

## A TALE OF PASSOVER

Last night we had Passover Seder. It's a holiday one spends with family and friends and we had about a dozen people gathered around the Seder table, including friends from Sighet. This was also our first Seder with a grandchild present and I was very affected by its significance. Vali and Debbie were so proud of Gabriel and he seemed to be proud of himself and smiled at everyone.

Maybe I ate too much or worked too hard, but for whatever reason I was wide awake when I went to bed. As you may have noticed, night is often the time when my memories are drifting back. For many hours I lay there remembering all sorts of things. I was searching the dark corners of my memory because what I could not remember disturbed me more than what I could.

No matter how hard I concentrated I couldn't remember the last Passover I spent with my parents forty years ago. I know that Passover that year came just before our world fell apart. Things were already quite bad, but not so bad that we would not honor Passover, the great celebration of the deliverance of Jews from Egyptian slavery. So why can't I remember that Seder? Wasn't it memorable? Or was it too sad to have stayed with me all these years?

I remember other Passover Seders. For the occasion, Father would be festively dressed in a *kittle* — the white robe embroidered by my mother which was worn only twice a year, for Passover and Yom Kippur, and on wedding days. My mother prepared for weeks in advance. She cleaned and scrubbed every corner of the house until not a crumb of bread could be found to violate the Passover. It took her a whole week to shop and she filled an entire room with food: a sack of potatoes, bottles of Passover oil, a huge basket of homemade matzo, dozens of eggs, demijohns of wine.

On the night of the first Seder she would put on her best dress, adorned only with her pearls, and cover her head with a white silk kerchief. Then she would light the candles and say the blessing. Father would bring home a beggar or someone without a family from the synagogue to fulfill the holiday *mitzvah* -- the good deed. The children, dressed for the holiday and nervous with anticipation, sat eagerly around the beautifully-set table waiting for our little brother Yancu to ask the four questions starting with "*Ma nishtanah...*" -- "Why is this night different...?" Father, reclining on an oversized pillow, would preside

proudly over the entire ritual. A special dinner was served, with the most delicious Passover dishes, matzos, *chremzli* (potato pancakes), roast; and the four goblets of wine were drunk. The atmosphere was of warmth, family togetherness, serenity. After dinner everybody sang traditional songs and read children's stories from the *Haggadah*. The melodies had not changed for generations. I still remember Father's voice as he sang the *Chad Gadyoh* (An only kid) and *Echat Elohenu* (Our only God).

But those Seders all took place in the good and peaceful old days. By 1944 times were turbulent. The war was in its fifth year. Nearly all my brothers were away and we had lost contact with most of them. Alter, the oldest, was in Budapest, where he had been working in a knitting factory. Moishi was at the front in the Ukraine in a forced labor unit. Miki was somewhere in Italy finishing medical school. Yossie had disappeared on his way to U.S.S.R. a few years earlier and my parents feared him dead. Ezu had been arrested in Budapest for printing bread ration coupons. Ebi, also in Budapest, was an apprentice in a trade school. Only Yancu, who was fourteen, remained at home with my parents and me. I was twenty-two, the only girl in the family, and at that moment the only breadwinner.

Sighet's Jewish community had suffered much hardship since Hungary annexed the northern part of Transylvania. Jobs were lost, stores were closed, Jewish children could not attend the high schools. Still, life went on.

It wasn't until March of 1944, however, that the Germans moved in. When they did, fear spread everywhere. Rumors were already circulating about pogroms and deportations in Poland. Now Jews had to wear a yellow Star of David sewn on their clothes when they went out on the street. There were frequent searches of Jewish homes during which valuables were confiscated -- although we didn't have much of value that the Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators wanted to take. There was an early curfew and no one dared to be on the streets alone.

The police requisitioned my room and a German officer moved into our house. He was so pleasant and friendly we could hardly believe it. To my father's worried questions about the future the officer replied reassuringly. "What do you think?" he would say, "The Germans would never do those things. We are human beings too."

Could we have celebrated Passover while the German officer was lodged in my room? This was the room where we usually had our festive dinners on Sabbath and holidays. It pains me so much that I cannot remember that last Seder with my parents.

Soon after Passover orders were issued for all the Jews in Sighet to move out of their homes into a ghetto. We got less than a day's notice. We were told to be ready to go by morning, to leave all our possessions at

home, to take only folding beds or mattresses, one suitcase of clothing per person, cooking utensils and enough food for two weeks. And everything had to fit into one horse-drawn carriage.

