The Triumph of Life

The Story of

Rachel and Menachem Vardi

Edited by Racheli Lavi

Translated from the Hebrew by Danny Verbov

Printed in Israel, 2016

Contents

PART 1: Rachel

Chapter 1: Happy Childhood

My birthplace was Olaszliszka, Hungary. The same birthplace that eventually betrayed its Jews and the same birthplace I exchanged for the State of the Jews, the only pure place for our people. But I cannot forget neither Olaszliszka's betrayal nor my early days there. And I cannot deny its place in my life and the life of my family. My roots are embedded deep in the accursed earth of Hungary.

My Mother's House

My maternal grandfather, Samuel Lefkovits, and his wife, my grandmother Katalin Roht-Lefkovits, were an inseparable part of my life in those early days, before our world was destroyed. They had 12 children, nine girls and three boys. My mother was the youngest. My grandparents were very comfortable. They had vineyards and land and even a share of a forest alongside the River Bodrog. On the other side of the river was a large farm, where my grandfather built houses for all of his daughters. When the time came, he also built a house for my mother. I was born in my grandparents' house on Friday night, March 10, 1923 and that's where I spent

my first days in the world. Since it was Sabbath Eve, they didn't know how to pass on the good news to my father's parents. In the end, it was my grandfather's non-Jewish worker who was sent to tell the rest of the family. I was the first granddaughter in my father's family and their joy knew no bounds.

Our house, the house Grandpa built for my mother, was located in the beautiful new section where only non-Jews lived, but there was never any friction between us and we all got on very well together. My best friends were my mother's best friends' daughters. Our relationships were so warm and good that they would invite me and my sister to their houses on Christmas and even put presents for us under their magnificent Christmas tree. We were fine with that and celebrated with them. My father came from a different background with a profound Judaism permeating his bones, but he too did not object to these joint celebrations.

Our house was very close to Grandma and Grandpa's house, and they were a constant presence in my childhood. They were both wonderful people and although they had had a hard life, you couldn't tell. You wouldn't have known that Grandma had lost two daughters after a difficult period of illness. There was nothing in her behavior that showed such a thing. They had a very big house, thanks to Grandpa's business, and they lived a traditional-liberal lifestyle. Their home was always lively and happy. They had 35 grandchildren and we all visited them all the time.

My grandfather was a very impressive man, both in character and in looks. He donated a lot of money to the Jewish community and they in turn gave him a lot of respect. He had a large farm and employed many non-Jews on his land. When the crop was bountiful – and Grandpa could afford to do so – he would forego his part of the yield and give it all to his workers, and they loved and respected him in return. One of my childhood memories is a journey to the flour mill with sacks of barley from his fields. My sister, Judith, and I were sitting on the bulging sacks and jumping with the cart as it made its way to the mill.

Yom Kippur is another memory I have of Grandma and Grandpa. Grandma would wear white from head to toe, and we would walk to the synagogue together. We had to leave my grandparents' exclusive neighborhood and walk to the simpler area, where most of the Jews lived and the synagogue was situated. Rabbi Friedlander, a very learned and famous figure, was the leader of the congregation.

My Father's Home

I was fortunate in receiving so much love from my maternal grandparents but in no way did that cloud my relationship with my father's parents. I was their eldest granddaughter and a strong bond of love was formed between us.They – Gabriel Flohr and Matilda Binet-Flohr – had six children. The oldest was killed by a bolt of lightning as he worked in the fields. He didn't have a family. The second was my father.

My connection with them was not daily, because we lived quite a way from them but every summer, from when I was seven through to my high school days, we would spend two whole months with them. At first my mother took us by train to Szerencs, where our uncle was waiting for us with a horse and cart to take us to Megyaszó, to Grandma and Grandpa's house. On one occasion I was scared when I saw the horse and I refused to go but my uncle bought me a ball and persuaded me to climb up onto the cart.

It was mostly a pleasant journey but it was always hard to say goodbye to my mother. I was very attached to her and – despite my fond affection for my grandparents – I would always cry when we got there because my mother had to go back home. "I'm not staying, Mother. I'm coming back with you," I would say tearfully, and Judith would chirp in and announce she wasn't going to stay there by herself so if I was going she was coming too. My mother would stand embarrassed and Grandma would say softly, "My little girl, you are staying, right?' and of course the objections disappeared, the tears dried up and my sister and I spent some wonderful summers in my grandparents' house.

There was a huge nut tree on a large lawn in their yard. Grandma would make me bread and honey layered with a generous sprinkle of nuts. She spoiled me. I was a bad eater in my childhood and every time I put on weight when I was with her she would excitedly write and tell my parents.

My Parents' Home

My Hungarian name was Gabriela (Gabi) Flohr. In 1925, two years after I was born, my beloved sister, Magda-Judith, came into the world and we became great friends. We never fought or became angry with one another, never jealous. Perhaps because each of us had everything we could possibly wish for. We grew up like princesses.

When Judith was three or four, we were separated for the first time. She contracted diphtheria, her neck became swollen, her temperature rose and she found it hard to breathe. Today there are vaccines for diphtheria and you very rarely hear of anyone who actually has it, but then, before vaccines and when penicillin was scarce and very expensive, it was a common illness, contagious and fatal, so to protect me from catching it, I was sent to my grandmother's house. My parents managed to keep me away from the danger but Grandma couldn't hide her concern for my sick sister. It was fairly common for children to die early in those days… in the end, thank God, my parents managed to obtain the necessary medicine, my sister got better and everything returned to normal.

Judith and I were very close. We could speak to each other about anything and everything. We both loved to read. We discussed the books we read and what was happening around us. It's funny what sticks in our memories… I remember Judith constantly wearing my socks, and when there was a school trip, I would debate whether to ask my parents for

money while she would go straight to our father as if it was the most natural thing in the world and say to him, "Daddy, tomorrow we're going to Košice so can I have some money please?" Father would say, "And if I say no?" And Judith would answer, "You won't!" Time after time…

My mother, Regina Rivka Lefkovits, was an extraordinary character. She read a lot, and was blessed with a natural beauty enhanced by her being particular about her appearance and by the order she kept in the home. She loved flowers and grew roses and lilacs in our large garden. She also grew corn, potatoes, parsley, peas, green beans and fruit trees in the yard. Yet all this apparently did not satisfy her esthetic tastes and she grew Salvia plants on our porch as well. Beauty and esthetics did not blind her to others though. She was an extremely generous woman and every day she would invite the workers tiring over the railroad near our home to come in and eat lunch with us.

My father, József Flohr, grew up in Megyaszó, near Szerencs. He studied in the Hatam Sofer's rabbinical seminary and yeshiva in Bratislava (graduating in 1913). He also had a secular education as well as his Jewish studies. He did not want to be a Rabbi but he did want to know Judaism thoroughly and he was a very intelligent and well-educated man. He also studied at the advanced school of business on the Austro-Hungarian border, and later actually went into business. To support his family, my father opened a small shop adjacent to our home, where he worked from dawn to dusk. When there were no customers, he would pull out the

particular tractate of Talmud he was learning at the time and study intensely, as only fitting for the type of man he was. The Torah was not just a book of laws for him. It was a way of life. My father lived the Orthodox tradition but added his own very unique style. He possessed some wonderful life wisdom I often fondly remember to this day and he displayed an optimism and a humanity I will never forget.

Our home was a genuinely warm, traditional Jewish home. Very understanding and liberal. It was important to my father not only to provide us with the basics like food, clothes and a roof, but to also give us spiritual sustenance that would serve us for the rest of our lives. He did that by sending us to study a lot more than our contemporaries, uncommon for girls at that time. Other Jews in the town would often criticize him and say, “Why do you need to send your daughters away from home to study?” And Father would respond politely without becoming annoyed, “We never know what life holds in store for us. I don’t know what will happen to my money, my land or my vineyards, but the studies I provide for my daughters will last them a lifetime. That is my real legacy.” And to this very day I think how wise and how right he was, and how he saw the writing on the wall, because that is exactly what happened. The education we received was indeed the only thing we took with us from our parents’ home. The education, the lessons of life… and the memories. And among the wealth of memories are those of my father, a very special man who loved my mother deeply, and the memories of their beautiful partnership.

My father, József Flohr

Daily Life and Festivals

Thanks to my mother's love and her penchant for beauty and esthetics – and thanks to her amazing organizational abilities – our dining table would look festive every single day. And our meals were always calm and enjoyable, ending with the words of thanks my grandparents taught me in German.

One of the childhood experiences I carry with me to this day was Shabbat in my parents' house. Every Friday, before sunset, my mother would tie a special, hand-embroidered white apron to her waist and light the Shabbat candles. My father would bless us and then go to synagogue. Prayer was very important to him but he never forced us to pray.

While Father was away, Mother would prepare the Shabbat table and one could feel an atmosphere of holiness throughout the house. My father came home and blessed us again, made Kiddush, made a blessing over the Challot and we sat down to eat.

My mother was the ultimate housewife, renowned throughout the neighborhood. She would not allow me or my sister to cook or work in the kitchen, and I will never forget the taste of her cooking until the day I die. For Shabbat she would prepare fish, chicken and soup and never forgot anything. After the meal, my father would sit and tell us about the weekly Torah portion using simple, clear words. He would go to the synagogue again on Shabbat morning, afternoon and evening, and we would make Havdala and a new week would start with calm and joy.

On Rosh Hashanah, my father would spend most of the day in the synagogue. Mother would also go with me and my sister in tow, but we mostly played in the yard with the other children.

On Yom Kippur Eve, we would all go to the synagogue together, for a whole night and day of prayers. Before we left, dressed in pure, spotless white – like the thoughts that filled our hearts in expectation of the new year ahead – Judith and I would ask forgiveness from our mother and father for all the heartache (intentionally or not) we had given them during the past year. Father would kiss and bless us and we left the house hand in hand.

At the end of the Fast, after our father had revived himself a little with some drink and Mother's cake, he began building our Sukkah. He would build it every year and it was often just him who ate in it, because it was usually raining on Sukkot and the rain would send my Mother and us running into the house.

My mother, Regina Flohr-Lefkovits

My sharpest memory from Simchat Torah is the year my father was Chatan Torah.[1] It was a great honor, and after the service and the dancing, many relatives came to our house to celebrate.

Mother was known in the village for her astonishing baking talents, and this was obvious throughout the year, but mostly on Purim. No other family made Mishloach Manot like my mother! Her specialty was soft and tasty Hamantaschen.

1 The person ceremoniously called to the Torah for the last reading of the annual cycle.

Of course she would thoroughly clean the house before Pesach as well. There was not a corner she didn't touch and as the holiness of the festival descended upon us, we were sure there was not a single speck of dust in the house. We usually enjoyed Seder Night with my father's side of the family, which was another opportunity for my sister and me to bask in their love and be spoiled by our paternal grandparents, whom we rarely saw because they lived so far away.

The Judaism instilled in me from my parents' home was a beautiful way of life – warm, honorable, family-oriented. Our home was cozy, loving and very special, full of love. Great love between my parents, and they piled love on us unconditionally and unrestrictedly. Sometimes there were 'kind souls' in the community who would comment on the fact that my father had not merited male offspring, and my father would say that his two girls were worth at least six boys and that he lacked nothing. Father was so attached to us.

Even today, I remember those lovely, carefree childhood years every evening and thank my parents who raised us with so much warmth and love.

Life was just so good and simple.

Soon though, these memories, sights and smells, still fresh in my mind, would make the separation from my mother and father all too much to bear.

In School

I began my formal education in a Jewish school in our village close to where we lived. I studied there for three years. I was enthusiastic, happy and a good student. After those three years, I moved to a general school, where I stayed for another four years. High school was next, 27 km away in Sátoralijaújhely, and I would spend an hour each way on the train in order to get there and back.

There was a charity box on the teacher's desk in my classroom in elementary school. As a good student and generous girl, I wanted to donate as much as I could, and so on Chanukah, when I received the customary Chanukah Gelt from my grandfather, I would take it all and drop it into the box. When my mother heard, she didn't get annoyed with me. She understood why I had done it but she spoke to the teacher and suggested she remove the box from the classroom because it wasn't educational. Mother was a very sensitive and wise woman and knew how to tailor her response to the individual human being in every situation.

I had a Jewish class teacher called Szombatin Fila Samaria. My mother wasn't concerned too much about my studies because I was a good student, but there was one thing she was constantly worried about, more or less from the day I was born. Because I was an awful eater, Mother wrote to my teacher and asked her to check my bag to make sure I'd eaten the food she'd put in there. I knew this though, so before Ms. Samaria had a chance to check, I would take

out the sandwich or whatever it was and give it away to my friends!

When I think about that period today I understand this was just another way on my part to attract my mother's attention. My sister, who was extremely intelligent, didn't need these games. And yes, it is quite likely this was only a game for me… Mother would give me an angry look, I would cry and say, "Mother, don't be angry with me, don't hit me," even though she never ever lifted her hand against me or Judith and there was no one more gentle than she was. And because I was a little spoiled in this way, and because I didn't eat as I should, I contracted pneumonia quite severely. I cannot forget how my mother cried from worry and I told her, "Mother, I'll be okay. I'll eat anything!"

