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### *The Ghetto*



In mid-1943 the Jews of Hungary were ordered to wear a yellow star on the left side of the chest. The star had to be clearly visible at all times. This order was the last of a long series of restrictions that had left us virtual prisoners. By now, the Germans had come to town to supervise the Hungarian Nazis, to make sure they complied with the Final Solution.

We had the sense to fear the Germans more than the Hungarians did, but we still had no true idea of what lay ahead. Uzhorod had been cut off from the world. The names of Auschwitz and the other death camps had not penetrated our isolation. We had been under Fascist occupation for five years and still had food to eat and our own roof over our heads.

One day, our friend the governor telephoned Nick. There was a typhus epidemic in the mountains, he said, and a doctor was needed. He urged Nick to accept the assignment and take his family along. Dangerous though typhus was, he implied, it would be safer for us to be there than to stay in town.

After lengthy discussion, mother decided not to come. Nick and I set out for this very remote region, making part of the journey by oxcart.

We had been there only a week or two when a letter came. The entire Jewish community of Uzhorod was being transferred to a ghetto, on the grounds of a former brick factory. My elegant, 85-year-old Grandfather Kaufman was among the first to be called in. For quite some while, my mother had been battling depression.

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She could not cope with this latest blow and took an overdose of sleeping pills. She was found in time and taken to a hospital, but was still too distraught to be released.

Nick and I took no time at all to reach a decision. Our place was with our families, where we could be of use to them. We would stay on a few more days while Nick did what he could for the typhus victims. Then we would put in our application to move into the ghetto.

The next evening there was a knock at the door. It was past nine o'clock, much too late for a regular visit. Two farmers stood there with rucksacks on their backs, asking to come in. A rumor was circulating, they said, that we were to be arrested in the morning. They had come to help us escape across the Russian border, and had brought us blankets, freshly baked bread, salami, rubber-soled shoes, and drinking water. We must not delay a moment, they said. We had to reach safety before sunrise.

Nick and I looked at each other, deeply touched by this offer. But we could not accept it.

As soon as the farmers left, we began our own preparations. Ready for anything, we had brought a considerable sum of money and some jewelry. Knowing it would be confiscated as soon as we were arrested, we decided to hide it in the infirmary. We loosened a plank in the floor, wrapped the money in layers of newspaper, and tucked it in the hole. Then we replaced the plank and nailed it in place.

We took the risk of keeping one pair of gold chains, which I sewed into the lining of my winter coat. We also sewed in a small bottle of a fast-acting poison, enough for two or three people, just in case.

By the time two Hungarian soldiers pounded on our door the next morning, we felt prepared for anything. Or so we thought.

In Uzhorod, we were driven through the familiar streets in a horse-drawn carriage. People stopped and stared. We were among

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the last Jews still free and almost the last ones to be taken to the ghetto. We were not particularly distressed or terrified. The main thought in our minds was that we would be united with our families.

There must be many survivors of Hiroshima whose lives, before that tragedy, must have seemed uneventful and even uninteresting. Our arrival in the ghetto was my Hiroshima, an event that plunged me into a nightmare and cut me off from the past. On that day, I entered a life I could never have imagined before. But, unlike Hiroshima, it was not a single moment that transformed the world. It was a series of moments—days and months of moments, each piling its horror upon the preceding horror until the accumulation of all of them had altered everything beyond recognition.

It was May 1944 when we arrived in the ghetto. We stayed about three weeks. The first few minutes were filled with wonderful reunions and hugs and kisses. We hardly had a chance to really look around before friends called to us that someone wanted to see us at the fence. It was Nick's nurse, Ami, as ready to help as ever.

The fence was almost five feet high. We were all up on our toes, trying to look over and speak to each other. She handed us a small package—a razor and some shaving cream for Nick. We had been talking for a couple of minutes, exchanging news about all that had happened since we had left town, when two German SS officers ran across the yard toward us, their eyes filled with fury and hate. They had whips in their hands and guns in the holsters on their belts.

They began whipping us with savage anger and kicking us with their pointed, shiny, black boots. One seemed almost out of his mind, yelling insults and curses. The one concentrating on me cracked his whip and four fingernails flew off my left hand. Then he threw me to the ground, drew his revolver and pointed it at my head. This seemed to calm him slightly. "I should kill you, dirty Jew," he growled, "but you'll be dead soon enough . . ." Then he took out his gun and began clubbing me with the butt.

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They continued working us over. Even through the pain, I was aware of my astonishment. I had never seen such crazed behavior, such lunatic viciousness, and such rage against people who had never harmed them in any way. It was as if they were under the influence of some drug or a psychosis that had robbed them of all rationality. Was this life? Was this reality? Were these actual human beings behaving this way?

Both Nick and I were badly hurt, but all throughout those endless minutes, my mind was on my mother who was due to arrive at any moment from the hospital. With her fragile emotional balance, I was afraid to let her see me like this.

When the two SS finally wore themselves out and left, some friends picked us up and washed us as best they could. I wrapped my throbbing hand with a rag. We managed to get clean just in time, for the gates were dragged open and my mother rode through them in a horse-drawn carriage.

It was an intense reunion. Mother and I clung to each other. Each time one of us tried to speak, we both broke down in sobs. She was still recovering from her suicide attempt, and I was still recovering from the pain and mortification of the morning's brutality. We stood there, shaking and trembling, streaming tears.

At last, we were all together. My brother Bandi was there with his wife and their little baby boy, just four months old. There were aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and even Nick's old father. We forgot our sorrows in the joy of reunion.

But reality was quick to intrude. Life in the brickyard was wretched. Ten thousand of us were squeezed into a space the size of one large city block. Our roof was a canvas tent. When it rained we were soaked. To get into one of the four or five makeshift toilets we had to wait in line for hours. The sick, the old, and the children gave up and relieved themselves wherever they might be. It was summer time, and very hot, and the stench soon became unbearable. People grew edgy and desperate. They fought. They stole. They wailed and cried.

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The Hungarian government provided food, but it was minimal. We were always hungry. Lice took over the camp. There was no way to wash. The sick were untended. People began to die.

At first, it was all shocking and unbearably horrible. Then we grew accustomed, and the sounds and smells of death became ordinary. Some could not bear it and attempted suicide. We tried to rescue them, not always successfully. There was no privacy at all. On one side of you someone was dying, while on the other side people were making love.

As each day ended, the heat grew mercifully less, but new horrors replaced it. Each evening the German SS and the Hungarian police would pick out a few prominent people and take them away for interrogation: "Where is your gold hidden?" "Where is your money?" We could hear the screams all over the yard. They were always tortured until they died.

We got used to that too. It was just another aspect of our imprisonment. Each person was struggling for survival and overwhelmed by his own immediate needs. In a few weeks, the ghetto had stripped us of 10,000 years of civilization.

Once a week a transport was put together and about 2,000 people were taken away for a work brigade. They lined up, the gates were pulled open, and they marched off through the fields toward the railroad station. We waited impatiently to hear some word of where they had been taken, of what was happening to them. No word came.

Most of us looked forward to leaving. Because those being taken away were going to work, the sick and the old were very worried that they'd be left behind. They begged the younger ones to be sure to take them along. Life in the ghetto had become so unbearable that we could hardly wait to get out and start a new life, even in a work camp.