I remember leaving our house with our few belongings and starting that journey that ravaged our family. We looked back for the last time to what had been our home and contained everything dear to us. It was like going to a funeral. I can see my parents walking alongside the carriage, and Yancu and I behind it. And I recall the neighbors watching. Some of them were Jews whose turn had not yet come and who perhaps thought that, because they were doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, they would escape what befell us. The family of our neighbor the pharmacist were at their window, watching and crying. They were spared only for another three weeks; they were among the last group to be evacuated to the ghetto.

We passed along the main street, surrounded by many other families with their carriages, all going in the same direction toward the outskirts of the town where a dozen small streets were designated by the authorities as one of the two ghetto areas into which more than one third of the population of the entire city was to be crammed. When we reached the entrance of the main ghetto we saw that it had been fenced in, and the gate was guarded by Hungarian gendarmes. The non-Jews living in that area had been moved out and in each of their homes eight to ten Jewish families were assigned.

We were led to a small house and shown our room, which we had to share with another family that had already moved into it. We knew them, years ago they had been our landlords. They had already taken the beds, so Yancu and I put our mattresses on the floor for our parents, and we slept on the porch with the other youngsters. Soon a third family was assigned to our room, and other families to the next room and to the kitchen.

After we unpacked and put our few belongings in the room, I went out to see who else was around. To my surprise, I saw Zsuzsi standing in front of the house across the street, looking at the new arrivals. I went over to Tzali's family, who would have become mine too if only the war ended, the young men came home, and there was time to marry and settle down. It warmed my heart that at least we would be close.

The very next day it was decreed that the houses on that side of the street were to be returned immediately to their gentile owners and the Jews had to move out. I helped Zsuzsi and her family carry their belongings to a house not far from us on our side of the street. They were so helpless. Zsuzsi was just seventeen. Her mother had been overwhelmed by her responsibilities for years, ever since she was widowed. Her sister Dori had four-year-old Yortzo to take care of. The grandmother was old, sick and bedridden. As in most other families, the men were away at

forced labor camps, at the front, or in jail. Laichi, Zsuzsi's boyfriend, who was only seventeen and too young to be drafted, was one of the few young men who were around.

After the houses on the other side of the street were reoccupied by their former owners, access to those houses was changed. Their gates facing the ghetto were sealed and the windows were painted so they couldn't see what was happening on our side of the street and "they wouldn't know."

I spent a lot of time with Zsuzsi and her family. Her mother liked me and accepted me. I kept her company and helped her mend socks. I was impressed by her skill: for years she had been saving the boys' socks with holes on the heels. Now she had the time to fix them. She would unravel the hole to an even row, slip the eyelets onto a knitting needle, knit a whole new heel downwards, then sew the edges together. All her motherly love poured into this work as she eagerly anticipated Tzali and Bela's return.

It is so painful to remember and write about those times. Yet some of the last and most precious memories of my loved ones also come from the three weeks we spent in the ghetto.

It was spring, trees were in bloom, the lilacs and jasmine filled the air with a sweet fragrance. Behind our row of houses was a little creek where we young people would gather every evening to discuss what might happen to us and what we should do. Should we run away? Should we hide in the mountains nearby? And then what? How long could we roam the mountains? Who would feed us? How long would the war last? What would happen after the war? Obviously this was only talk. Could we desert our families?

The problems of day-to-day survival belonged to our parents. I still don't know where the food came from or how far down our supplies of rice, noodles and potatoes dwindled. We had been told to bring food for two weeks but more than two weeks had passed. Was there any milk in the ghetto for babies? There was no market, there were no shops.

All day long we walked around looking for our friends. Since I still had the job at the movie house I had a permit to leave the ghetto to go to work whenever they called me. On such occasions I found myself the only one in the center of the city wearing a yellow star on my chest. People stared at me. Once in a while a former gentile friend would approach me and give me some food to take to my family. But the theater manager found my presence too bothersome and soon let me go.

I volunteered to work in the infirmary. It was so dreary. The Jewish patients from Sighet's municipal hospital had been sent back to their families. A temporary hospital was set up in the synagogue at the

entrance to the ghetto, but only the very severe cases were admitted — patients with terminal tuberculosis, multiple bedsores, or others who could not be cared for at home. There were no medications. There were no clean dressings; the dirty ones had to be washed, boiled, ironed and reused.