Judith finished her high school in two and a half years instead of the usual four. She studied by herself and passed all the exams. We were very close to each other. Although I was a diligent student, I couldn't draw and Judith always wanted to do my art homework for me. In my end of year report I received "Excellent" in all subjects apart from Drawing, for which I received an admonitory comment after the teacher realized it wasn't my work.

At the general school, we had a singing session in the church every morning. Judith and I were very musical and loved to sing. I would rush to get to school first and stand near the soloist. I was so musical in fact that at age 11, my aunt Erzsi (my father's sister who had spotted my talent), bought me a

violin, which I started to play for a while but then stopped. Later of course music became an integral part of my life and I would enjoy many moving musical moments in the years to come.

My sister Judith and I, in our backyard in Olaszliszka

Chapter 2: Adolescence

In 1940, when I was 18, I completed my high school studies. I wanted to carry on in business school, and indeed I managed to study there for a year, but then the Hungarians introduced laws against the Jews and I was forbidden to study. My sister wanted to go to the Teachers Seminary in Miskolc but she too was not accepted for the same reason, in spite of her undoubted qualifications. And so my parents decided to send me to Budapest. My aunt Erzsi owned a very famous women's fashion boutique, and it was decided I would go to her and learn the profession.

I had a friend then called Tamar Stern and we had some relative in common. Tamar came to Budapest from Slovakia and we quickly became good friends.

My aunt Erzsi

In the Movement

In one of our conversations, Tamar told me she was a member of the Maccabi HaTza'ir (Young Maccabi) movement. Every Sunday they would go on a trip in the Buda Mountains and enjoy various activities such as lectures and singing. She suggested I go with her next time and I did. I was excited from the very first trip and I announced that I had found my place. I really felt at home. Singing was one of the things that particularly touched my heart. We sang many Hebrew songs and I loved to sing, had a good voice and I felt wanted and part of something bigger. We sang the Maccabi HaTza'ir anthem, "Forward Maccabim, forward Maccabi to work and victory…" I still remember the tune and every single word!

From the moment I joined the Movement I could not stop singing, and those songs accompanied me every day wherever I was. Later they started a choir and I really enjoyed that too. We heard lectures about the Land of Israel, kibbutzim and pioneering. I told my aunt about the activities and asked her permission to participate. She agreed but insisted I return home by 10 every evening. I only went back to my parents' home for festivals.

Youth movement activities were not legal at that time. The documents we carried during movement activities were counterfeit. And every so often we learned just how important it was to be careful… they conducted spot searches, sometimes even arresting 'suspects,' including my madrich (leader), Joseph Sheaffer, and two chanichim

(movement members). They took them to a detention camp. We later discovered that some of my father's friends had also been taken there. One day my father came home and told me he understood why my heart was so attracted to the Movement, for his friends had told him that those madrichim and chanichim were fantastic people and how much they helped each other and everyone else in the camp.

Hachshara (training camp)

1941. We were already aware of the war and its impact on Polish Jewry, for the refugees had arrived in Budapest, but we refused to believe we were in any danger whatsoever. We didn't think anything would happen in Hungary, and by the time the Germans would get here the war would already be over. By then I was devoting most of my time to the Movement. After being regular chanichot, my friends and I decided to join the Maccabi HaTza'ir Hachshara (training) program. This took place in a beautiful location in the Buda Mountains. The aim was to prepare us for making Aliyah and to live a pioneering agricultural life in the Land of Israel. The group was organized and united in pursuit of our joint aim and we appointed a treasurer. Since the whole operation was illegal, we camouflaged our activities under the simple name, "The House of the Working Girls."

There were 12 girls in my group. The boys were in a different place, but we would meet for joint activities. All my friends in the group came from good homes and we felt our parents'

presence there too, far from home. My mother would send me a package of goodies every week and I would share them with my friends. By evening there would be nothing left!

During that Hachshara year, we still had to work in various jobs outside the camp so we could make a living for ourselves. I continued to work in my aunt's store. I sewed the most beautiful clothes and underwear. I was also tested [in the profession] and passed the exams but I didn't like it. In the morning I worked there and in the afternoon I would pick up my friends and we would go to the Hachshara, where we learned about different agricultural techniques and prepared to make Aliyah. I was very disciplined and completely identified with the values. So much so that I contributed all I earned from my clothes deliveries to the Hachshara without a second thought. That was my way of expressing the strong Zionism pulsating through my veins.

In 1942, the Hungarians tightened the laws against the Jews and our cover was not good enough anymore. We had to move underground. Hungarian police would often break into our house and search and we had to destroy all the documents we had. We felt the ground burning under our feet. One day, in the middle of 1942, we gathered for a meeting with a senior Movement official. We waited and waited but he didn't come. Eventually someone else came, emotional and breathing heavily, to tell us that all the Movement's leaders had been caught and arrested and we must flee to the mountains.

Throughout that time we were involved in activities very different from those we thought we would have to deal with. Now, instead of preparing for an idyllic pioneering life in Eretz Yisrael (Israel), we had all enlisted our strengths to protect the Jews that had arrived from Poland and Slovakia. We helped them hide and brought them food. The most important thing we did was to constantly find new hiding places and keep the food supply in stock. My aunt was at the center of events. She would make food for the refugees and I would bring the guys in for lunch. But that period didn't last long. The boys were arrested and taken to the army and they took the Movement's leadership to the Garany Concentration Camp. Joseph Sheaffer – my first madrich who taught me everything about the Movement – was also taken there.

By the end of 1942, all the boys in the Movement were in labor camps while we girls continued to hide those who had escaped. We gave the Polish and Slovakian refugees fake immigration papers we had managed to obtain. We understood their predicament, but it was clear to us that any danger was still nothing to do with us. We were totally convinced we would get through this difficult time and everything would be okay.

My uncle Emanuel and his family, before the war
(all three perished)

My uncle's home in Slovakia prior to the war

I knew I would get to Eretz Yisrael in the end. I had no idea how urgent it was for us to leave Hungary. I had no conception just how much Hungary was no longer a safe place for the Jews.

We stayed in the Hachshara program until it closed down in 1943.

The Hachshara home in Buda, 1942

Life Changes

In 1944 the Germans were in control of Hungary and life was never the same again. Persecution of the Jews – something so many Hungarian Jews refused to believe was possible in a country they were so loyal to – became routine. Before Pesach, the Movement leaders tried to convince us to stay in Budapest to save us from the long arm of the Nazis, as they had done with many of our friends, but my sister and I refused to desert our parents and we decided to go back home and celebrate Pesach with them. We still believed the

trouble would pass. We took it for granted we would go to Budapest again after the festival and everything would be okay and we went home feeling quite sure of ourselves.

I am still sure of that decision today. I would never have been able to forgive myself had I left my parents then.

Nevertheless, things were not as they used to be. At that time, my father's store was closed – they forbade him to work – and yellow stars were a stain on our clothes.

Pesach preparations were particularly difficult that year. On the one hand it was important for us to celebrate as we always had, but on the other the clouds of concern were hovering ominously overhead. Rumors, persistent rumors we refused to believe, reached us from the east. Rumors of loss and suffering, of inconceivable acts, of incidents that seemed so detached from the enlightened, cultured Germans we knew, and we did all we could to live our lives as we had until then. Good, simple lives. The good, simple lives that were no longer.

There was no escape now. We had no choice but to wait.

So while my mother was cleaning the house as usual, she also "cleaned out" her jewelry and her best clothes, depositing them with a trustworthy neighbor until the danger would pass.

Pesach arrived. My mother lit the candles and my father went to synagogue. By that time every departure from the house was accompanied by the fear that one may never return.

That this may be our last meeting…

But my father came home and restored the air to our lungs, if only for a few moments. We sat around the Seder table, just the four of us. Together. We could no longer celebrate with the entire extended family, but we drew courage from our own little united foursome.

And at that moment we had no idea that this would be our last meal in the house.

Our last meal together.

We told the story of the Exodus from Egypt. How the Jewish people left slavery for freedom, but the spiritual highs of previous Seders was missing. Yes, we had matza, we had four cups of wine, but we didn't have freedom. When we sang, we sang quietly so no-one could hear us from outside. And we were scared to open the door for Elijah the Prophet,[2] for fear someone would burst into the house.

Seder Night came and went. The Almighty dealt with us kindly and allowed us to celebrate one more festival together as a family – Judith, me, our mother and father.

But that kindness did not last long.

We managed to hide for a little while with two of our non-Jewish neighbors, one of whom was the Szakács family. They were good friends of ours and in those dark moments, when no one else would be there to help, we well appreciated

2 *A Seder Night custom.*

their friendship. Those merciful non-Jews endangered their own lives to save ours. Later I learned their son had put himself in more danger by saving a Torah Scroll that had been thrown out of a synagogue. That scroll eventually reached a community in the US. The Szakács' hid us, fed us and looked after our valuables until the end of the war, but they couldn't save us.

We had to get out.

One morning we were all taken to the Great Synagogue, from where they loaded us onto carts and took us away. They didn't tell us where we were going but the general direction was towards the Jewish Ghetto in Sátoraljaújhely. We passed our house on the way and looked at it for the last time. Pain seared through my whole body. Real, tangible pain. I didn't know where they were taking us. No one knew but I think we all knew things would never be the same again and that we wouldn't be coming back here ever again. I think I also realized that my happy years of childhood had come to an abrupt end.

I will never forget the worried expression on my mother's face. Or my father's faithful optimism which he maintained even through that horror. His faith in the people around him. His repeated attempts to calm the other people in the cart. His help to everyone.

Chapter 3: Another Planet

In the Ghetto

They took us to the Sátoraljaújhely Ghetto, unloaded us and left us there. They told us we would work there but there was no organized work for us. The Ghetto was only a few fenced-off streets and we had to find out how we were supposed to continue running our lives, and for how long? Nobody knew.

There were those who gave in to the situation. Those that waited. Those who had lost the ability to worry about their fate. My sister and I – perhaps thanks to the Hachshara – were very active. We joined forces with a few other guys and girls and we helped people arrange apartments for themselves, carrying furniture and generally trying to restore a modicum of normal life – some type of order, some sort of routine, some sense of sanity. We lifted furniture with the boys who had escaped from forced labor. We arranged a youth movement for the children in the Ghetto, running activities and teaching them Hebrew songs. This activity – which filled our days and sapped our energy – gave us the strength to go on. It kept our vitality, our optimism, alive.

There were some extremely religious Jews who approached my father and asked him how he could allow his daughters to run around with boys. How could he permit his daughters to run mixed activities for boys and girls together?! Father, whose innate wisdom was stronger than any command or

Halachic – especially social – stringency, saw the life force this activity was inspiring in us, and said to Judith and me: “When I see those boys helping everybody, I understand your decision.” And he encouraged us to do more. He responded to his critics by saying he believed in us and that what we were doing was not a rebellion to the way he had educated us but the realization of all his aspirations. My father was always authentic in his behavior and opinions and very proud of the education he had endowed us with.

And if there were those who thought the Ghetto was the worst thing on earth, they were quickly proven wrong.

Because a short time after we arrived in the Ghetto, we were all taken to the rail station. There we were rounded up onto trains that had come from Carpato-Russia, with other Jews already inside. They were different from us, Sephardi, but we soon discovered we were one people with one destiny.

In the Train Carriage

On May 17, 1944, we were herded onto the platform and shoved into the train. Into a cattle truck on a freight train. More and more people were squeezed in to the small space, which didn’t have even one bench for respite and had one little opening through which a little air could seep inside. They pushed us in until we were more than 150 people. 150 bodies with no room to sit and almost no room to stand.

This was one of the first transports to leave Hungary.

It was a terrifying experience. Physically but mostly mentally. I was a spoiled child and the rudeness with which they pushed me into the carriage, the shocking travel conditions, were not at all easy for me or my sister, but at least we were still with our parents. We were grateful to be able to support them.

Even now, my father did not lose his characteristic optimism, his will to help his fellow man and he tried all he could to raise the spirits in the carriage. He told them he knew the way, a journey he had made many times in his youth, when he was a student in the Pressburg Yeshiva.

But this was a very different journey.

It became longer and longer and any certainty he had soon dissolved into the unknown. For three days we were trapped in that same carriage. No food. No water. Yet the fact we didn’t eat or drink didn’t stop our bodies from performing their natural functions, which we tried to hide as much as we could, to maintain some sort of modesty, privacy, humanity…

Three days without food, drink and minimal air was certainly enough to advance the Nazis’ mission (may their memory be erased), and the carriage was soon filled with piles of bodies. Those who just couldn’t take it any longer.

My father was silenced. His optimism didn’t survive the cattle truck. At some stage the horrific reality hit him hard and he understood that something else was happening here.

Something more frightening than any of us could have ever imagined. I remember his face. He must have aged at least 20 years in that carriage.

We were in Auschwitz.

