one another. They, along with the rest of the able-bodied women were immediately taken to a bathroom to be stripped and shaved. To add to their humiliation and degradation, the SS officers took pictures of them while they undressed. They took away all of their belongings and were given rags to dress in. Rose's dress was too long so she cut the bottom half and tied it around her head for warmth.

The sun began to go down and the women were told to line up for *tzelapel* - "roll call." They were counted several times per day, every day. While they were waiting they

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could see fires behind an old building and if they listened carefully, heard people screaming and calling names. It was almost as if their “shadows were running,” Rose observed. Judy asked the SS officer what was happening and he responded that they were burning hair. “Hair does not make that noise,” Judy said. The officer then replied, “they are burning cripples.” Everyone tried covering their ears from the piercing screams and their noses from the putrid smell. At that point, Rose knew the fate of her mother and siblings.

Auschwitz was also the name of the city and was divided into several categories of *lagars*, German for “camp,” by electrical wire. The first camp was originally built for political prisoners and the second camp was called Birkenau where Rose was taken. There was a Czech camp and a gypsy camp nearby as well. There were thirty barracks that housed 1,000 women in Birkenau, each containing three rows of bunk beds where groups of eight women were forced to squeeze into one. There were no mattresses or blankets. For warmth, they huddled close together. Non-functioning fireplaces were in each barrack. Today, only the chimneys stand.

The following morning they were served black coffee. Rose, the curious child that she was, told her sisters that she was going to explore outside. As she looked around the depressing and eerie camp she heard a man call her name. Rose saw someone with a striped uniform approach her. She hesitated since she did not recognize him at first. It turned out to be her father. She didn't have the heart to tell him what happened to her mother, but in his eyes, she could tell that he already knew. Rose told him that Helen and Judy were with her while her father said that Fishi was still with him. It was difficult to exchange any words, but the one thing that Rose's father stressed was to “continue to stay together and to try and stay alive so you can tell the world what is happening to us.” You must “tell your story” to the world, he said. Father, Fishi and the three sisters met the following day, but on the third meeting, Rose's father and Fishi did not show. That was the last time Rose saw her father and brother.

Weeks went by and the women grew weaker and sicker. People continued to be gassed without mercy. They were never given enough gas so they were half alive when they were being burned.

The food was atrocious. In the morning, there was black coffee. For lunch, they were given one slice of hard bread with a tiny bit of margarine. For dinner, they ate soup that was, as Rose clearly remembers, “so bad.” It was served in a large pot that eight people had to share from. There was cabbage and sometimes, if you were the lucky one to finish the last of the soup, potatoes. They must not have washed the vegetables, because the soup was always filled with sand. Chemicals were even put into the soup in order for women to not menstruate. Several times Rose would check the back of the kitchen for scraps hoping to find bits of leftover treasure.

Strong, Jewish women called *kapo* were put in charge of the camp. They kept the women in order. Once, Rose opened her mouth to complain about the food and got beaten. She still has the bruises and scratches to remind her. Many Jews were given job

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posts in the camps to do the dirty work of the Nazis. If they refused, they were killed on the spot. Some had to watch their families go to their deaths and could do nothing about it.

Rose ended up getting sick with diarrhea for weeks. During this time, she was never chosen to work, but would always get selected to go to the “gas” line. She was brave and always managed to sneak out and join her sisters in the “safe” line. “You had to be clever,” Rose remarked. Once, however, she was almost caught trying to sneak into the transport line where her sisters were. She ran into one of the *kapo* where she was forced to make up a story to save herself. Luckily, she ended up sneaking into the “safe” line, once again. She barely made the 300 women cut off point. “Using your brain” to survive was crucial.

After about three to four months in Birkenau, the camp grew smaller every day as women passed away from sickness and starvation or even killed themselves on the electrical wire. The stench of burning and decaying bodies was repulsive. Thoughts of escaping alive were impossible as officers and dogs surrounded the camps, checking if everything was in order around the clock. Those who struggled to stay alive found themselves used to their own stench and lice since they could not wash themselves for months. It was “not a nice picture,” Rose described.

It was not easy for the women to stay alive and keep hoping. Giving up seemed like the easiest thing to do. But “the rumors made us survive.” Good rumors were important. Women would gather in the bathroom to hear the latest gossip if the Americans or the Russians would liberate them. Without the hope that everything would be okay and that one day they would reunite with family, Rose and her sisters would not have survived. Even with such hope it was hard to continue believing in something. “We all questioned our faith in G-d.” After the war, many didn’t even think about Judaism.

