



MARCH TO FREEDOM

A MEMOIR OF THE HOLOCAUST

Edith Singer

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Santa Clarita, California

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*In memory of my father, Shabtai Slomovits
and my brother Ya'akov (Yanku)*

*This book is dedicated to my daughters Ester and Shula,
their children Yael, Yishai, Eve, and Yoni,
and to all my students who asked the questions.*

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Prologue

This book is about how we lived, not how we died.

When I was a little girl and went to Hebrew school and studied the *Bible*, I learned about history and all kinds of miracles like the parting of the Red Sea. As a child, I wondered, how could the miracles be true? I couldn't believe them, but today, if you look at me, I am one of the real miracles: I was condemned to die because I was born Jewish, but I am alive and able to share my experiences.

When I was liberated by the Russian Army on May 8, 1945 in a small German village, I promised myself that I would not talk or think about concentration camps ever again. I knew I would never forget what happened, but I wanted to push those memories out of the new life I would try to build.

Years later, I became a Hebrew school teacher. One day, an eight-year-old student wanted to know what the tattoo on my

arm was. “Is that your phone number?” he asked. The question upset me, but I decided, at that moment, that I could no longer hide from or pretend to forget about my past. I felt obligated to educate the new generation about the Holocaust. In the 1960s I started to talk to students from different kinds of schools—Jewish schools, Catholic schools, public schools, and colleges. Every time I prepared to speak to a group, I felt anxious and depressed.

“Again, I must tell my story. Why am I doing this?” I always asked myself. But I had made a promise to go, so I went. When I saw the reactions of the students, I knew I was doing the right thing. I felt I had taught them a very important lesson, and, at the same time, I was showing my father and brother that I had not forgotten them.

As the years passed, fewer and fewer survivors remained. I realized that my stories must live on after me, so I began to write them down. My family inspired and encouraged me.

It was not easy. Every story took me back to Auschwitz and Taucha.¹ After completing each story, I stopped for a few months until I could write again.

One day, I looked over a previously written story and discovered that I had written down details I thought I had forgotten. By writing down my experiences, I let go of some of the painful memories.

I hope that the readers of this book will gain a better understanding of the Holocaust and will unite in the struggle against evil so that it may never happen again.

1. A labor camp, not to be confused with Dachau, the death camp.

Before The War



Edith, 1940



Lilly, Frieda, Yanku, Shabtai, and Edith, 1933



Chust, Main Street

1 The Ghetto in Chust

I was born in Chust, Czechoslovakia between the two world wars on August 18, 1927. Chust was a small town of 20,000 gentiles and 5,000 Jews.

My parents raised three children in a religious home. The most important thing in the family was the education of the children. My father worked in the lumber business, and we lived a comfortable, middle-class life in a three-bedroom home. When my parents were born at the beginning of the century, Chust was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, so they spoke Hungarian and German, and taught us, too. After World War I, our part of Hungary became Czechoslovakia, so at school we spoke Czech. With my mother, I spoke Hungarian, and with my father, I spoke Yiddish. A large percentage of the European Jews spoke Yiddish, so later when I met Jews in camps from other countries, we could communicate in Yiddish or one of the other languages that I knew.

As far as I can go back in my memory, I always heard adults talking about the War (WWI), and every conversation ended with, “Will there be another?” I also heard the name Hitler before

I could understand the meaning of it. When I was fourteen years old, I dreamed that Hitler came into our little town and into our house and started a fire.

My earliest memories of public school were associated with anti-Semitism; the non-Jewish students and teachers did not hide their prejudice. Even in kindergarten, the teachers forced the Jewish children to sit at separate tables at the back of the room.

One day, I came to school with a bad case of laryngitis. As soon as the music teacher realized that I was hoarse, she called on me to sing a solo. I pleaded with her to excuse me, but she insisted that I stand in front of the class and sing, humiliating me to the point of tears. The entire class laughed and teased me. Another teacher ruined my straight-*A* report card by giving me an undeserved *B* in sewing.