Auschwitz

It was all so quick. The carriage came to a halt, the door opened, we were pushed out roughly and before we could see where we were and what was happening around us – we were separated from our father.

They took him with the rest of the men and we stayed with our mother. Judith grabbed her on one side and me the other, very happy she was with us. Between us. Protected.

Or at least that's what we thought.

For a moment we could still see our father, standing in line with the men, and we also heard his last words. His face was calm as he said to us, "Look after Mother well." That great love accompanied him to the very end. Great love and concern for her. For some reason he understood that the danger hovering over Mother's head was greater than that over ours. He thought Judith and I would be okay. He was only worried about our mother.

And then we began to walk.

From selection[3] to selection, without knowing where we were going, without understanding anything. We passed the first selection together, and the second as well. Mother was a young and attractive woman. Perhaps that is what gave her a few more minutes with us.

A few last minutes of life…

In the third selection, someone pulled me and Judith away from her. I had no time to think. I saw Judith behind me and my mother taken to the other side. I had no clue what that meant. I only thought that perhaps we seemed too happy together and someone had decided to put a stop to it. I didn't know what it meant… but I knew it was bad.

Some Shwabs – Hungarians of German origin – said to us, "Why are you making a scene? Why are you crying? You'll go to work in the morning and you'll meet up with your parents in the evening."

We really wanted to believe they were right.

We carried on walking and walking. Aimlessly. Only later did we find out we were in Birkenau. We also learned that that's where most of the Jews were killed, but in the meantime we just took in what we saw around us and tried to keep up each other's spirits. Along the way we saw people without hair. They were clearly not normal and we said to each other, "Look, if the weirdos are still alive it can't be that bad here." This assumption exploded very shortly afterwards,

3 Selection of inmates for slave labor or death.

when they took us to the showers. That was the most awful, scariest thing that had happened until then. Judith went in first. When she came out, I didn't recognize her. She looked just like all those "weirdos" we had seen minutes earlier.

Before I had a chance to understand what had happened, here I was too, stripped and shaved all over my body by an SS guard. A violent, impatient man who had no time to consider my shame. My shock.

While we still felt something, we sensed we would not leave here, but most of the time we were just apathetic. We didn't know what was happening and where they were taking us. From the shaving we moved into the showers. On one side lay our hair, our clothes, our personalities, and on the other, we came out to the rags. We came out as rags. My sister received a torn dress. That was the last straw for her. She couldn't take it. Her appearance was always so important to her and the loss of her beautiful black hair was a tragedy as far as she was concerned. She was hysterical. I couldn't restore her hair but I did give her the dress I had received. I took hers, the torn one. It wasn't such a big deal for me.

After they had taken from us all that made us who we were – our hair, our clothes, our determination, our vitality – they led us like a flock of sheep to C-Lager, the women's camp. On the way we saw the chimneys and smelled burned meat, but we had no inkling what it was. We thought – perhaps what the Nazis themselves thought, perhaps what they wanted the whole world to think – that it was a garbage dump.

We carried on walking until we reached Block 19 in C-Lager. The block that was to become our home. A cold and gloomy home to 1,100 women, squeezed on wooden boards three stories high. Judith and I slept on the top level with 10 other women. 12 women on one 'bed'.

The next day they handed out cards and asked us to write our families' addresses on them. So they could know where we were. So they shouldn't think we'd disappeared, God forbid. On the other side of the card it said we were in Poland, in a guest house. I wrote my aunt's address, my father's sister who had remained in Budapest. That was the address I remembered. Later I found out she had actually received the postcard. We asked when we would see our parents but we didn't get an answer. Even though there were people there who knew the answer.

My sister and I received two portions of bread. On one was written (in Hebrew) "Rachel" and on the other "Judith." Apparently someone from the Movement had spotted us in the line at Birkenau and sent us the bread. Later a friend also sent us underwear.

We gradually became exposed to the camp and its horrors, and it was probably better it happened gradually. I don't know how I would have coped with the full understanding of the significance of Mengele's visits to our block. How I would have coped with knowing what happened to the women he ordered down from their boards in the middle of the night – or at any other random hour of the day – to come

to him. I do not know what would have raged in my soul had I known who Irma Grese[4] was, and what frightening bestiality lay behind her angel face.

Where did we draw our strength from? I really don't know. Perhaps it was my parents and the goodness they bestowed upon us all our lives until their dying day, but Judith and I pulled ourselves together and began organizing things in our block and teaching others Hebrew songs. We were thinking about the future. We hoped that way we would stay alive. We drove away the fear through song and we injected hope into our friends' hearts. The small flicker of hope that this wasn't the end.

Then one day, while we were singing, our Kapo[5] – also called Judith, and known for her brutality and the fear she instilled in the occupants of the entire block – came over to us. That was a very scary and excruciatingly long moment. She stood by our bed and stared at us. We shriveled up inside. We were scared to death. All sorts of punishments raced through our minds, and we had no idea which she would choose, how terrible it would be, how painful, until we noticed the tears streaming down her cheek. She called us down and asked

4 An infamous female SS guard, who later became warden of the women's section at Bergen-Belsen.

5 A Jewish prisoner in the concentration camp assigned by the SS guards to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks in the camp.

us how we knew Hebrew songs, because it was a block full of Hungarians. We told her we had been members of Maccabi HaTza'ir and she told us she had been a member of Gordonia[6] in Warsaw. She told us to come with her to a little room at the end of the block, where she gave us a portion of bread and two spoonfuls of jam. We thanked her for the gift, returned to our board with the booty, and divided it into 12 equal portions – one for each of the women who shared the board with us. We received that unexpected portion of food in the Movement's merit, and we never forgot its values. Neither those values nor the values we learned at home.

We remained human beings.

It was only much later we heard that Judith the Kapo had been in Eretz Yisrael when the war broke out, and it was only when she went back to visit her parents that the Germans caught her and took her to the front in the German Army, like other young girls. As a reward for her service in the German Army, she was honored with a small chance of survival by being responsible for women prisoners in Auschwitz.

Day after day we stood in drills, at the end of which was almost always a selection. Sometimes natural selection – when a woman collapsed never to get up again – and more often the brutal selections of Dr. Josef Mengele and his cronies. My sister and I always stood next to each other, always together, no matter what happened. If we would stay alive, we would stay together. If we would go, we would go

6 A Zionist youth group based on the teachings of A.D. Gordon.

together and if we would escape, we would escape together. Escape was largely impossible but one day we did it. We escaped to a block where they'd already had a selection and later we made our way back to "our block," Block 19.

One day they brought some guys from the camp opposite to work in our Lager. We passed by and suddenly recognized one of the boys, Miklos. He was one of the refugees who had come from Slovakia to Budapest. Miklos had been in Auschwitz for a long time. He had experience and seniority. We asked him what was in store for us and his answer was straight and to the point: "There is no hope here. No point in you having any hope. You won't get out of here." Miklos had come to terms with his fate but he hadn't lost his humanity. The Nazis deprived him of hope but not of love or compassion. We told him the food we received was totally impossible to live on, and he would bring us the soup he received as a worker. However, he warned us, "Step aside and drink it, otherwise they'll all jump on you for a drop." That was the last time we saw him.

My mother, 1926

Guben

That was our life until the end of August. At the end of August, they gathered all the girls aged 10-18 and took us to the train station at Katowice. We didn't know where they were taking us, and we didn't care. We didn't care at all. Because a short time after that, the Allied Forces began bombing and our hearts burst with joy. If the Allies were bombing the Germans it must be the end, or at least the beginning of the end.

From Katowice they took us to Guben, on the Polish-German border, and dropped us off at a small camp set up especially for us. During the journey we found out they had brought us there to work, and indeed, the next morning, they took us to the C Lorenz AG Factory, where they made aircraft parts.

We worked 13 hours a day. They brought us there before dawn and we left there well after dark, apparently so the local residents wouldn't see us. We worked at a table next to a conveyor belt. The foreman was actually a nice non-Jew who showed us empathy and humanity – rare commodities we hadn't enjoyed for a long time, and it wasn't easy to get used to it. It was obvious he'd had enough of the war too, and he would tell us, every day, "I'm going to go with you. I don't have any strength left. I can't take it anymore."

As soon as we had arrived at the factory, he saw Judith and I were sisters and asked me where I wanted to sit, "Next to your sister or opposite her?" He suggested we sit opposite each other so we could talk during the day. All he said was,

"I don't care how you work or how much you rest, I only ask one thing: when the SS come round, make sure you're working!"

We worked there for three weeks until one night, in the middle of a shift, I fell off my chair and lost consciousness. The foreman – so they told me later – noticed and rushed over to help me. He forced some cognac down my throat and later got them to put me on a stretcher and lay me straight. After they examined me they said I had pneumonia. My temperature shot up to 40 degrees. They didn't take me away, or to a hospital, or even give me medicine, and perhaps that saved my life.

Irene Kohn, a Jewish doctor, hid me in the camp for three long weeks among sacks of potatoes. I owe my life to her and to Esterka, a pediatric doctor from Lodz who was with her. They treated me as best as they could and gave me their miniscule portions of food. If I had been found out, I have no doubt I would have ended up in the crematorium.

The foreman knew I was in the camp. He sent me candies on Christmas via Judith and told them to tell me my job was secure and he was waiting for my return. He also asked my sister and my friends to look after me.

Life, especially in Auschwitz, was incomprehensibly horrific but there were little miracles along the way. The man in Guben was one such miracle, for he was not a Jew and there was nothing to stop him from being just like everyone else – to hate us, to take advantage of us, and to throw us away like

unneeded pots and pans, just like so many did, and just like the general atmosphere permitted and even enforced.

The very fact I was alive was the greatest miracle. I was very sick, I didn't get any medication, no proper nutrition, I was considered weak from childhood – at home they always considered me the weaker of the two of us – and yet I remained alive.

Conditions were unbearable and we didn't have enough to eat and yet it seems we were in better shape than those in other places.

Little did we know what was yet to come…

Six months later, someone suddenly announced that the Russians were getting closer.

The Death March

The Nazi Empire refused to surrender to the Allied Forces. Refused to admit it couldn't face the British, the Russians and the Americans. Refused to fall without taking a few more down with it, as many as they could. And so, in the cold, harsh winter of January 1945, we left Guben and set off.

We had no idea where we were marching to, nor how long the march would take. But one hour and then another, one week and then another, became three consecutive weeks

of marching in the most awful conditions – freezing cold, hungry, in wooden clogs that with every step indeed became clogged with snow that made walking even harder. It seemed the kilograms we had shed due to our prolonged hunger were now gathering under our feet and pulling us down. I repeatedly pleaded with my sister to leave me, to let me be and carry on by herself. I couldn't think of anything worse than this. Would it ever end? But she adamantly refused and forced me to keep going.

Another mini-miracle occurred when an SS guard on a bicycle intermittently appeared by my side and helped me clean the hardened snow from my clogs. Perhaps he knew Germany would not win, perhaps he was trying to gain some brownie points for himself…

At some stage we found out we were going to Bergen-Belsen, but we didn't know what that meant. We stopped walking a day or two before we got there. They put us on a train, where I immediately fainted.

When I woke up, the first thing I saw was Judith's face. Judith, my amazing sister, for whom nothing could break her spirit, who remained optimistic throughout and always believed the end would turn out okay. "Do you know who I am?" she asked as soon as I opened my eyes, "Do you know who this is at your side?" And she continued in her very calm, stable voice, full of faith, "It's going to be alright. You'll see. You'll see you'll have the strength, and we'll get to Eretz Yisrael." Judith always spoke about Eretz Yisrael.

She never once doubted we would get there at the end of the journey, no matter how many trials and tribulations we went through.

Bergen-Belsen

There were thousands of Jews at Bergen-Belsen. Some had been there for months already, many others were taken there on the death marches, and still fewer of them actually arrived. We met seven of our cousins there. Two of them are still alive today, one (Eva) in America and one (Magda) in Venezuela.

The war was about to end, we knew that. We had seen the Allies approaching, we'd seen the Germans retreating and something within us had begun to rise, to rear its head, to expand our thoughts, to hope… but our bodies, our bodies didn't know any of that. The body did not provide us with support. The body hadn't withstood the suffering. So much so that Bergen-Belsen tipped the scales for so many Jews so close to the end, and even afterwards too.

Conditions were unbearable. The two of us, like so many others, became ill with stomach typhus. And a typhus-struck body is far too weak to support the soul. Far too weak to respond to it. Typhus weakened us. Weakened and made us apathetic. Both Judith and I were at death's door, and after my pneumonia there was no chance at all. In fact, most of us had no chance and the Nazis did not let up for a moment. They did all they could to ensure our deaths. Until the last moment they apparently believed they could fulfil their

supreme goal – if they would only put in that last final effort they would annihilate the Jewish people – and they refused to forego even the smallest 'achievement.'

We didn't work in Bergen-Belsen.

We were there to die.

