

Recollections of March 19, 1944 in Debrecen
by John Geroe
Courtesy of Susan Geroe, USA

After I graduated in Torokszentmiklos from Junior High in July 1943 with an excellent report card, I applied to the two nearby high schools, but was rejected due to the law of *numerus clausus*, which limited the number of Jewish students allowed to attend public high schools. Thus, I enrolled in the Jewish High School in the city of Debrecen, approximately 100 miles from my hometown.

My father took me up to Debrecen late August 1943 and although some of my other friends took rooms in the school dorm, we found a nice room in a private home of the Ratkai family, son of the well know actor Marton Ratkai. I shared the room with a student who was one year older than me, Paul, with whom I keep in touch to this day.

From very early on, I realized that I would have to study very hard because this school was more exigent than any other I attended so far. Most of my teachers were the best in Hungary, ending up in this high school due to the anti-Jewish laws that allowed them to teach only in Jewish schools. I remember Laszlo Kardos and Pal Kardos, the school director Dr. Sandor Vag, the German language teacher Dr. Erno Grosz, Dr. Gonda Laszlo, and the phys ed teacher Karoly Karpati, whom we all admired a great deal due to his Olympic achievements in 1936 and his great character strength.

I enjoyed the freedom of being away from home and the beautiful big city! I also liked very much my stay with the Ratkais because they had a beautiful large home. On occasions, actor Marton Ratkai came to visit and entertained his little granddaughter and us with his great humor.

During the week, we studied a great deal as our teachers were strict and expected the best from us. On Saturdays, we students went to a small chapel to pray, on the street below the Arany Bika Hotel. The rest of the weekend we were free and made plans for some relaxation. During the winter, Paul took me to the skating rink in Nagy Erdo and for me that was quite special. We read, walked, visited the museum, went to movies, visited with friends, and listened to the news on the radio because we were already well aware of the war. The public high school near the house where I lived was transformed into a hospital that received wounded Hungarian soldiers from the Russian front.

One Sunday, on March 19, 1944, Paul and I had tickets to an Alida Valli movie for the afternoon. He woke me up in the morning after having heard unusually loud, steady airplane noises. He asked me to go to the nearby main street and take a look what was happening. I didn't have to go too far to see marching German paratroopers. Nothing opened, and we didn't go to the movies. Later that day, we learned that Germany occupied Hungary.

In days, all schools were closed, a new pro German government came to power and started to decree severe anti-Jewish laws, including the compulsory wearing of the yellow star, forbidding changing locations or traveling on trains.

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I had to go home and the only document in my possession that did not indicate my religion was my city transportation ID card. I went to the railroad station, already surrounded by Hungarian gendarmes and German soldiers, presented the card and purchased a first class train ticket.

People flooded the train. I ended up in a six-seat compartment with four high-ranking Hungarian officers returning from the front and an injured German soldier, who sat by the window. Across from him, there was an empty seat and I politely asked the officers if I could take the empty seat. They answered affirmatively and I sat across the German soldier. The officers asked me a few neutral questions that I could answer easily. Earlier, I had worked out several answers in my head to disguise my true identity and memorized the names of teachers from the Protestant High School. Several Hungarian gendarmes checked the compartments, but they never entered the one in which I was sitting. With my fluent German, I was able to keep a conversation with the German soldier who asked me questions about the city of Szolnok, where he was headed for recovery.

My father and stepmother waited for me at the station, as they did many nights earlier. In April 1944, we went into the ghetto in our hometown, then in that of Szolnok, and finally, were deported for forced labor into Austria. Following my liberation in April of 1945, I was unable to return to the Debrecen Jewish High School because it did not reopen due to lack of students. I made up for my lost school year by private schooling, then, enrolled in high school in Kisujszallas, from where I graduated in 1947. The next time I returned to Debrecen, it was in the 1950s, as a Hungarian army officer.