

My Second Life

1939-1945



4

The War



I arrived home in early September 1938. Everybody greeted me warmly, but their minds were distracted by the political crisis and the tension was almost unbearable. Now that Hitler had taken over Austria, he had set his sights on the German-speaking portion of Czechoslovakia, known as the Sudetenland. He argued that all he intended was to unite ethnic Germans and that he had no ambitions beyond that. Everyone knew that—unless Hitler was speaking the truth—war was inevitable, and nobody wanted war. For this reason, many people believed him, or at least tried to believe him, or didn't really believe him but used the time to buy more time to build their defenses.

On September 29, Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy signed the Munich Pact, ceding the Sudetenland. The mutilated remains of Czechoslovakia were incapable of putting up a defense, and the way was clear for an unhindered German advance. Meanwhile, the year before, Hungary had taken over my own district. The Hungarian regime was anti-Semitic and pro-Fascist, and life for us Jews became a kind of foretaste of what we would endure later under the Germans.

Now, after over half a century, it is easy to see that France and England blundered at Munich. Today, people wonder how anyone could have been so blind. People might also look at my mother's actions and wonder what had happened to her customary foresight and wisdom. Why did she call me back from the relative safety of Brussels to the war zone that Czechoslovakia would become? Instead

My Second Life

of trying to bring me in, why wasn't she trying to get the rest of the family out? The reasons were many, but these three stood out:

First, as Jews, we had been facing danger and crisis for thousands of years. Through it all, we had survived by sticking together, giving mutual support, and putting family and community ahead of the individual. Our own family was large and extended, and included the very old, the very young and the very sick. How could we go and leave the most helpless behind?

Second, in order to get out, we had to have somewhere to go. The small countries of Eastern Europe were all vulnerable and likely to fall. If Poland was attacked, its allies in Western Europe would also be drawn in. Besides, there were few, if any, countries—whether in the immediate danger zone or beyond—that were willing to accept Jewish refugees. Even later, when it had become clear that Hitler was out to kill us all, the doors remained closed. For example, at one point the Germans loaded Jewish children aboard a ship and sent it around the world in search of a country willing to take them in. None did, and after a year of wandering, this Voyage of the Damned ended back in Germany, where the children met their deaths.

Third, we had no crystal ball and could not foresee the Holocaust. In the past, our people had been through many horrendous experiences, but nothing comparable to what faced us now. Sometimes, lying awake at night, we might scare ourselves imagining persecutions of every kind: loss of rights, closing of synagogues, confiscation, confinement in ghettos, forced labor, starvation, pogroms, systematic beatings, torture, murder and even expulsion. All these things had happened to Jews before, but by sticking together we had seen to it that at least a remnant survived.

The War

But who would be paranoid enough to imagine families torn apart, then mass-murdered? Who could imagine sweet little babies being gassed, or trainloads of starving victims being shipped all over the continent, to be killed and burned in huge factories of death?

The sheer madness of Hitler's intentions was such that sane minds could hardly conceive them. In the crucial last year of the war, for example, the German armies were often in desperate need of food, ammunition and medical supplies. Yet Hitler left these provisions unshipped, while devoting more and more of the rail system to supplying the death camps with victims. Instead of reinforcing his armies, Hitler used thousands of able-bodied men to hunt down and exterminate Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, cripples and the like. Killing was more important to him than winning! What rational person, civilian or military, could have foreseen such a thing?

So we were expecting very hard times, but not a total catastrophe. We behaved accordingly. When I first arrived home, my mother's first reaction was shock at all the weight I had gained. Looking back, this may seem ridiculous. But at the time, it did not seem strange.

My younger brother, Laci, was determined to get out. Since early childhood he had dreamed of living in Palestine, and he made up his mind to go as soon as the Hungarians took over. He put it off because of my trip to Brussels, but now that I was home again and could help our oldest brother, Bandi, look after our mother, there was no reason for him to wait any longer.

I had very mixed feelings about his leaving. I was glad that he was doing what he wanted, but we had always been very close and I knew I would miss him. I was also worried for him. The British, who still controlled the Holy Land, were trying to placate the Arabs by not admitting Jewish refugees. Laci would be travelling on a boat that would be brought into Palestine illegally. This was a highly dangerous procedure. Many had been turned back and some had sunk (deliberately or accidentally).

My Second Life

For three long months after he left, there was no word of him. Then, at last, a letter came.

It had taken Laci the full three months, under conditions of extreme hardship and danger, to reach Palestine. This struggle was only the beginning. Times were difficult: The Jews lived a frontier, pioneer sort of existence, barely scratching a living from their infertile patches of soil. The Arabs were hostile and the English little less so. To make matters worse, many of the Jewish settlers were secularists and socialists and lived on communes, or kibbutzim. Laci's own position was more conservative, and he often found himself drawn unwillingly into controversy. Even so, he was glad to be there, and would remain there for 17 years.

With the Hungarians in charge as the war began, life around Uzhorod had changed drastically. Every day brought some new, restrictive regulation, especially for Jews. Men were being sent to forced labor camps. Even so, I was genuinely glad to be back with my family in familiar surroundings. My school days were finally over. Now at 20, I could begin the adventure of being an adult.

It is hard to explain what our life was like in those limbo days. Things were profoundly abnormal and yet perfectly normal at the same time. Constantly insecure and under threat, we still followed our daily routine, had our moments of joy and fun, and made optimistic plans for the future. From what I can gather, it was the same for the English during the Blitz.

Now that my father had been dead more than two years, our relatives were urging my mother to remarry. She was still attractive, and young enough to start over. It seemed a crime for such a lovely woman to be alone. Matchmakers came to our house all the time, so we children would have had to be blind not to know what was going on. But my mother turned all offers away with the same response: "I can't think of getting married," she said, "as long as I have a marriageable daughter in the house."

So now the family pressure turned on me. By not being married,

The War

my relatives scolded, I was ruining my mother's chances. I had to find a husband as soon as possible.

Today, such a point of view sounds ludicrous. Why shouldn't my mother marry before I did? But at that time and place, there was some tradition behind my mother's attitude. As a rule, women did not bring adult daughters into a new marriage.