They didn't give us any food at all and water was near impossible to find. Towards the end, they even poisoned the water we did have. We didn't know it then – we only found out after the war – but their efforts, even if they didn't manage to complete their mission in its entirety, still bore fruit. Fruit in the form of skeletons shuffling along the camp paths and bodies piled up in the open areas. It seemed that even those who remained alive… behaved as if they were dead.

They took us to blocks that were completely empty. No beds, no blankets, no nothing. I don't know if anyone even cared. We would lie there, on the bare floor, and the night would pass us by in sleep that wasn't sleep, and the day in awakedness that wasn't awakedness.

That's how the British found us on April 15, 1945.

My sister was still on her feet then. I remember the spark in her eyes, the joy, as she said to me, "The British are here! The Germans are fleeing! I was on all fours by then. I weighed 25 kilograms and couldn't hold myself up any longer. I was just too weak. But finally I could believe her. At last I could believe we might get out of there. We would live! We would

reach Eretz Yisrael! The two of us. Together. As we had been until that day. If we had reached this moment and nothing had separated us – who could separate us now?

However, it quickly became clear that the very compassion, mercy, and the will to save us as fast as possible was the final nail in so many of our coffins.

After the British had entered the camp, they broke into the food storerooms and handed out tins of preserves to anyone who asked. A huge barrel of sauerkraut was opened and the camp was now full of people walking around holding cabbage in their hands. For an instant it seemed like the moment of deliverance had arrived, but the fall that accompanied it was far greater. Greater and deadly. Our digestive systems – which for so long had not been asked to digest more than a measly portion of bread a day, and recently not even that – couldn't take these foods. Neither in quality nor quantity. People who had survived the despicable hunger could not cope with the new abundance, and ironically so many died.

I too approached the sauerkraut. Judith couldn't move by then and I wanted to bring her something, but at that very moment, someone passed behind me and accidentally pushed me. I slipped and fell into the barrel! Today I can laugh but at the time it was disgusting. I managed to get out and the fall didn't affect my joy at being able to bring my sister food – to feed her, encourage her, help her. I reached her with the cabbage in my hands and said, "You see? We are liberated! You'll see we'll get to Eretz Yisrael!" But Judith

replied, "I feel I'm about to die, but you will definitely get there. Promise me you won't go anywhere else. Eretz Yisrael is our country."

I refused to take her seriously. I was the weak one. The idea of her dying was not an option at all. It couldn't happen because I couldn't cope with it. It couldn't happen because if one of us was going to die, it would definitely be me, not her.

Then I knew I would survive.

That very same day I met Judith, our Kapo from Auschwitz. I told her my sister was in a bad way, and me too. She gave me some pill (like Tylenol or Aspirin), and said, "It won't help but give it to her. Try and hold out as long as you can. "We weren't liberated immediately. In our state, it was simply impossible to take us all out of there. The British treated us block by block. They came to our block on the morning of April 20. We were utterly apathetic. We couldn't conceive it was all over. It seemed like eternity since the Germans had fled and nothing had changed. However, once the understanding trickled into my consciousness, I tried to wake up Judith. She had asked me for a little water the night before and I had managed to find her a few drops (with the help of my cousin Eva) and weaved my way through the bodies.

"Judith!" I shouted.

"Judith, they've come to take us, we're being liberated!"

No response.

Judith, who had kept her portions of food for me, who had carried me through the death march… Judith, my wonderful, considerate, strong sister, was no longer there. Only her shell remained.

My sister, Judith Flohr

Alone

Private graves were a luxury unavailable in Bergen-Belsen. The bodies piled up all over the camp – nobody knew who they were anymore – were a very serious hygienic danger. The only solution was mass graves. Judith's body was also thrown into a mass grave. In a pile with hundreds of other bodies.

I couldn't carry on without her.

I didn't know who I was without her.

I begged them to throw me in with her.

Without Judith, I had no one in the whole wide world.

I felt there was no one who would even look for me.

And I didn't have the slightest sliver of strength to go on.

Perhaps I would have ended it all there. Who knows how many like me finished like that? How many were slain by despair even though their bodies were still there – battered, scarred and depressed?

But Ilonka was there.

And Ilonka would not give up.

Ilonka knew Judith and me from Budapest and was always amazed by our friendship, by the fact we never fought and always looked out for each other. And it was Ilonka who grabbed me and forced me to live.

So I continued. I continued to live for a day, two days. On my knees. I simply couldn't stand. And then I saw a vehicle carrying live bodies away, to a place where conditions were better. I gestured to them to take me too. I wanted to live. I wanted to live even though I didn't know it. And in the shower there, under the stream of hot water, I fainted again, and someone pulled me out and treated me, but I didn't know where I was and I hid, so they wouldn't send me back to that block.

By then, the British had set up makeshift field hospitals and they brought me to one of them. I shuffled along in the line for food and suddenly I just keeled over. That was the end. I knew it. Someone quickly came over and took me to another makeshift hospital. I heard one of the doctors say to his colleague in German, "Why did they bring her here? She won't hold out till morning."

I want to believe he thought I was unconscious, that I didn't hear what he said, or that maybe I didn't understand German, but I was fully conscious. I understood every word and I knew exactly what was happening to me. They put me in a room with three other girls. On the door was a note saying "Tuberculosis (TB)."

I asked them to take me out of there. I was scared of catching the disease. I knew my state of health would not offer my body any protection from Tuberculosis.

Somehow, without understanding how, the spark of life began to burn within me. I was all alone. I wanted to die and yet I

wanted to live. But no one heard me. I cried and screamed there by myself, until Pela came in. Today she lives in Kfar Saba. She was in better shape than I was. She was helping out there as a nurse and asked me why I was crying. I told her I didn't want to stay in that room, that all I needed was TB, and that if they left me there I would die for sure.

Pela called the doctor. The doctor said I had severe TB and that was why I had been put in there. I refused to accept that and begged them to let me out. By morning, those three other girls in the room were no longer alive.

Later they moved me to another hospital in Bergen-Belsen, which by now had become a refugee camp. One day a Belgian doctor came up to me and asked if I wanted to go to a hospital in Sweden, where they could give me the treatment I needed. He explained that they couldn't treat me properly here in Bergen-Belsen, and I couldn't return to Hungary in the state I was in. I told them I didn't want to go back to Hungary anyway, and because I didn't have anyone left in the whole world, I couldn't care less where they took me.

Only one thing was important to me. I met a woman in the camp called Agi (Agnes) Biro, and we became friends. She was the only person I felt close to at that time and we had decided we would stick together.

And so, on stretchers, because neither of us could walk, we were taken to the ship and sailed to Sweden.

In Hospital in Sweden

Port workers took us off the ship when it stopped in Copenhagen. Our situation was not much better than it was on the day of liberation, and when the locals saw us they were shocked. They brought us milk chocolate. That was the first time we had ever seen milk chocolate and we didn't eat it. We feared we would never see milk chocolate again so we hid it under the pillows. Deep down we were still prisoners.

We arrived in Stockholm in June 1945. From there they took us to a rehabilitation facility. For the next four weeks, Agi and I lay side by side in isolation and our relationship deepened. I was suffering from heart failure, and my lungs were in a bad way. But I received good treatment and gradually began to gain weight.

The hospital was a semi-military hospital in Sigtuna, a very famous student town. Everyone at the hospital (apart from us patients of course) were volunteers – doctors, nurses, professors, maintenance workers – all working for us throughout that summer.

When we found out there were also SS guards among the patients, we immediately staged a hunger strike. We stubbornly refused to eat anything until they took them away.

Agi and I were transferred to rehabilitation facilities in Smålandsstenar and Eksjö. I was becoming stronger every day. My strength returned and with it my will to live. I even started to sing. My soloist's voice, something I hadn't even

thought of for so long, rose and erupted from within. I had learned a Swedish song related to the town we were treated in – "Flickorna från Småland," which I really enjoyed singing. A Swedish Jewish woman, a lawyer's wife, once heard me sing to the patients and decided I was a living miracle.

And so, four weeks after my arrival, she took me and we put on a concert for the medical staff. I sang and Agi accompanied me on the piano. I met Irene Kohn there, the doctor who had saved me in Belsen. She was overjoyed to see me. At the end of the concert they gave me a bouquet of flowers. We had given the audience a lot of pleasure.

Indeed, it was no less than a miracle that I was alive and well with the will to continue.

The lawyer's wife suggested I stay in Sweden. She didn't have any children of her own and asked to adopt me. She promised she would take care of my singing lessons and give me everything I needed, but I declined. I told her, unequivocally, that I was not going to stay. I had one place in the world – Eretz Yisrael – and my sole aim was to get there. To get better and to go there.

Just as I had promised Judith.

In the hospital in Sweden

I sang in Sweden

Returning to Life

Agi had been exchanging letters with Miklos, a young man she had made contact with but hadn't yet met. She asked me to read Miklos' letters to her, because I read well and she thought I conveyed the emotions reflected in his words. I became a witness to the beautiful love that started growing between them. One day, Miklos came to visit and the nurses allowed me to accompany Agi to the train station. It certainly wasn't love at first sight. Like us, Miklos looked like a typical Holocaust survivor and Agi was not impressed. He too was being treated at a hospital, in northern Sweden.

Sometime after, Miklos came again with five friends from his hospital. It was a freezing cold December night. One of his friends was Mena, who asked me out for dinner in the hospital dining room. Afterwards, he asked me to join him for a walk in the snow. I agreed and he told me all about his family and what he'd been through in the war. He spoke with such warmth and passion about his parents and sisters I sensed how much goodness he had in his soul.

Mena told me he was going to ask his doctor whether his lungs were healthy enough for him to leave the hospital, and asked if we could meet again after that consultation. Again I agreed and Miklos and Mena invited Agi and I for a New Year visit. It was extremely cold and the two of us did not have enough money for the train, but several passengers collected money to pay for our tickets. We arrived and had a wonderful time together.

Mena asked me if I wanted to continue our relationship. He told me he had a ticket to Canada in his pocket because his uncle, who worked there in the leather business, had arranged for him to come. He asked me if I would join him. He looked so happy, so full of hope, yet at that very moment something exploded inside me. “I only have one place,” I said to him. “Eretz Yisrael. If you decide to go to Canada, our ways must part.” It was a decision made in the moment but I was sure. Thankfully, I did not have to cope with the consequences. Mena sent the ticket back to his uncle.

Mena and I, 1946

Mena and I (standing third and fourth from the left) with a group of Hungarian survivors in Sweden

Mena and I with the group of other survivors

Part 2: Menachem

Chapter 4: Menachem's (Mena's) Story

Hungarian Childhood

I was born in Budapest on September 24, 1920, to Irma and Mór (Moritz) Weisz. My Hungarian name was Laszlo (Laci). My parents already had three daughters – Lola, Sári and Edith (Enci) – and a son (Ernő), when I arrived, and I was the spoiled baby. We lived in the Kispest suburb of Budapest in the Wekerletelep neighborhood.

My father was a train guard but had an accident and later opened a chicken business, where he made his living. I would often join him at work and loved helping him. I soon caught the business bug.

Mena's mother, Irma Weisz

Mena's father,
Mór (Moritz) Weisz

Both my elementary and high schools were in the same suburb, not far from our house. I enjoyed playing football (soccer) in my spare time. I was known in the family and the neighborhood as a very mischievous little boy. It was in nobody's interest to start with me.

For example, among the many anti-Semites in our neighborhood was a woman who used to call me a "dirty Jew". Every morning at dawn, this woman would take her freshly kneaded dough to the local bakery. One day, my sister Enci and I stretched a rope across the sidewalk outside her house, and when the woman came out with a tray of dough in hand, she tripped over the rope and fell flat on the sidewalk.

I had already developed an interest in leather as a child so it was only natural I went to study the secrets of the tannery after I'd finished school.

I began my studies in 1936 with an Orthodox Jew who was very left-wing in his opinions but an extremely talented, professional and uncompromising craftsman. I was also a Jewish member of the Liberal Party and so our occasional conversations were useful and reinforcing for me, because we shared the same opinions and his age gave him the advantage of wisdom and knowledge I could benefit from as well.

I studied for three years, put in a lot of effort and in 1939 began working in the field in Budapest. My particular specialty was leather bags and suitcases – not a straightforward craft at all.

That same year, my parents left Budapest for a village called Kistelek. I remained in Budapest by myself.

Sári, Mena's sister, in London

Edith (Enci), Mena's sister

Ernő, Mena's brother,
and his wife

Mena

Mena at boy scouts camp

Mena age 6 at boy scouts camp

Mena (arrowed) at school in Budapest

A Jewish Soldier in the Hungarian Army

September 1939. World War II broke out. Not one Hungarian Jew imagined then that anything would happen to them, but we did feel the war, and in October 1940 I was enlisted into the Hungarian Army at Buda, into a unit responsible for guarding the borders. Because I was a tanner, the army made use of my skills. My job was to work with horses and I would also sew bags for the officers. When I told them I needed specific tools to do the job properly, they supplied them. So it was that I would leave the unit in the morning to go to my store and spend the day sewing bags and other leather goods for the officers and I would return to the camp at the end of the day.