One day, things dramatically changed. The remaining women were cleaned up and given new clothes with numbered sheets of paper tacked onto them. They were packed onto trains destined for Brünental, a production camp for ammunition, uniforms and gas masks. It was a dream-come-true when they arrived. They were each given a bunk, a blanket, a canteen for food and a spoon. They were treated “500%” better than at Auschwitz-Birkenau, almost like humans since their labor was needed. The work was difficult and Rose joked once that she should be getting extra food for the work she was doing. Sure enough, she got it! They knew they were still “slaves” though, and were each branded with a number from the sheets of paper. Rose was known as “A25893.” The evidence is still on her arm.

On May 6, rumors spread that the Germans were going to be taking them on a march. However, the women woke up on the morning of May 8, 1945 not expecting it to be one of the most important days of their lives. The gate to the camp was open. They could hear planes and gun fire. They knew the war was coming to an end and that liberation was finally here. Rose saw Russian soldiers from afar and ran out waving a white cloth to surrender, not knowing if they were going to shoot her.

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The women were given real food to eat. It was both a blessing and a curse. Many overindulged and got sick. Their bodies were not used to ingesting substantial food. Rose, among a few others were invited to go into town with some of the Russian soldiers. They were able to gather some extra pairs of clothes. They remained in the liberated camp between ten days and two weeks. Despite the freedom and relief they experienced, the women were still in constant danger of being raped by the soldiers.

It was finally time to go home. Rose at fifteen and her two sisters gathered the one pair of shoes and clothes they each had left and headed to the train station. It was a time filled with mixed feelings. Everyone felt liberated and thankful, like “free birds,” that the war finally ended, but, on the other hand, it was unpredictable and frightening. “You didn’t know what to do next.” There were so many questions to ask, not sure which ones could even be answered. *Who was still alive? Was there really a home to go back to? Was there anything left? Why did this happen to us? What happened to G-d?* No one was certain what the next step was after losing so much of their lives. One thing that Rose did know was that she certainly had “a new life to live.” Rose and her sisters never discussed what the plan was going to be or what the future held. The most important thing was to go home hoping that someone would be there. All you could do was plan for today and not worry about tomorrow.

The Schwartz girls arrived at the train station amidst chaos and hordes of people. It took them three days to get train tickets, which were free. Everything in Europe was chaotic without rules or regulations. Most things ended up being free at the time. When all joy and happiness was thought to be lost, Helen met a Czech soldier named Tibor and they immediately fell in love. He gave her a key to his apartment in Prague and promised her that they would get married one day.

After the war, people changed. Jews now had access to eateries and hostels, all for free during their journeys home. “Non-Jews opened their hearts” and took Jews into their homes. Before the war they would not have even lifted a finger. *What does it take for people to help their fellow human beings in the face of adversity and inhumanity?*

The train ride to Seredne took four weeks since there were no direct trains. They didn’t expect to come back to what they saw. Their once beautiful and cozy home was now a run-down horse shed. Despite the image, Rose was still hopeful that there was something still keeping the home alive. She went directly to a nook in the part of the house between the roof and corner wall. She held her breath and reached in to find the box of jewelry that her father had hidden before they were taken away to the concentration camps. Many Jews buried their prized possessions in the ground in hopes of not having every piece of their lives taken from them. Not everyone was able to uncover their buried treasures as Rose and her sisters did, leaving Europe’s soil rich with secret treasure forever.

It wasn’t easy to return to see their past in ruins. The girls went to their neighbors to “get their stuff back” since non-Jews took over the homes and businesses of the Jewish

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people during the war. "You'd have to fight for it," they said. Two dozen people returned to Seredne, many inhabiting abandoned homes like the Schwartz girls did.

Of those who returned, two different survivor friends were able to tell Rose what happened to her brother and father. Fishi and her father ended up getting separated. Her father remained in Birkenau while Fishi was transported to a camp where he made SS uniforms. A couple of days before the war ended, Fishi's camp was cleared out. Everyone was taken to the forest where they were all shot. The Germans did not want any witnesses. One of Fishi's friends had stayed back in the barracks because he was too sick to leave. He survived to tell the story of Fishi. Rose's father got quite sick in the camp and was eventually sent to the gas chambers, because he could no longer work.

After seeing what was left of their home, Helen decided she would leave for Prague while Judy and Rose stayed in Seredne for about three to four weeks. Rose was still young and "wanted to have a good time" without worrying about the future. Judy also found love and married Bumi, a long time friend from Seredne and also a survivor. Five years later, they moved to Uzhgorod with their son.

In February 1946, Helen was lucky enough to sign Rose up for an Orphan Rehabilitation Program in England even though she had turned sixteen. Helen thought it a good idea for Rose to leave Czechoslovakia. The program ended up settling in Scotland in a hostel called Polton House, half an hour from Edinburgh. She was there for seven or eight months working and studying. The remaining thirty-five survivor children were shipped to Bedford, England where other survivors were waiting. They continued to work and go to school in the Goldingtonbury hostel. Rose soon became proficient in English. While there, she met Max Schindler, who became her husband of fifty-seven years. She "knew he was the one."