I remember only one teacher, Miss Pearl, an older woman, who was kind to the Jewish children. She stopped her regular lesson to lecture the class about the evils of prejudice. But this did not help because the next day the teasing, the name-calling, and the beatings in the school yard continued. Whenever we were hurt, we went to Miss Pearl, and she comforted us; we loved her for her kindness during this difficult time.

In September 1939, World War II broke out, and Hitler gave our part of Czechoslovakia, known as Carpathian Rus, back to Hungary. Overnight, without moving, we found ourselves in Hungary. The language of instruction in my school changed from Czech to Hungarian. This was not a major problem for the children because we learned fast.

With the Hungarian occupation our lives changed completely; the government enacted all types of anti-Semitic laws. Our lives became increasingly difficult. At first, government leaders fired all Jews in public office.

Every few weeks leaders announced new restrictions. We had to bring all our radios, bicycles, sewing machines, and any

other machines that had any value to City Hall. City officials distributed all these items among the non-Jewish population of Chust.

The biggest blow came when one day they said, “Any Jew who has any kind of business, bring the keys to City Hall.” City officials took the keys, and non-Jews lined up from our home town—people with whom I, my parents, and probably my grandparents grew up for generations—to take the keys. They had already picked out which stores they wanted. These people moved into these private businesses full of merchandise without paying a penny.

Perhaps because we lived two houses back from the street, in an alley, we managed to hide our radio. At night, some of our Jewish neighbors used to come over, and we closed all the doors, windows, and curtains, and tried to listen to the London broadcast. We were hoping that the Hungarian news was not true. If the news was good, we believed it. If it was bad, we told ourselves it must be German propaganda.

The Hungarians expelled to Poland some Jews who did not have Hungarian citizenship papers. A few managed to sneak back to our town and told us what was happening there: the Nazis forced Jews to dig their own mass graves and then shot them. The Nazis set up camps surrounded by electrified wires. I did not believe this was true and would not accept that this could happen to our family. I always ran to another room because I didn’t want to hear those stories. I thought, if I don’t hear them, I won’t know them. It cannot happen to me. But the news worried and scared my parents.

Administrators allowed my class to complete junior high school; however, they would not allow all the other Jewish students who were one class level below me to attend public school anymore. The Czechs built a very large high school called Gymnasium. All the children from the surrounding villages used to come and study there. Even though we knew that they wouldn’t

accept me, my mother took me to the principal and showed him my report card when I finished junior high school. He stared at the report card and then looked at me. He told Mother, "I would love to have her in my school, but I cannot take her because she is Jewish." Parents set up private schools in their homes so that their children could continue their studies; this was happening until 1944.

Outside of school, life was hard too. We never knew what would happen next. The anti-Semites preyed upon every Jewish man, woman, and child.

The Hungarian army drafted Jewish young men at 21, but not in the regular way. The army took them away in the middle of the night, during weddings, etc. The young men did not report for duty; the army came and got them. Also, the Hungarian army did not draft them to the regular army: they drafted the Jewish men to labor camps. The Jews had to wear their own clothing and a yellow arm band. Once the army took them away, they were not allowed to write home. We didn't know where they were, what they were doing, or who was alive. We had no communication with them. We had to wait until the war ended to see who survived.

One day, my father came home with his beard shaved off. For the first time in my life, I saw my father without his beard, which he wore for religious reasons. When we asked him what happened, he told us that a Hungarian soldier grabbed him on the street, took him to a barber shop, and ordered the barber, "Shave the beard off this Jew!"

Often, on a train or bus, a non-Jew would demand that a Jew give up his or her seat or move to the last compartment. Many times a drunk who needed money would grab a Jew on the street, take him to the police station, and lie to an officer saying, "This Jew took my money!" The police officer would order the Jew to give the drunkard all the money he had. The innocent man was then beaten and thrown into jail for a few days without even being questioned.