One of the officers told me I could change my name and stay in the Hungarian Army. That way no one would know I was Jewish and I wouldn't have to join a labor brigade. I was shocked at the very idea and told him, "If I am not good enough for you as I am, I certainly won't be good enough as a non-Jew. Although I am not religious, I am a Jew and I will stay a Jew."

In October 1941, a year after my enlistment, they indeed transferred me to a military labor brigade set up especially for the Jews at Hódmezővásárhely, near Szeged. Now I couldn't work with leather any more. We were forced to wear Hungarian military uniform with a yellow band on our sleeves. We went through basic training and learned to use hoes, hammers and spades. We were then sent to Kőrösmező

in the Carpathian Mountains, on the Ukranian border, where we had to lay roads. The Hungarians were our guards and foremen.

In December they moved us to Szeged, where at night we had to shovel snow from the streets and do some gardening work. We were there till the end of March, when they split us up and sent us to different army camps for all sorts of work. I stayed in Szeged and worked in the kitchen serving the senior officers – the pauper's jobs the other soldiers didn't want to do, like cleaning the floors, scrubbing the pots, etc. After a day's work we would go back to our base on the other side of town.

I was doing this till 1943, the same year my mother became ill with pneumonia. Kistelek was not far from Szeged and I asked permission to go visit her. They refused to release me. I couldn't accept that so I escaped from the camp, went to visit my mother and returned the next day. Of course the authorities found out and I was sent to the local jail, Csillag, known for its particularly despicable inmates.

And so with these criminals – and with those a little less loathsome, like me – I whiled away my time until May 17, 1943, when I was transferred by boat – via the Tisa and the Danube – to Bor in Yugoslavia.

Labor camp, 1943-1944

In the Copper Mines at Bor

We disembarked and joined a train to Bosnia, to the Bor Copper Mines. These were an important scalp in the German conquest because copper was a vital raw material for their military industries. Until the German invasion, most of the city's residents worked in this mine. However, once they knew the Germans were on their way, the majority fled their homes, unwilling to become cogs in the German war machine. 75% of the houses had been abandoned.

But the Germans needed copper and ordered the Hungarian Army to set up a forced labor camp on the site. At first it was soldiers, like me, from the labor brigades. My battalion was the first to work there. We had to mine copper, which was very strenuous, difficult work. We worked in daily eight-hour shifts and our commanding officer promised, "If you work okay, I'll be okay with you."

The work was hard and exhausting but Bor was an open camp and if we had any strength left after work we could go into town and come back later.

The good conditions didn't last long though.

After six months, they disposed of our commanding officer, closed the camp and the war against the Jews began.

Apparently the soldiers in the labor brigades were not sufficient to supply the German needs so they started plucking young people out of the cities across Hungary and bringing them to work in the mines. In the end about 6,000 people were involved in this forced labor.

They took away our Hungarian Army uniforms. We wore civilian clothes with a large yellow star on our backs and a yellow band on our arms. Only our hats reminded us of our past as soldiers with equal rights. Now the Hungarians were in charge of us in the camp. Every day they escorted us to the gates of the mine – about 2km away – turned us over to the SS and escorted us back in the evening.

Now we had to work 12 hours a day, in day and night shifts. We only received one meal, and that was after the shift, and not very substantial either, certainly not suitable for grown men who had just finished 12 consecutive hours of very physical labor. After night shifts we would return to the camp at six in the morning, eat, go to bed, and have to get up at eight to clean the camp and perform crucial tasks like moving rocks from one side of the camp to the other and

moving them back again the next day. At six in the evening we would be on our way back to the mines. And if anyone's work didn't meet the officers' expectations, or if our blankets weren't as smooth as they should be – we would be punished with lashes.

Our living quarters, our hut, was approximately 8m wide and 50m long. Bunk beds stood close together on both sides with a narrow path in between. There were no bathrooms in the hut. They had dug latrines on the hill opposite with a water pipe and faucets nearby. In winter the water froze so if we wanted to 'shower' we had to break the layer of ice on the little river passing through the camp and woe to the person who was caught unwashed.

We went down to the underground mines in an elevator. Down there we split into dozens of tunnels. SS guards supervised the work as we drilled holes with a compressor, placed explosives and blew them up, and then removed all the rocks, stones and dust into the carts. The more we worked, the longer the tunnels became and so we had to lengthen the cart tracks as appropriate. Apart from the drilling, everything else was done by hand.

Not only that, but most of the work we did standing in water up to our knees, sometimes our waists. If anyone fell sick they sent him to hospital so he could get better and return to work as soon as possible. Every so often we heard rumors that the copper we were mining did not actually reach its intended destination in Germany. Yugoslavian partisans had

blown up the railroad lines and stopped the material getting through to fuel the Nazi war engine.

Once I misbehaved. I don't remember what I did. As a punishment, I was sent for two months to a notoriously cruel labor camp, 700 meters underground. For our work we received a very special item of clothing, reserved only for those working so deep into the earth – boots up to our stomachs, like fishermen's boots, with one enhancement especially for us – the soles had been removed.

We stood there every day, soaked in cold water up to our stomachs. 12 hours a day, every day. Our skin whitened and wrinkled and the cold pierced our bones. We felt water, water and more water, until we lost any sense of feeling at all. Thankfully, I survived that and returned to Bor two months later.

Days merged into nights, which merged into days, which merged into nights. We didn't know what day it was. We had no idea what was going on in the world, the war, the state of Hungarian Jewry.We were working hard 12 hours a day, without food, receiving harsh, humiliating treatment. We didn't know the Russians were approaching. We knew nothing.

After about a year, we noticed the Russians had cordoned off the camp. Anyone working outside the camp – those who had built the railroad, those involved in cleaning – was moved into Bor. The camp's population grew rapidly so we knew something was afoot.

And then, one morning, they announced that work would stop in the mines. The front was closer and it was impossible to send out any more trains. At nights we heard the rumble of the cannons. The Camp Commander, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Hungarian Army, told us our military service was over and we were to be sent back to Hungary to be officially released. We noticed the SS guards had suddenly disappeared. The Hungarians were eager to get rid of us as well. We had been the first battalion to arrive and we were the first to leave. We began marching westwards.

On the Roads

And so, in September 1944, close to Rosh Hashanah, we left the camp. We were about 6,000 hungry, threadbare Jews, who made the journey from Bor to Hungary on foot, escorted by non-Jewish Hungarian officers. There was no food allocation at all. We ate whatever the villagers threw at us or what we managed to gather from the fields when we stopped at night. The Yugoslavians were nice to us, and even when we walked through towns occupied by the Hungarian Army, they gave us food and a fantastic reception. But as we moved on, it all became very different.

Stone-faced Hungarians escorted us on both sides and guarded us so no one could escape. If anyone moved from his place in the line – or tried to pick and eat a carrot – he was killed on the spot.

On October 7th 1944, after three weeks on the road, we reached the Serb town of Cservenka (Crvenka), site of a

brick factory. We stopped. There was nothing to eat and in the evening we boiled water and drank it. At 11 o'clock we woke up to hear shouts in German and Hungarian, "Everyone out to the center of the factory!" Anyone who didn't get up and go by himself was forcefully pushed or hit on the head with a rifle.

They shoved us all – all 6,000 Jews – into a hall on the top floor, used for drying out concrete blocks. They closed the door. The Hungarian Army fled and left us in the hands of the Shwabs (German-born Hungarians), children aged 13-15. The machine guns were taller than they were. A little later, 10 of these kids opened the doors and ushered about 50-60 Jews into the yard. Downstairs, outside the building, was a huge pit dug to dispose of the raw materials used in brick construction.

The Germans ordered the Jews to stand at the edge of the pit.

They shot them.

The rest of us, still in the hall, heard the shots. We didn't know what they were.

Or perhaps we didn't want to know.

After about 10 minutes they came back to take more Jews, and killed them too.

It was 50-60 kids with guns against 6,000 Jews but there was nowhere to escape. We couldn't move. We couldn't do anything. We were weak from years of labor without

sufficient food and we'd just been walking for three weeks. We were still alive but the spirit of life was dead. We had no physical or emotional strength to fight back. We were skeletons whose last drop of willpower had been sucked up in the mines, on the march, by hunger.

After a few more groups had left and not come back… it was my turn. I was taken downstairs and placed with my friends by the pit.

I saw thousands of my fellow Jews lying there lifeless, and I understood.

It was all over…

Suddenly, a German officer appeared and commanded the children to stop everything. He ordered them to herd us into another hall in the middle of the village.

That was the night I was saved.

I did not die like those poor 2,500 Jews. But I still didn't know what was in store for me. I couldn't know how near or far my own death was or what I would have to bear before it happened.

We were now in the hands of the SS and had to start walking towards Baja in Hungary. The soldiers told us they were taking us to the Jewish cemetery where they would hand us over to the Hungarian Army. And if they wouldn't take us, they would kill us there. We reached the cemetery and waited.

All 3,000 of us. The Germans demanded that the Hungarians take us, but they refused. We knew that if nothing had changed by midnight, we wouldn't live to see the sun rise.

At 11:30, a Hungarian officer appeared and told us he was reluctantly taking us. He was sorry he couldn't have killed us on the spot – thus wiping out the last odious vestiges of Hungarian Jewry – but he let us understand that we were probably on the same path as the rest of the Hungarian Jews, or as he put it, "Don't worry, we'll deal with you."

And so, with bodies broken and souls seared, we set off on yet another march.

This time we got to Hegyeshalom, on the Austrian border on the way to Vienna. Again, we received no food on the way. Anyone who was exhausted and sat down received a bullet in the head on the spot. It was also the end of anyone who stepped out of line or tried to beg food from any villagers.

We reached the Austrian border and they handed us over to Wehrmacht soldiers – the German Army's combat units. These were soldiers in a foreign army, an army that fought for Hitler's objective of destroying the Jewish people, but they treated us better than the Hungarian soldiers with whom – until a while ago – we had fought side by side. The Hungarian Army was far more extreme than the Germans and hated the Jews even more than they did. The soldiers gave us food and, perhaps even better, the march ended. They piled us onto rail carriages and at last we could rest a little.

Flossenburg

When the train stopped, they dropped us at the gates of the Flossenburg concentration camp, in Austria. This was a closed camp, lined with watch towers. It was obvious we couldn't get out of there alive, but it was a guest house in comparison to our last few weeks. We worked there for two months. We set up the fence, dealt with ammunition, helped lay roads and generally helped the Germans set up the camp. When we finished, the SS and their dogs arrived and we were treated like dirt again. Now we only received a little soup and some carrots.

The Germans were still abusing us, working to annihilate us, but the world was changing. The Germans had already begun retreating, the Russian front was coming closer and by the end of February 1945 we had left Flossenburg on the way to our next stop.

We marched for another three weeks. Three weeks that seemed like eternity. Three weeks that for many were the last three weeks of their lives. Hundreds fell by the wayside – hungry, sick, sapped of any strength at all. They didn't have to suffer by the side of the road though. The Nazis saved them from that.

Bergen-Belsen. The end of the journey.

It also seemed like the end of the journey I had begun way back in 1920. Death was everywhere. The Nazis didn't have time to wait until we died from everything they had done to us till then, so they began speeding up the process. Food rations ceased completely. The water faucets were shut off and rumors spread that the Nazis even planned to hand out pieces of bread containing chopped glass and to poison the water system, but they didn't manage to do that.

Next to us was a closed gypsy camp and one night we heard terrible cries from that direction. The entire camp was decimated in one night. The Nazis had killed them all.

The message was clear.

We were living on borrowed time.

I didn't accept that though. I repeatedly said I didn't want to die. Over the road from our hut was a German army kitchen. We didn't receive a thing to eat but every night we could smell the Germans' meat. While they were helping themselves from their huge pots, two soldiers were posted on either side, guns in hand.

If anyone dared approach the food, he was in danger of being shot.

But I didn't care about that.

I had nothing to lose.

I grabbed a pan, jumped between the two soldiers, reached the huge pot, snatched some food and ran.

Suddenly, I felt a terrible blow shatter my whole body. A German with a stick had hit me and opened up my skin. It was a hard and painful blow, but it didn't distract me from my goal. I still had the food. I hadn't dropped it, or given it to someone else or thrown it away. With a bloated, swollen neck, I held on to the food with all I had and ran.

The blow didn't bother me. Death didn't even bother me. There was only one thing on my mind – I couldn't die of starvation.

My technique improved over time. At nights I would cross over the road to the kitchen, with a little backpack I had prepared myself and tied under my stomach. Every two or three minutes a huge spotlight would light up the road. I studied the timing and as soon as it turned away, I opened the barbed wire fence and jumped into the ditch. Then I would wait until the spotlight passed again and jump to the other side, and so forth, until I reached the kitchen.

I would grab a piece of meat, put it in the backpack and return to camp. Other prisoners jumped on me and tried to snatch the meat but I lay on it and didn't give in. Once they had despaired and left, I returned to my eight friends, who had been with me in Bor, and we divided the meat between us. Only two of those eight survived the war. The others died from illness or starvation.