Despite going their separate ways, the girls still kept in contact with one another. Rose even visited Helen in Prague in 1949.

The group of orphans continued to shrink as many went to Israel to fight in the War of Independence. After three to four months, the remaining children including Rose, Max and Max's brother, Fred, were gathered up again and taken to London. The Committee for the Care of Children from the Concentration Camps (CCCCC) divided the children into pairs and placed them in families for at least a year. At this time, Max and Rose were engaged.

On July 27, 1950, Rose and Max were married in the West London Synagogue, the first of the survivors. Rose was twenty and Max was twenty-one. Sir Montefiore, a famous Italian-British man who saved several orphans after the war, walked Rose down the aisle.

The married couple lived in London for a year while Max corresponded with his family in America. Eventually, they were asked if they wanted to come to the States. "I thought money was on the streets!" Rose exclaimed. They did not hesitate, and were

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sponsored a year later on October 12, 1951 to take a passenger ship to New York. When they arrived, they found a one bedroom apartment for rent and got jobs in the garment industry for \$1 an hour!

A year went by and the couple was proud of what they had accomplished. They saved up enough to rent their own place in Brooklyn. They furnished it beautifully and received guests all of the time to play cards. Many of their survivor friends had moved to New York as well. They had their first child, Roxanne, in 1954.

After five years, Max and Rose decided to try out California. Max had a friend already living there so he served as a useful contact. They moved to North Park, San Diego in April 1956 where they lived for six months until moving to their new home in southern San Diego. They had three more beautiful children within five years named Ben, Steve and Jeff and many years later were blessed with nine grandchildren.

Max worked for General Dynamics as a computer systems analyst for twenty-eight years while Rose worked part-time in a fabric store. In 1967, she opened up her own fabric store after the kids were all in school. After ten years, they closed the store. Max retired in 1988 and Rose in 1977.

Max and Rose have lived a good life together. "This country has been good to us, but we've been good to this country too," they responded. Grateful that America gave them such amazing opportunities, they also knew that they were great assets to the country. It wasn't easy overcoming the past, but, as Max pointed out, "most of the survivors went forward in their lives and didn't look back." This was an important process and many agencies such as the United Jewish Federation helped integrate people back in the community, placing survivors in different locations around the country.

In 1956, Max and Rose joined the *New Life Club*, a social organization for survivors, which was established in 1951. They were the youngest at the time. The club meets once a month over lunch and engages in unique programs. The club has a considerable membership of sixty to eighty people who give donations to help support efforts to keep the stories of the Holocaust alive from the Holocaust memorial in Israel, *Yad Vashem* to school field trips to the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. The club even sponsors children to go on the March of the Living, a powerful guided walking trip through the remains of the concentration camps in Europe.

Helen settled in New York where she currently resides. She ended up never marrying Tibor. She came to the United States through papers Rose had sent in 1962. Unfortunately, Judy had been sick for a long time and passed away in 1961. She was buried in Prague. Along with her grave, a stone was erected dedicated to Rose's family who lost their lives. In 1968, Bumi's sister brought himself, his son and his new wife to the U.S.

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In 1995, Rose and Max returned to Seredne on a Jewish Heritage Tour. The city was “100 years behind” with the same dirt roads, broken fences and roaming cows and chickens from Rose’s younger days. The Nazis had killed practically everything.

Looking back at how she lived her life with the memories of the past, Rose explained how difficult it was to return to Judaism as well as talk about the Holocaust and her experiences. Rose contemplated how she should “change my religion so my children don’t have to go through what I did.” For years, they did not go to Temple. But Rose soon realized that she was not strong enough to not do what she was brought up to do. When her children were born, she resumed Jewish practices and beliefs. “You need to hold on to something,” Rose highlighted. Rose often thinks about what it would have been like if they ended up in Israel where they would feel at home in their own country not having to worry about being judged for who they were.

One of the hardest things was to talk about the past. It wasn’t easy for survivors to revisit such painful times. The children knew that her and Max were survivors, that their parents had powerful experiences, but these stories were generally kept from them for most of their lives so that they could grow up a normal life without any stigma. It took Rose many years to finally talk about what happened. It wasn’t until her son Steve was in junior high school that she began talking. For the first time, she was ready to tell her story like her father had once told her to do. Today, at age seventy-eight, Rose has overcome much more than most can fathom, but has looked forward during the troubling times, continuing to live the good life that she has built for her family.

Each story that is told is unique and special on its own. But all tell of the unthinkable and the unimaginable; stories that “we have to keep talking about to make sure that it doesn’t happen again.” Each serves as a piece to a story in our history- A story that must never be forgotten.