

A Bitter Journey

by

By Mrs. Sandor Gabor née Ida Weisz. Sandor Gabor was aka Sandor Grunberger.

Újfehértó is a village with a population of 15,000 in eastern Hungary. In spring 1944 about 2,500 Hungarian citizens of Jewish origin lived in the village. Present among their ranks was almost every shade of ideological thinking, ranging from the devout orthodox Shephardim to the Conservatives and even atheists.

Most of the Jews in the village were ordinary people: shop-keepers, shoe-makers, tailors, haberdashers, glaziers, leather merchants, feather merchants, carpenters and beggars. The women, especially married women, did not go out to work. They looked after their families, which involved a considerable amount of toil since many families had as many as eight to ten children. In countless families three or four generations lived under one roof. The professionals included two doctors of medicine, two pharmacists, one lawyer, some landowners, office clerks and four teachers.

There were many old people and even more children. Some two hundred and fifty children attended the six grades of the elementary school, the number of pre-school children was even higher, while the over-fourteen age group was slightly smaller as many left home to seek their fortune in the cities.

It was with horror that this Jewish community awoke, on March 19, 1944, to find that the Germans had occupied Hungary.

Much has been said and written about the war, the atrocities committed by the Germans; and yet up to that day we had nurtured the belief that it would not happen to us, that, unlike Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland our country, Hungary, would be an exception.

The only excuse I can find for our naiveté is that we had led a fairly isolated life and could not, even in our worst dreams, imagine the horror of what was to happen to us. For this - since we did not even contemplate the idea of running away - we were not prepared psychologically.

On that memorable day, March 19, my girlfriends' aged father entered the room and said: "Die Deutschen sind da!" He said this in German so that only we, the older ones, would understand, but his distorted face and the tears in his eyes revealed more.

After a few days came the new measures. "every Jew must wear the yellow Star of David on his clothes!" announced the town crier. As the teacher of the Jewish school in Újfehértó I was, perhaps, the first to sew the star over my heart.

Our shops and workshops were shunned, no one in the village would communicate with us, everyone was afraid of the authorities, the gendarmes and even the Germans whom noone had seen as yet. I can still recall the sarcastic and malevolent words of a gendarme as he addressed a crowd of women at the marketplace: "Ladies, soon there'll be enough

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homes available for everybody to move into a new one!" I feel ashamed that at the time I did not understand what he had implied.

Around April 10 another announcement came from the town crier: "Jews are forbidden to leave their homes!" He naturally went on to list the various forms of punishment which awaited those who failed to comply. It was not possible to escape.

The more well-to-do families and left-wing sympathizers were taken away on carts on April 15. A few days later we were notified that we would be taken to Nyíregyháza.

At dawn, April 17, our gate was kicked open by gendarmes who pressed forward with rifles and bayonets. They were accompanied by civilians, employees from the town hall. They acted swiftly - the whole family was out in the street in a matter of seconds, joining others already on the march. The house was locked up and sealed.

One of the civilians knew my husband and whispered benevolently: "Dress up well and prepare a light pack, you're going a long way".

They took away my necklace, watch, my wedding ring. This was more than I could bear without crying. I had been married for two years and my husband had been away at a forced labor camp for a year, my parents were in Debrecen, my only brother had disappeared, our little home lay ransacked, my trousseau, which took so long to collect, was scattered all over the place. All objects dear to us had to be left behind and now they wanted my wedding band? I broke the glass of my framed diploma and removed the document, still thinking that I would perhaps be able to use it somewhere. I also took my two tiny prayer books, both of which were given to me as a wedding gift from my husband. (The diploma and the prayer books accompanied me all the way to Auschwitz. There everything was taken away except my body.)

From a pillow and eider-down I packed a bundle. I slung my pack over my shoulders and left, without looking back.

My escorts took me to the Jewish temple. The building and the courtyard were filled with the sound of desperate crying, lamenting, the noise of wailing children and the silent prayer. We spent the day here. Pregnant women tried to sit on the benches where some elderly people were already sitting and young children were weeping. Nursing mothers tried to find a quiet corner to feed their crying babies. By evening we managed to sort ourselves out, despite the intolerably overcrowded conditions.

The physician and the two pharmacists had not yet been brought in, later, however, they too arrived, with the exception of one of the pharmacists. He had committed suicide together with his wife.

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The next morning a long row of horse-drawn carts lined up in front of the temple. At shrill commands from the gendarmes we packed up and climbed on the vehicles.

There lived a landowner by the named of Neubauer in the village. He was responsible for executing this inhuman measure. He issued his orders from horseback, with a leash in his white-gloved hands. As we were being driven out of the temple an elderly Jew was unable to keep up with our pace; he kicked the old man, who collapsed from the affront.

The line of carts proceeded along empty streets. Every gate, every window was shut, every curtain was drawn. This too was probably done under command. And yet I felt that from behind the curtains perplexed, nervous and perhaps sympathetic glances were following us.

It took us between four and five hours to make the 16 kilometer trip to Nyíregyháza. Here I came across some of my friends in the ghetto that had been set up for us. Sixteen of us were crowded in an apartment which consisted of one room and a kitchen. From then on they were my family. My husband was in a forced labor camp near Marosvásárhely, and I had no child. My parents were in Debrecen - from where they were eventually deported. As far as I knew, my brother was no longer alive. (He actually returned safely to Hungary in July 1947.)

On May 4 the carts appeared once again. The people in the ghetto were rounded up and we were taken to Nyírjespuszta, where we were accommodated in the tobacco shed. The Jewry of the whole of Szabolcs County had been transported there. From here events took a fast turn. The deportations began.

I could not make out the system they worked by. From time to time names were read out, lists were pinned on walls and those not on them were told not to leave the shed. However, those on the list were taken away. It was said that they were being taken to work, but we found this hard to believe as the elderly and the insane were among those led away. We never saw them again with the exception of one or two people whom we encountered at one or other of the notorious concentration camps.

At Nyírjes we were once again guarded by gendarmes. Beatings were fairly frequent, as were other forms of torture. Those who tried to escape were treated with the utmost cruelty. Those who had been exempted up until then were also brought here and special care was taken to round up even Christians of Jewish parentage. On the morning of June 4, we awoke to the sound of shouting. Peeping down from the attic of the shed I saw men dressed in black. They ordered us to assemble in the courtyard together with our belongings. Here we sat on the ground and waited for our deportation. Once again we went to Nyíregyháza from where we continued our journey in cattle wagons. The doors were slid open only in Kassa. Here we were given a new guard.

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Our train began to pull out. I still remember the voice of a gendarme who shouted to one of his subordinates: "If you want to be in the good book hand over as many wretches as possible on arrival!"

This piece of advice accompanied me on the forty-eight hour train ride. Conditions in the wagons have been described in countless accounts. Our situation was no different.

Suddenly the door of the wagon opened up. There was shouting: Los... los!... Alsatians, wire fences, worn out people and a strange smell in the air. We had arrived in Auschwitz.

S. Gabor



Mrs. Sandor Gabor (middle) with her parents

(Excerpts from *Budapest*)

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