I would perform the same exercise twice a week and steal meat from the kitchen. I totally believe that was the only reason I was able to remain alive. Because apart from that meat we ate nothing but leaves.

I stopped stealing on April 13. I just couldn't get out of bed. I couldn't move. My whole right side was paralyzed.

On April 15, the British Army liberated the camp.

After the War

I lay there helpless. Bodies and quasi-bodies strewn around me. I noticed a British doctor coming towards me. He had a Star of David on his arm and asked me in German, "Why don't you get up and eat?" I pulled the blanket up and told him I couldn't move. "I'm dead on one side."

The doctor made sure they immediately moved me to the hospital. I was one of the first prisoners in Bergen-Belsen to go into hospital. I stayed for two days in the hospital in Lubeck and on April 17, they put me on a ship to Malmö, Sweden. I was 24 and a half and weighed 28 kg.

On the way to Sweden, a Malmö Rabbi asked me what language I spoke. I told him and he asked me in Hungarian how old I was. I told him I was almost 25. There was a group of about eight-ten other Jews there and I heard one of them whisper to his friend, "He's 25? You've got to be kidding! He must be crazy!"

They started to treat me in the hospital but very quickly told me I had no chance. "It's a disease we can't treat," they said. After about two weeks they transferred me from the Government Hospital in Malmö to another hospital in Kristianstad. There I received my first slice of white bread. I bit into it and all my top teeth and most of my bottom teeth fell out. No blood. No pain. I received very intensive treatment in that hospital – every two hours another injection on my paralyzed side.

On Pesach, I asked the doctors' permission to go to synagogue. They said I could on condition I go in a wheelchair accompanied by a nurse. I agreed and left but after a few minutes I felt pain and went back to the hospital. The pain was excruciating. I began to cry. It took me a while to realize the pain was actually a good sign. Blood was again flowing to my toes and they changed color. Two weeks earlier they'd wanted to amputate both hand and foot. I told them I wouldn't have it and if I had to die I would rather die.

Now the situation was completely different. I could walk again! There was nothing more miraculous!

But the story does not end there. All the fluids that had accumulated in my body had found their way into my lungs. They treated me for tuberculosis, but my health deteriorated so much that the doctors had to remove six liters of fluid from my lungs.

Once again they had saved my life.

Mena (arrowed) at the hospital in Malmö, Sweden

At the hospital

Next to the hut at the hospital

My time in Sweden was full of miracles. One of them was finding my sister, Sari, or really her finding me. She had already left Hungary in 1937 and travelled to London. After the war, she had feverishly gone searching all over the place for me and other family members and asked anyone who could to help her find our names. In the end she found us through the JDC (the Joint).

Sari knew the Hungarian Consul in Sweden from the time of his service in London, and through him sent a letter to me.

When I received that letter my joy knew no bounds. Another family revelation was to discover I had an uncle in Canada. He wrote to me, invited me to go there and even sent me an air ticket.

However, the most wonderful thing that happened in Sweden was meeting Rachel. I felt I had found my place in the world. I knew I would no longer be alone. Rachel refused to go anywhere other than Eretz Yisrael and under her influence I joined the Zionist movement and immigrated to Israel.

Rachel

Mena

Part 3: Together

Chapter 5: Our Own Family

A Swedish Wedding

A special, profound love blossomed between Mena and me. It was more than two survivors connecting with each other to dissipate the loneliness. It was a seamless bond.

On March 17, 1946, we – Mena and I and Agi and Miklos – were married in a double ceremony at the Great Synagogue in Stockholm. The local Jewish community organized the wedding and many of them came to rejoice with us. The Chief Rabbi of Stockholm conducted the ceremony and Maj Von Dardel (Raul Wallenberg's mother) was our maid of honor. A long article about us – two couples of Hungarian Holocaust survivors finding each other after the atrocities and now planning to build new lives – appeared in the local newspaper and generated great interest and emotion.

On the day of the wedding, Mena and Miklos had decided to surprise us by buying us cherries, but they mistakenly bought black olives instead. We all had a good laugh and the story became an inseparable part of our wedding memories.

We spent our 'honeymoon' in a hotel in Stockholm. Passers-by, Jews and non-Jews alike, recognized us from the article

and came over to congratulate us and hear more firsthand. We were embarrassed again and again, each time anew, and just wanted to get away from it all…

Mena and I at our wedding in Stockholm

Next to Rachel stands our maid of honor, Maj Von Dardel
(Raul Wallenberg's mother)

Agi and I

UNGERSKT DUBBELBRÖLLOP

Our wedding picture in a Swedish newspaper

I Guds namn!

Denna dag den första dagen i veckan, den 14 i månaden Adar sheni, i året 5706 efter världens skapelse, det är den 17 mars 1946 efter vanlig tidräkning, förenades med Guds bistånd i äktenskap här i Stockholm

Brudgummen Leszlo Weisz, f. 24/9 1920 och

Bruden Gabriella Flohr, f. 19/3 1923

Nämnde brudgum har därvid sagt till sin brud:

"Var min äkta hustru efter Moses och Israels lag; själv skall jag vara din trogne äkta man, skall jag akta och ära dig och mot dig uppfylla alla en äkta mans plikter".

Bruden har givit sitt bifall till att bliva hans äkta hustru, lovat honom tro och kärlek samt att mot honom uppfylla alla en judisk hustrus plikter.

Därefter hava parterna slutit sitt äkta förbund inför Gud i enlighet med den judiska religionens föreskrift.

Så är numera deras äktenskapsförbund stadfästat och helgat i Guds, den Heliges namn.

S. Brodetzki, Rabbin

Our wedding certificate

We knew we weren't going to stay in Sweden much longer, but we didn't leave right away. After the wedding we lived near Stockholm for a few months before traveling to Hungary to Mena's parents, who had survived a Nazi concentration camp in Austria, together with Sari and Enci. Ernő was killed by the Nazis in the Mauthausen concentration camp.

We stayed in Budapest for about a month and then – through the Maccabi HaTza'ir Movement – moved to a village near Szeged, where there was a Jewish orphanage for children who had survived the Holocaust. Mena was Purchasing Coordinator and also planted and nurtured a vegetable garden. I was a Madricha (looking after the children) and accompanied them to school every day.

We were eagerly waiting to make Aliyah to Eretz Yisrael.

Mena and I at the Hachshara in Szeged (one of the Hachshara members in the front row is holding Uri)

New Life

I became pregnant soon after the wedding. Two years earlier I had been on the verge of death and now I felt new life germinating within me. An indescribable feeling.

The actual birth was not so euphoric. I was in hospital in Szeged for two days. I clearly felt the birth pangs but nothing seemed to be happening. Other women came, gave birth, and left and I continued to lay there, tired and aching. Our private doctor came up to me and said, "Lady, we have no choice. It's going to have to be a Cesarean." I refused. I was convinced I wouldn't wake up if they anesthetized me.

"I've suffered till now. I'll suffer more," I told him.

Uri was born on October 8, 1947, weighing 4kg and 56cm tall! He was a big, beautiful and healthy baby, and shortly after he was born the doctor told me, "Mark my words, when your son grows up he'll be a mathematician or a musician."

I stayed in the maternity ward for 10 days. We had the Brit there and the doctor and our friends from the Hachshara came to celebrate with us.

I had become acquainted with Rachel's poetry[7] and loved it, so I knew what I was going to call my firstborn son. Mena agreed and we called him Uri. My Uri.

7 Rachel Bluwstein, Israeli poetess, 1890-1931. She wrote a song called "Barren," in which the narrator says she will name her son Uri. "My Uri" is a line in the song.

The Long Way Home

I returned to my role as Madricha in the orphanage. I now had one child of my own – a new life, unlimited potential – and many orphans, whose lives had blossomed long ago but the Holocaust had taken almost everything from them. It was our responsibility to make the remnants flower again.

We left Hungary, travelled with a group of orphans to a small town near Paris. I was still accompanying the kids back and forth from school and Mena was still buying all the produce and managing the kitchen.

Next stop was Marseilles, where we waited a few more weeks for the boat that would take us to Eretz Yisrael.

Mena and Uri in France, on the way to Israel

The day we had yearned for finally arrived. There were also Moroccan immigrants on the boat and that was the first time we had met Jews from North Africa, so different from the Jews we saw in Europe. The trip on the "Pan York" boat was unbearable. There was no sweet water, only salty water, which irritated Uri's skin and he became full of sores. Before we realized the cause, we thought he'd contracted scarlatina,[8] and we feared the contagious disease would make us leave the boat for fear of spreading the disease to the other passengers. The waters were choppy, it was very crowded and many of us came down with sea sickness. We sailed for six never-ending days until we finally reached Haifa Port in the midst of the War of Independence. Mishmar HaEmek was being bombed at that very time.

A member of Kibbutz Kfar HaHoresh was waiting for us at the port. The four of us got on a bus from the Checkpost near Haifa to Nahalal Junction. From there we decided to hitchhike (since there was no public transportation from Nahalal to the kibbutz). Finally an army jeep stopped for us and took us to our new lives in Kfar HaHoresh.

The orphans, who we brought with us, first went to Kibbutz Gan Shmuel and then to Kibbutz Matzuba.

8 Scarlet fever.

The dining room, Kfar HaHoresh

Chapter 6: On the Kibbutz

The First Days on Kfar HaHoresh

Upon our arrival at Kfar HaHoresh, we handed over all our money and all our belongings to the collective. I believed in the kibbutz lifestyle and the personal fulfillment it enabled. For me it was the Zionist realization, the realization of all the ideals I had believed in ever since I had joined the youth movement. It was the only solution for me after the Holocaust and my loss. I wanted to be the best kibbutznik possible from the very beginning.

But it wasn't easy being a kibbutznik. Certainly not in Kfar HaHoresh in 1948. The older members of the kibbutz – who had built it from scratch on the bare hills of Nazareth – were Polish immigrants. We were not supposed to have gone there – the members of our Hachshara group were slated to go to Kibbutz Tze'elim in the Negev, but Kfar HaHoresh was in decline at the time. Members were leaving and the kibbutz was falling apart. And the Kibbutz Movement had decided we were the most suitable group to rehabilitate and revive it.

When we arrived, members of our Hachshara group from Hungary were already there. We lived in a two-story house: a downstairs clinic and sewing room and an upstairs unit where we lived with two other families. Our Hachshara, which in Hungary had seemed like the real thing, now

looked like child's play… in our first days on the kibbutz we didn't even have running water and we had to bring water from the nearby well on a donkey. A generator, which was supposed to supply electricity, didn't have fuel in those days so it didn't work at all. We had to carry gasoline lamps at night.

Besides lack of water and electricity there was other infrastructure missing. The road to Nazareth, the nearest town, was closed, and there was hardly any food in the kibbutz. I was the Kitchen Manager from the very early days and I would wait for the Treasurer from Kibbutz Ginegar to supply us with Tlushei Mazon (food tabs) so we could receive our monthly rations. At the beginning we didn't yet have our own allocation so we needed the help of a neighboring kibbutz.

Thankfully, we had a good friend in Nazareth who was able to obtain a lot of stuff for us. Without him, we would have hardly had anything to eat. In my position, I would have to get up every morning at four and rush to the kitchen. I would heat the water and cook soup on kerosene burners and Primus stoves. We didn't have gas. All of us shared the little food we had equally, although I added butter and jam for pregnant women and served it to them in small bowls.

If I hadn't believed in our path with all my heart and soul, I don't know if I would have held out, but I was very idealistic. I knew this was the right way, and this was the only way we would stamp our authority on the land so obviously ours.

I was an enthusiastic kibbutznik – everything was cool and I never complained about anything, even when life became really complicated…

There was a heavy snowfall in one of the first winters (1950). To reach our room, we had to climb a ladder to the second floor. One snowy day, the ladder broke when we got to the top and we couldn't go back down. I sat there, helpless, unable to go to work and unable to tell anybody. Back then, the only channels of communication were our legs and mouths…

The founding members of Kfar HaHoresh
(Rachel and Mena to the right of the pole)

Kibbutz Children

When we arrived at the kibbutz, Uri was still sick and had to be in isolation at home, to prevent the other kids from catching his disease. In those days (and for several decades afterward) the custom was that children didn't sleep with their parents. They slept in the children's house, where they enjoyed the best living conditions for their growth. The kibbutz ideals included educating the kids from the start to share everything and to live a communal life. And so, once Uri got better, we had to move him to the children's house. It was a painful separation for the three of us.

One night, when Uri was about 18 months old, he cried so much that the babysitter brought him to our room, a little space with a wide bed my aunt had given us. As soon as he saw us he jumped with joy and lay between us. I was afraid Uri would get used to the idea and refuse to sleep in the children's house. I was concerned what people would say. I was so hysterical in fact that I told Mena we had to take him back to the children's house, because they could throw us out for breaking the kibbutz rules. So we got up in the middle of the night, returned Uri and slept by his bed till morning!