Day after day we waited for something to happen. By the end of the second week the houses in the ghetto were bursting with people and the streets were jammed. The last ones to come had to sleep in barns, woodsheds, or in backyards, under the open sky. Then something unexpected happened: hundreds of young Jewish men who had been doing forced labor on the front in the Ukraine were recalled and brought to the ghetto.

Moishi was among them. We were so happy and relieved. He was very handsome, and lots of girls had been in love with him before he was sent to the front. He liked to court them, to go dancing, and to have fun. He liked to dress well. After the war began he was the only man in our family who ordered several suits from the tailor. After two years my brother was back with us.

Moishi was very creative. Out of any material he found -- shell fragments, shrapnel -- he would make drawings, cartoons, carvings, engravings or sculptures. He told me that at the front his officers kept him busy creating war mementos for them. This is how he survived while the other men had to dig ditches, sweep mines and live on near-starvation rations. It was so good to have a young, strong man to lean on. But he arrived with a severe toothache. There were no dentists available to treat him. Every aspirin we had or could find, Moishi took to ease the pain.

There was a great deal of speculation inside the ghetto. Why had these young, able-bodied men been brought back while the war was still raging? Their return strengthened our naive expectation that we would be sent somewhere to work, that we were needed indeed.

The week Moishi returned our house was raided again. The Hungarian gendarmes ransacked our belongings and took away the only good clothes we had left -- Moishi's three new suits. Moishi was in too much pain to react. Father suffered in silence.

The last image I have of my father before we were all taken away was of him in the backyard, sitting at a table in the sun, working on his manuscripts as he had done for years. It was as if he could express in his writing everything that he didn't dare say out loud. But none of us will ever know what he wrote, for those manuscripts were destroyed.

Rumors started circulating that the whole ghetto would be soon evacuated. One evening, after three weeks in the ghetto, we were told that we would be leaving the next morning. We were ordered to gather on the street in front of our houses and to take along only one piece of

luggage per person. Everything else was to be left behind. Mother had found a hiding place in the attic of our small house where she hid what was left of the trousseau she had been collecting for me: some embroidered table linens, lace curtains, a white silk shawl, a matzo cover; and some silky fabric for a dress, whose texture and grey-and-white paisley pattern I still recall. She had saved it for years for a happy special occasion that never came.

On the morning of May 14 the streets of the ghetto slowly filled with hundreds of people carrying bundles and suitcases. Some were helping the old and the sick. Others were carrying children. Everyone was dressed in his or her best clothes, the young ones as if for an outing, with rucksacks on their backs. There was so much fear and anxiety. The older people were arguing and speculating about what would happen to us, some were just praying. We waited and waited.

Against that backdrop of the mass of people worried about the unknown, an image haunts me: Moishi, tired, exhausted and in pain. We sat down at the curbside near a ditch and he put his head on my knees for a nap. Much else happened in the next few days, but this memory is the strongest. Moishi, the young man, my older brother, the strong, the handsome, so overwhelmed, needing me so much, resting his head in my lap. He alone is in that image. All the others have disappeared.

I wish, Miriam, I could explain it. Why is my heart now so heavy with this vision of my brother? Why does pain come from nowhere while I am writing this letter? Why does everything else disappear to bring out this one clear painful image?

By noon three thousand of us -- almost a third of the ghetto population -- were marched out of the ghetto and crowded into Sighet's Great Synagogue. Through the whole afternoon the gendarmes searched again and again through our belongings and took their share of jewelry or whatever else was left. My mother and many other women were taken a few at a time into a small room where they were stripped and searched internally by female guards for "hidden treasures."

Night fell. The searches ended and we were left in the synagogue without food or water. The doors were locked. People were sitting on benches or lying on the floor. Some were assigned to the balcony. The place was so crammed you could hardly move. The lights were on all night. It was noisy: children were crying, people were whispering, praying, coughing or sobbing. Our family sat together on the floor. Around were our neighbors from the ghetto. Little Yortzo was crying, "I want to go home!" We took turns resting our heads on our only suitcase. We were exhausted but couldn't sleep. The hours passed slowly.

The dawn brought noise and commotion from the outside. The gendarmes burst in and started to yell for everyone to get up and assemble

in the courtyard for the walk to the railroad station. Carrying our few belongings, we started to march through the streets. I remember looking at the clock tower of the Roman Catholic church as we passed. It was six o'clock on a beautiful clear morning. Shouting commands, the gendarmes herded us together, clubbing anyone who wasn't moving fast enough. Some people who could not keep up were whipped by the brutal guards. Children and the elderly stumbled and had to be helped. Packages and bundles fell out of tired arms and could not be picked up. People cried, family members held hands to keep from being separated. Pillows and bags were scattered all over, baby carriages were left behind.