All these experiences made our lives difficult, but we were

still together in our homes, and we were not hungry. These hardships went on until March 21, 1944. I was sixteen years old.

By 1944, the world knew that the Germans were losing the war. It was only a question of time, and we were hoping and praying that we would be able to stay home until the war ended.

One morning, we woke up and realized that the German army had occupied all of Hungary. At that point, our lives changed rapidly from bad to tragic.

On the second day of occupation, the Germans arrested all the Jewish leaders—doctors, lawyers, and rabbis. Some non-Jews who knew the Jewish population of Chust collaborated with the Nazis to prepare this list of leaders. The government ordered us to sew yellow stars to the clothing on our chests, and they enforced a curfew from dusk to dawn on the Jewish population. Officials rationed food only for the Jews and forbade Kosher meat. These orders came so fast that we had no time to grasp what was happening; we had no leaders to whom we could turn.

Whatever the Germans did in other occupied countries over the course of several years, they accomplished in Hungary in just a few weeks. Hitler placed Adolph Eichmann in charge of the Hungarian Jews, and Eichmann wanted to liquidate the Jews quickly because he knew the war would not last forever. After only one month of the German occupation, they told us to take whatever we could fit on a horse-drawn wagon and go to the ghetto. We put mattresses, clothing, food, dishes, pictures, books, valuables—whatever we thought was most important—on the wagon. We struggled to assemble one cartload from a lifetime of belongings. My father did not even lock the door behind us. He knew that our non-Jewish neighbors would loot everything.

The ghetto in Chust consisted of a few blocks of homes, about a square mile, enclosed by a high, barbed-wire fence. Five thousand Jews were forced to live in this small area.

The Nazis assigned my family to a house that belonged to one of our cousins, an average, three-bedroom house; more than fifty people lived in this house. My parents, Frieda and Shabtai, both forty-three; my twenty-year-old sister, Lilly; my eighteen-

year-old brother, Yanku, and I were in one small room with two additional families—fourteen people in all. Every family had its own corner for their belongings.

We brought our mattresses from home and spread them out on the floor at night. All three families slept one next to the other. During the day, we piled the mattresses up in a corner so that we could move around in the room and get to our suitcases. When we wanted to change clothes, we held up a make-shift curtain for privacy. But, our family was still together, and we were not yet hungry.

We brought all of our food from home, which lasted for the four weeks we were in the ghetto. We did not have to depend on the meager rations the Germans provided. The Mothers alternated cooking and even competed with each other over who could make a better meal. We ate together, and after the meals the girls washed the dishes. It didn't occur to us that boys could wash dishes too (but now my husband washes a lot of dishes).

Often, the adults fought with each other over trivial things. Everyone's nerves were on edge.

When the Germans were not around, the adults gathered the children in one of the rooms and taught them whatever they could: a doctor taught biology, an engineer taught math, a rabbi taught Hebrew. They wanted their children to go on with their schooling.

The older boys tried to learn some self-defense tactics to protect themselves against confrontations with the Nazis. My brother Yanku, among others, led this group. Whatever he knew or read about in books, he taught to the younger boys. They did not know that they would never have a chance to protect themselves against what the Germans had planned for them.

Every morning, officers from the Gestapo¹ came to the ghetto. When they arrived, everybody immediately busied him- or herself; we grabbed a broom and swept our rooms or the yard

1. The German secret state police.

outside. We had to show them that we worked.

Each time the Gestapo came, all the men had to line up. We feared the Gestapo because we never knew what they wanted. Usually, they picked a group of young men and took them to work somewhere outside the city, bringing them back late in the evening.

One day, the Gestapo picked Yanku to go to work. My father did not talk the whole day; he paced back and forth from our cramped room to the gate of the ghetto. It became dark, and Yanku was not back yet. That day the first rumors of taking us “away” surfaced, fueling my father’s panic. Finally, the group of young men returned to the ghetto. My father saw Yanku, ran to him, and burst out crying. I had never seen my father cry before this. Later, he told my mother that he was afraid Yanku would not return in time to be with us when we were taken away from the ghetto.