Next to the old dining room

Me and Uri, Kfar HaHoresh

Four years after Uri was born, Yehudit arrived. I was over the moon, overjoyed. We named her after my late sister, my wonderful sister Judith… in whose merit I am convinced I survived… while she didn't. Our Yehudit was a beautiful baby and there was always a happy atmosphere when she was around.

Mena and Yehudit, Kfar HaHoresh

Mena, Uri and I, Kfar HaHoresh

A Man of Work

For 67 years, Mena's humble, solid, earthly persona accompanied the kibbutz. From its early days – when we had all arrived to save it from collapse – through to the last year of his life. Mena was known as a Man of Work. He worked for more than 20 years in the kibbutz orchards, where he would tend the trees before they produced fruit, manage the harvests and organize the workers. At the harvest stage, he would already move to the packaging house.

We had groves of apples, apricots, pears and plums. Each fruit needed its own special care and each had its own particular timing. Mena was in full control of when and how and never missed a thing. He worked with many workers and always got along with them.

For many years Mena managed the kibbutz children's petting corner. He also planted a vegetable garden, worked with the children there and showed them how they could sell their produce. Mena also worked in the bakery in Upper Nazareth, and when Kfar HaHoresh moved the large bakery back to the kibbutz, he came back to work there for many years. He prepared challot, rolls and other breads and was an outstanding caretaker of the gardens around the bakery. At 80 years old, Mena planted a rose garden in the center of the kibbutz and set up a greenhouse growing almost every possible plant.

Mena stood out in the kibbutz due to one central characteristic. Humility. He personified and exemplified in his lifetime the

values of physical labor, abiding by Gordon's[9] principles, although I'm sure he never studied them in any formal way. Once, a kibbutz woman showed Mena's tough, corned hands to the kibbutz children and told them, "These should be a model for you."

Mena would get up very early for work, sometimes even at three in the morning. His work day was long and hard, but he always found the time and energy for me and the children. When I worked as a Madricha in young kibbutzim and only came home twice a week, Mena looked after Uri and Yehudit. He was a dedicated father and devoted family man, and he loved children. So much so that when one of the kibbutz children's parents were serving the Kibbutz Movement abroad – and the kid needed a home, some love and fatherly warmth – Mena knew what to do, even scolding lovingly, as if he was his very own son. Children on the kibbutz were constantly flocking to Mena like bees to flowers.

His life overflowed with love and fulfillment. Perhaps because of that, perhaps because he was so sure of himself and of his principles, he gave me so much praise and support. When I worked away from home he always encouraged and supported me. He understood the importance of what I was doing and valued me for it.

Mena was a full partner in my life.

9 A.D. Gordon, 1856-1922. One of the founding fathers of Labor Zionism.

The years in which Mena had helped his father's chicken business back in Budapest had trained him to become a skilled businessman. In the kibbutz he combined his love of children, business skills and working the land.

Mena had very broad interests. He loved animals, enjoyed reading and was an avid movie freak. He knew the names of all the plants and would take the children to the nearby forest and teach them how to distinguish between the various trees and flowers. He also planted and cultivated a little cactus garden outside our house.

Mena worked as long as he was able. It was only when his eyes rebelled against him, at age 91, that he lay down his secateurs, the pruning shears that had served him for more than 60 years.

Mena gardening, his most enjoyable pastime

Mena's mother with her three children in Kfar HaHoresh

Mena with his two sisters

Yehudit, Uri and Mena with an injured
fawn in the fields of Kfar HaHoresh

Mena with an aquarium he built

No Resting on Laurels

I made my career in the kibbutz kitchen. At first I worked in the children's kitchen, which was separate from the main one. Over time, the kibbutz members understood I was a good cook and they moved me to the big kitchen, and even elected me Kitchen Manager, a role I fulfilled for several years.

The first thing I did was to buy oilcloth tablecloths for the wooden tables. Avraham Hartzfeld, one of the leaders of the Labor Party and one of the public figures most active in establishing settlements all over Israel, approved the purchase. Later I was able to receive preserves from the army, since there were no raw materials for cooking then, so I made up menus and soups from those tins.

With Naomi Gardi in the kibbutz kitchen

I initiated many other things too. Jewish values were sacred to me and a warm memory from home, and it was important to me to bring them to the kibbutz. Thankfully, my position allowed me to integrate these traditions and so I started candle lighting on Friday nights, and a festive meal. In the early days many kibbutz members fasted on Yom Kippur and everyone came to a makeshift synagogue to hear the shofar at the end of the holy day.

When fasting members arrived at the dining room after the fast, we would hand out yeast cake and little cups of drink. The food was already waiting, the table was set and the meal always began with some good wholesome soup. This tradition I initiated remains a kibbutz custom till this day.

Celebrating Shabbat in the kibbutz, before Yehudit's Bat Mitzvah

It wasn't only Judaism and festivals that occupied my mind. It was important to me that the kibbutz children ate well, and they should also have proper provisions whenever they left the kibbutz on hikes. The kids from other kibbutzim in our children's classes always talked about how they envied Kfar HaHoresh children because I had supplied them with special meals for their trips and excursions. I loved what I did and it was very fulfilling. I was also interested in many topics such as: Judaism, Women's Studies, Home Economics, and took every opportunity to learn, attending many lectures and conventions. This way I expanded my knowledge and skills.

As time passed, the kibbutz gave me more responsibilities and also put me in charge of events, celebrations and purchasing. I made a point of doing everything as best as I could, and I would even travel to Tnuva (the produce supply center) in Afula myself to choose the products and make sure they were giving us the best. I would also go to Mashbir,[10] and managed the storeroom we had near there. I worked hard and gave my all, even though I was never 100% healthy following my experiences in the war.

I later gained a reputation outside the kibbutz as well. Drivers who worked for the Kibbutz Movement, driving from kibbutz to kibbutz, would arrange their schedules to make sure they would be in Kfar HaHoresh for lunch in Rachel's kitchen.

10 Now a large department store chain but the original HaMashbir was set up as a consumer cooperative, with the goal of supplying the Jewish communities of Palestine with food at affordable prices during the terrible years of shortage in the First World War.

Eventually someone contacted the kibbutz secretariat and asked if they could let me come and teach young kibbutzim about efficient kitchen management. The first kibbutz I trained was Kibbutz Bachan (then on the border with Jordan), most of whose members were Argentinian immigrants. First I bought oilcloth, which served as tablecloths. I took all the preserves they had received from the army and taught them how to put a proper daily menu together containing all the major food groups. I also placed great importance on cleanliness and hygiene. I taught them to cook and was in charge of buying them pots, pans and other kitchen equipment.

There was a war going on in Israel then and I spent many hours with the Bachan members in the shelters. After the Six-Day War, I trained many other kibbutzim – Sha'ar HaNegev, Brur Chayil, Nir Am, Mefalssim, and others. I would stay for about six months in each kibbutz at the beginning and then visit every so often to see how they were doing.

They also appointed me Coordinator of the Joint Committee, the Inter-kibbutz Kitchen Committee. The committee's role was to set up kitchens in kibbutzim, purchase equipment, teach cooking and guide kibbutz members how to manage a kitchen. I arranged kibbutz visits, and after we had identified problems – social and otherwise – we sat with the locals and offered solutions. There were places we had to arrange mediation sessions between members and solve social conflicts before we could talk to them about making their kitchens more efficient. I did all that too.

Over the years I also taught Home Economics in the regional school in Kibbutz Gvat, I was Kitchen Manager at the Oranim Seminar for a few years and then returned to the kibbutz until I retired.

Kibbutz activities

Do Not Cast Us [into Old Age…][11]

I had an important position in my kibbutz and in the Kibbutz

Movement as a whole. I enjoyed what I did and the important contribution I made to many other kibbutzim at the start of their existence.

But it wasn't enough for me.

Apart from the need to settle the Land and make it blossom, I also felt a desire to give elderly Holocaust survivors what I couldn't give to my own parents. So along with everything else I was doing, the most meaningful thing I did – and what gave me the most satisfaction – was looking after parents of friends in Kfar HaHoresh. I did that entirely in memory of my parents. I couldn't pay them back for all the good they had given me in my childhood, and so I cared for, listened and loved my friends' parents, with whom I had lived all my adult life in Israel.

This was a very serious, responsible job and thankfully I was able to acquire tools and training in the field. The kibbutz sent me on a six-month course in Tel Aviv to learn how to care for the elderly.

I helped the elderly on the kibbutz as a volunteer for many years. I also arranged events and activities for them. I invited them to the kibbutz clubhouse and made sure these meetings were full of content. I also organized birthday parties for

11 *Psalms 71:9.*

the elderly members, and their friends would come from the surrounding areas as well.

I would visit the needy elderly members every day, sit and talk with them, care for them where necessary. Those who needed more professional care moved to the Old Age Home in Afula. And I would go there every week to visit them, taking them out in their wheelchairs for a stroll and chatting with them. I always did this with all my heart, because it was so important to me.

So much so, that all this work with Holocaust survivors makes me look back on my life with satisfaction, feeling I have done something useful. To my great joy, Mena was a full partner in these activities, always encouraging and supporting me.

Body and Soul

Kibbutz life was hard, especially in those early days. We were all busy with our daily problems – mainly food and where our next meal would come from – but we didn't forego parties and dancing and song. From the get-go, we invested in the spirit, not only the body. One of the ways we did this was to establish a choir. This was something we initiated very early on and we would meet once a week to sing. At some stage, at the end of the 50s, I joined the Ichud Choir (the choir of the United Kibbutz Movement). Yehuda Sharett and Nitza Shur were our first conductors, and later

Avner Itai and Yael Tavori. I loved to sing. I had been a good singer from childhood and so I enjoyed the choir for many long and wonderful years.

The Ichud Choir was very successful. We appeared in concerts around the country, performed with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and the Kibbutz Orchestra, and even performed overseas three times. Of course, this was a hobby, and in between my choral activities I still fulfilled all of my duties at the kibbutz.

Mena and I on Purim

Planting trees on Tu Bishvat

Purim in Kfar HaHoresh

With another kibbutz member on Purim

A celebration in the kibbutz dining room

Chapter 7:
The Few that Hold the Many

Endless Love

The love that blossomed between Mena and I – two sick and scarred Holocaust survivors, in Sweden, when we were all alone in the world, when everything we had had been lost, risen in smoke to the heavens – was true love. Eternal love that grew and became stronger over time, filled our hearts and bolstered our lives.

We addressed each other with great affection. Every morning, after barely opening his eyes, the first thing Mena did was to kiss me. Only after that could he start his day. And every night, the last thing before we fell asleep was the "retaliatory" kiss, from me to him. In between those two kisses, many long days passed – sometimes straightforward, sometimes complicated, but always with confidence and security. In spite of life's troubles and hardships, the foundations were there. We had a safe place to leave from and a safe place to return to.

Mena always used to say to me that he only asks one thing from God: that I shouldn't leave him alone. Mena asked to die peacefully. He asked to go to sleep at night and not wake up. God listened to his request.

Mena was a man with a big heart and extraordinarily devoted. Devoted to the kibbutz and his friends. Devoted to our children and grandchildren. Devoted to me. He was a good man and not a day goes by without me feeling his absence.

After his passing, Uri transferred the cactus garden Mena had planted in our yard to the cemetery, setting it around his grave, and there will soon be a sign in his memory placed near the rose garden he planted and cared for near the kibbutz entrance.

The Next Generation

I really enjoyed raising my children. Although Uri and Yehudit grew up in the children's house, and spent most of their time with the rest of the kibbutz children, we all derived tremendous pleasure from our time together.

I always loved music. I love classical music – mainly Mozart and Beethoven – and Jewish music as well. I always looked for any opportunity to sing, and of course there were many such moments, especially in the Ichud Choir.

I was especially excited when I discovered my Uri was a very musical child, just as the doctor had prophesized the day he was born. Already as an elementary school kid, Uri would sit and compose tunes for the recorder. I think it was then I sensed he had an extraordinary musical talent, and his music teacher also felt it. There was no real importance given to music on the kibbutz. The children were expected to participate in agricultural work as soon as they could. But I couldn't just let this go so I fought for the chance to let him focus on music and when Uri was 14, he began studying the cello.

I would take Uri with me whenever we went to weekend Ichud Choir conventions in various kibbutzim. I wanted to keep him in a musical environment as much as I could. To help him grow and improve more and more – his hearing, tastes and musicianship. Uri continued to nurture his unique talent. He began cello with a teacher in Haifa, and after three years moved to study with Uzi Wiesel in Tel Aviv. He would

go there after his regular studies. Mena and I supported him in every way we could, and he received further support, on a regular basis, from the Sharett Scholarships Program of the America-Israel Cultural Foundation. As he grew older, Uri continued with his music. He studied within the framework of the Atuda[12] in Tel Aviv University's Academy of Music, and began to teach children too.

His talent was not reserved for the kibbutz, and it wasn't only us and his teachers who enjoyed his playing. Uri often flew abroad with the Israel Ensemble (later the Israel Chamber Orchestra) and played to a variety of audiences. At some stage he went to continue his studies in the United States, as a student of the famous cellist and pedagogue János Starker. He needed $1,000 to help him fund those studies, which we didn't have and we didn't know where to look either. In the end, I asked a distant relative of mine in Brazil for a loan. He agreed and Uri eventually paid him back. Uri later completed his Masters at Yale University where he studied cello with Aldo Parisot.