The streets were deserted. Where were the people of the city? Were they really sleeping, or were they peering at us from behind the shutters? How did they feel, witnessing this miserable spectacle, this mass of humanity being chased in front of their houses? Wasn't each of us a former friend, neighbor, schoolmate?

Finally we arrived at the station. As the crowd gathered on the platform, my parents, my two brothers and I tried hard to stay together. We felt strong and healthy enough to withstand whatever ordeal awaited us. Just as we had managed that two-kilometer march, we would manage whatever work the Germans expected us to do. Zsuzsi and her family were nearby, all waiting for the trains to come into the station. In the distance we saw a few freight trains.

Suddenly a train pulled in a few tracks away, a military train. When it stopped, a young man got off. He looked around at the thousands of us on the platform. At first I couldn't tell who it was, but then I recognized my brother Alter. I frantically called his name, I waved. He heard me and he looked in my direction until he saw us. He ran over, and hugged and kissed us all. He asked us where we were going. We said we didn't know for sure, but we suspected that we were going to a work camp in Germany, or to be resettled in Hungary, on the West bank of the Danube.

"And how about you?" I asked.

"To the Russian front," he said. He was en route from Budapest with a whole trainload of Jewish men drafted for forced labor.

There was no time for more words, only hugs and tears. His train whistled. He said goodbye and ran to catch the moving train. The whole incident must have lasted only a few minutes. Zsuzsi, who was behind me, didn't see any of it, and as she turned around and saw us all crying and waving to the vanishing train she was astonished. "What happened? Who is on that train?"

I wondered if I would ever see Alter again. Little did I suspect that Alter would be the only one of them that I would see again. When I think about that amazing encounter, it borders on the miraculous.

As for Moishi, you know by now that he never returned from Auschwitz. All my inquiries about him after the war ended in disappointment. No survivor I spoke to ever saw Moishi after our arrival *There*. For all these years I assumed that he had died -- rather, that he had been killed -- that first night, with Yancu and my parents.

Last April Tzali and I went to Israel. We visited the Museum of the Holocaust again. This museum leaves a strong impression on me every time I see it. It has exhibits on everything relating to what happened to the Jewish people during World War II. One exhibit has pictures and documents about the *Sonderkommandos*. These were those few young men who were forced to work at the crematoriums and help the SS herd people into the gas chambers. They had to shovel the bodies out of the gas chambers, remove whatever valuables they could find -- rings, chains, gold teeth, hair -- and stack the bodies in the ovens. Imagine the horror when one of the men of the *Sonderkommando* found his parents or relatives among the dead.

The work was grueling and the men lasted only a few weeks; then the whole team was gassed and replaced with other young men who had just arrived. Rarely did the men of this team escape to tell their stories -- but some did.

All the time I was in Auschwitz, very little was known about what went on at the gas chambers and crematoriums. After the war I learned a great deal about them, how they operated, how the killings were done, how the bodies were disposed; and that whole industries in Germany were based on the remains from the killings. Nothing went to waste: hair was used to stuff pillows and mattresses; fat to make soap, human skins to make lampshades for the officers. (Perhaps some gifted prisoners were forced to make nice drawings on these lampshades without suspecting what they really were).

As we saw the documentation of all this in the museum my heart sank. I was very quiet. On the way out Tzali said to me, "Moishi was also in the *Sonderkommando*."

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, I heard it."

"When did you hear it? How come you never told me!"

"I thought I did. Maybe I didn't. Probably I shouldn't have told you now."

"Tzali, I don't believe it. You knew about this and you never told me? all those years..." I was shocked, incredulous.

"Look, it was probably only hearsay. But what difference does it make?"



It makes all the difference in the world to me. For almost forty years I thought Moishi died an instant death with the others and this ended his suffering. Now I have to live with the knowledge of what he suffered and that he must have died a hundred times every day as he saw so many others die in front of his eyes. He knew then what was happening and that torture alone must have been unbearable. He also must have known that there was no hope for him or for the others working alongside him. How can I come to terms with this?

For many nights I couldn't sleep. I had nightmares about Moishi, forced to do all those terrible things. Wouldn't it have been better not to have been told? If Tzali had been trying to spare me this anguish, wasn't he right? I tried to convince myself that it was not true.

Would it be too much to expect that they would allow such a handsome young man to die without enduring his share of work, torment and suffering?

*April 17, 1984*