In the beginning of May 1944, four weeks after we had arrived in the ghetto, the Gestapo told us, “Get ready. In two days, we will relocate you for work.” When they said “relocate you for work,” they included older people, disabled people, little children, babies, pregnant women, everybody. They told us that we could take with us only what we could carry in our hands and on our backs and march to the train station, so we had to decide again what to pick, from the few belongings that we brought from home, to take with us in suitcases and knapsacks. Of course, the young Mothers with children couldn’t carry anything because they carried their babies, or their children held on to their skirts. We tried to figure out what to take. We put on two sweaters, or two sets of socks, or two sets of underwear to have more. I also put on my best blue shoes.

We tried to hide jewelry and money. We didn’t know where we were going. I overheard my father saying to my mother, “Put away this ring. Maybe we will be able to buy bread with it.” I looked at my father, and I couldn’t understand what a ring had to do with bread, but later I learned what he meant.

We walked to the train station. The people carried as much as

they could hold in their two hands; the children held on tightly to their dolls and Teddy bears. Five thousand people, young and old, carrying all kinds of suitcases, knapsacks made from sheets, baskets, and wrapped bundles, marched in silence.

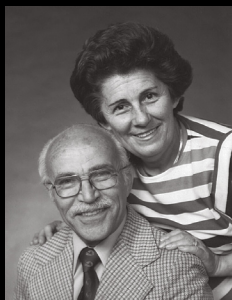
Our frightened group walked three miles to the train station. People abandoned the streets. The non-Jewish population of Chust hid inside their houses. Our neighbors—people we had worked with, grown up with, gone to school with, and played with—became invisible. They did not come out to say goodbye, to give us something for our journey, or to promise to take care of our homes until we returned. Nothing. Empty streets. Only a large, silent group of Jews walked to the station accompanied by the Hungarian police and Gestapo.

When we arrived at the train station, we saw girls sitting behind long tables. I looked at the girls; almost all of them were my former classmates from junior high school. All of us had to register by giving our names before we left. None of the girls looked at me, showed recognition, or gave me reassurance. They just sat, joking, smiling, laughing, and taking our names. I looked at them, and I became very sad, but I didn't say anything. After the registration, the officials searched every man, woman, and child in tents; they searched our clothes, our luggage, and our bodies for hidden money and jewelry. When they found something, not only did they take it away, but they beat up the person very badly. If we could easily reach the hidden jewelry and money, we threw it away to avoid a beating. Jewelry and money covered the ground.

They searched Yanku, and they found money that my mother had sewn into his jacket lapel. A Hungarian policeman began to hit him.

“Please, don't hurt my son,” my father pleaded. “I have more money. I'll give you everything. Just don't hit him.” My father undid his hernia belt, opened up a seam, and gave the policeman all he had.

Then, they pushed us into cattle trains that took us away from Chust to the unknown.



Michael and Edith Singer

Edith Slomovits Singer was sixteen years old when she and her family were taken to the Auschwitz death camp. This is her personal account of the day-to-day existence under the most brutal and inhuman conditions. She recalls the extraordinary people—both good and evil—she encountered in concentration camp, labor camp, the death march, and in her escape to freedom.

In a straightforward and intimate style, she tells unforgettable stories of resistance and survival.

“Edith Singer’s testimony of Holocaust survival is a tribute to the human spirit. It is a story of a young girl’s love and loyalty to family and her determination not only to survive, but to sabotage the Nazi war machine.

At the Museum of Tolerance, Edith played an integral role in our establishment of ‘Testimony to Truth,’ the opportunity for Holocaust Survivors to speak to students and the public about their war experiences. Edith inspires thousands of her listeners with her message of history, hope, and tolerance.”

Elana Samuels,
DIRECTOR, MUSEUM VOLUNTEER SERVICES
Museum of Tolerance

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