In 1974, Uri married Hagit, from Kibbutz Alonim (a poet, musician and a Feldenkrais practitioner), now mother to my three older grandchildren. Today Uri is a Professor of Cello at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

One of the most emotional stories of my life is the story of my violin. The very violin my aunt bought me as child,

12 An IDF academic program that allows soldiers to study before their military service.

but that I never really played too much. During the war, my mother deposited the violin in the hands of a non-Jewish neighbor. This neighbor, a good woman, kept it for us, and the violin arrived in Israel with Mena's mother, and his two sisters (Sari and Enci) who emigrated from Hungary to Israel in 1957.

However, because the kibbutz was a collective, I had to share the instrument. One of the kibbutz children was lucky enough to use it. Sadly, in the War of Attrition, that violinist fell in battle, and the violin remained with his family for many years. When Uri's son married a violinist, we thought she would appreciate it. The fallen violinist's family returned the violin to me and I was thrilled to have it back in my hands. Just seeing it was enough to send me back to the sights, sounds and smells of my childhood, and everything I had been through since. This violin carried memories from my father, my mother, my studies… and so, in the end, I decided to give the violin and its story to The Memorial Museum of Hungarian-Speaking Jewry in Tzfat, where many more generations can learn from it and what it represents.

From the day Yehudit was born, it was pure pleasure for us all. She was a well-behaved little girl, a good student and very sociable. After she completed her studies on the kibbutz, she enlisted in the army and served in a combat unit in the south. She knew we were concerned about her, and did her best not to worry us. Once she dehydrated and was taken to hospital. She only told us afterwards, when it was all over and she felt better again.

After the army, Yehudit stayed on the kibbutz for a year and worked in the dining room, but she knew she didn't want to stay. They asked her to become an official member, and they agreed to fund her studies, on condition her salary later would go to the kibbutz. She moved to Central Israel, found work at Ikapharm, a drugs company, and studied to become a laboratory technician in the evenings.

She didn't have it easy and it was hard for us to support her financially. Despite the challenges and her young age, Yehudit displayed admirable independence and determination. She completed her studies as a Chemistry Technician with great success. She worked in the field for a few years – at the Volcani Institute, at Israel Aerospace Industries, and in a food laboratory.

At some stage, she decided to switch direction and turned to Dental Hygiene, so she began studying at Tel Aviv University. Again she finished with honors and has since worked as a dental hygienist for many years. Dedicated to her work and well-liked and respected by her patients. Now living in Givatayim, she has a charming and talented son called Gal.[13]

[13] *Born in 1997.*

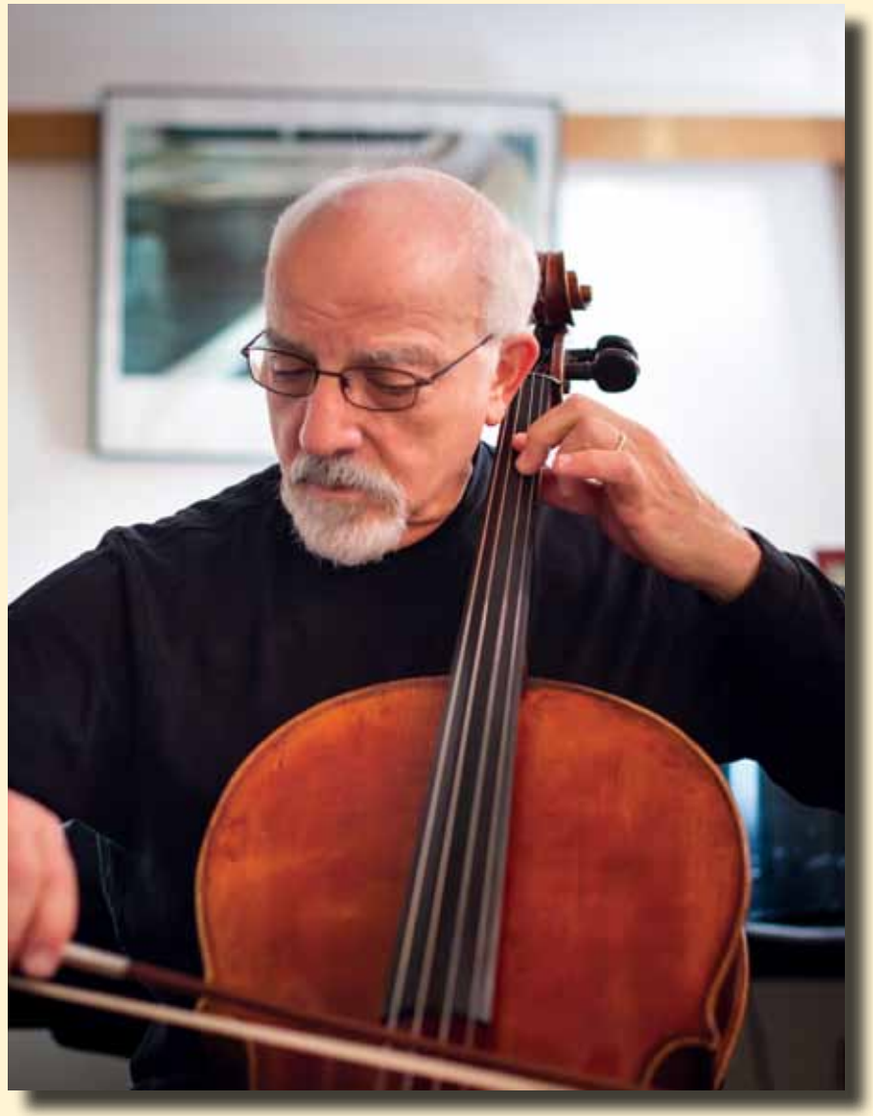
-

Uri, me, Mena and Yehudit in Kfar HaHoresh

Mena, Yehudit, me, Uri, Emmi (Ernő's daughter),
Enci, Irma (Mena's mother)

Mena and I with Yehudit

Yehudit



Uri

From Generation to Generation

All my grandchildren are very special individuals. Orit[14] will finish studying six years of Naturopathic Medicine and Acupuncture in June 2016, and is married to Brian. Amitai[15] is a talented clarinetist, a Clarinet Professor at Kent State University, Ohio and a member of orchestras, a soloist and a chamber musician. He is married to Diana. Shira[16] is a clinical social worker, teaching at a university in Chicago, caring for individuals and groups, and is married to Eric. Gal finished his high school in Givatayim and is destined to serve in the IDF. He is a computer hardware maven and puts computers together by himself. He is a very sensitive, value-oriented child. I have a very special relationship with all my grandchildren. They are so devoted it is hard to believe there are still grandchildren like this in the world! My grandchildren are the greatest gift God has given me. Mena also loved them deeply and was so proud of them and their achievements. The love is mutual.

Every evening, before I go to sleep, I remember all those who are dear to me. This is the best possible therapy. I lie with my eyes closed, talking to God, recalling my family one by one and the joy they bring to my life. I do my breathing exercises and fall asleep. This gives me a lot of strength.

14 Born in 1985.

15 Born in 1977.

16 Born in 1979.

Uri and his musical family before a family concert

Amitai and Diana's wedding

Orit and Brian

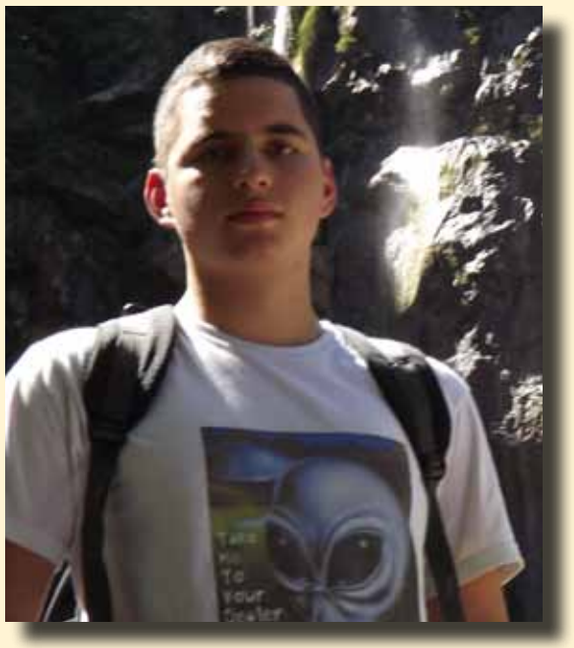
Shira and Eric's wedding

From left: Amitai, Shira, Hagit, Orit and Uri

From left: Amitai, Hagit, Orit, Uri and Shira at the Banias Reserves

Yehudit and Gal

Gal



Chapter 8: The Circles Close

In 2006, Mena and I, Uri, Yehudit our grandchildren went on a heritage trip to Hungary. We went to visit our childhood homes for the very last time. The places we grew up and studied in, and from which we never had the chance to say goodbye. To profoundly understand the relevance they held in our lives and what influence they had upon us.

We rented a minibus with a Hungarian driver and travelled to the places and slivers of memories that had shaped our lives.

The first stop was Olaszliszka, my birthplace. Olaszliszka which is very close to Tokaj, famous for its wines, where my grandfather also had vineyards.

We went to see my grandparents' house and then my parents'. The last time I had been there was just before we were taken to the ghetto, so it was quite an emotional moment and I couldn't hold back the tears. Sadness for my beloved parents – for all that had been and gone so fast – mixed with joy at the merit I had to visit these places with my children and grandchildren and tell them about my parents on the very earth they walked.

We also visited the school I studied in as a girl, the remains of the synagogue, and we stood at the spot where the Jews had been taken to Auschwitz.

We then went to the cemetery and saw the graves of my grandmother and grandfather. Again I was aflood with tears. My grandfather was a Kohen, and a priestly symbol (outstretched hands) had been engraved on his tombstone.

My grandparents were fortunate to have merited something my parents and my sister did not – a grave of their own. Their last place of rest marked by a tombstone bearing their names. A memorial. A memorial they so deserved. A place that arouses all the memories of their lives. The memory of the welcoming, generous home my grandmother managed with such wisdom.

The visit to Budapest was also extremely moving. Mena grew up in Budapest in Wekerletelep, the rail workers' neighborhood in Kispest. The current occupants of his family home told him that when they were kids and playing in the attic, they once discovered the name Weisz scratched on one of the ceiling beams. Weisz had been Mena's family name.

Mena was also moved by our visit to the Great Synagogue on Dohany Street, especially when we sat in the seat his father had sat in for many hours during the High Holidays of Mena's childhood and youth. The visit to his father's grave was also very emotional.

I was excited to visit the Movement's house in Buda, where I had spent so many hours in my youth, charging the Zionism that was to be my guiding light from then on.

Szeged was another stop on our trip. Mena had worked

near there when he was taken to a Hungarian Army Labor Brigade, and both of us had returned there after the war when we joined the Hachshara group prior to our Aliyah. We visited the Hachshara grounds and Mena even recognized the fruit trees he had planted. We also passed by the hospital where Uri was born.

Not far from Szeged is the village of Kistelek, where Mena's parents lived after they left Budapest.

During the trip we met Agi, my best friend since our liberation from Bergen-Belsen, and the renewed encounter was very moving and joyful. Agi even joined us for a few days. She was a splendid hostess and served us traditional Hungarian delicacies.

Afterword

Every year, on the eve of Holocaust Day, I fondly remember all my loved ones who perished in Europe during the terrible war the Nazis fought against the world in general and against the Jewish people in particular.

We have a very special ceremony in the kibbutz. Pictures of the deceased are placed in the community hall with a memorial candle by their side. Everyone goes to the picture of their particular relative and lights the candle. In 2015, my children and grandchildren attended the ceremony a few days after Mena's passing on April 9. We walked to the pictures together and lit the candles. We then sat and talked

With Mena, next to his father's grave in Hungary

Mena's father's tombstone at the Jewish cemetery in Budapest

about the past, the fond memories and the harsh moments. I felt enveloped with love and warmth.

At that same ceremony, I read out the names of my family in front of the large audience. The most difficult moment is always when I reach my sister's name and recall that awful morning she just didn't wake up. That was and has always been the most difficult moment in my life. But I gather the courage to do this year after year, again and again, from my children and grandchildren, standing by my side, encouraging me and telling me how proud they are of me.

I have a wonderful family who give me the strength to keep on going.

***

We wanted to write this book, to tell the story of our family, so it wouldn't be forgotten. So that future generations – our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and beyond, will know where they came from and will remember our family's precious legacy.

Lastly, my beloved ones: know that life is beautiful and worth fighting for. We have a loving, wonderful family, and it is important to keep it that way. Remember there is a Heavenly Force that directs our lives and answers our prayers, even if we can't always see it. Relish the good things you have and accept the challenges with love. Be good, humble, and rejoice in what you have.