

Albert Rosenthal

# Memories of the Holocaust

April 1994 to May 1995

## Part One

July, 1990

Distinguished Rabbi Herzberg, Cantor Silberman, and Ladies and Gentlemen:

After carefully considering my dear friend Cantor Silberman's suggestion about my participating in this event, I came to the conclusion that no matter how painful of an undertaking this is, I simply couldn't say no, when it comes down, what I consider one of the darkest chapters of European Jewry and my life, the years between April, 1944 until May, 1945. And now I stand here before you, via a long, battered way, 34 years later, via Auschwitz and Belsen. When I was liberated by the British forces, they found me unconscious on the top of a pile of dead bodies, my weight 70 pounds, covered with lice, having typhus, diarrhea and tuberculosis. I was shipped off by the Swedish Red Cross to Sweden, and it took three years to patch me up and return me to reasonably good health, after being shuffled back and forth, first to a quarantine, hospitals, sanitariums and convalescent homes, finally finding me fit enough to return me to a normal society. And now, to the subject as it happened and how I experienced it.

I assume you are all familiar with Elie Wiesel's works - The Beggar of Jerusalem, Zalman The Madness of G-d, and Night, one of his first books. This book is in the story of my home town of Sighet, nestled in Transylvania in the heart of the Carpathian Mountains where both Mr. Wiesel and I were born, raised, and finally witnessed the complete destruction of all Jewish life, traditions, and its Jewish population - reduced from a total of 11,000 to merely 400 survivors. When I visited Sighet with my daughter last September I found a handful of Jews, about twenty families. They were heavily intermarried and only about a dozen still observed the Sabbath, holidays, and kashrut. Of about fifteen shuls and shtieblech, only one remains.

Thanks to Chief Rabbi Rosen of Bucharest, a member of the Parliament whom the

Romanian government highly respects, there is complete freedom of religion. There are even kosher restaurants in the major cities and tourist attractions on the Black Sea ports of Bucharest, Brasov, and Cluj. And now, this is what happened to Sighet's Jewish population in March of 1944.

At that time this part of Romania was occupied by the Hungarians and the ruler was Admiral Horthy in close alliance with the Axis powers, Germany and Italy, and were fighting a common war against the Russians. After the Hungarian forces took a heavy beating at the hand of the Russians by the Don River and later by Stalingrad, Horthy realized it was time to get out of the war and make a separate peace with the Allies. As a consequence, Hitler gave the order of Hungary's total occupation, and that's how we woke up one morning - trapped and occupied by the German troops.

Only three days later the first Jewish victim was lying dead in the so called "Jew Street" in Sighet. A little nine year old boy, a neighbor of mine, Baruch Frankel, son of a poor tailor who had six additional kids to feed and a hard time making ends meet, was shot dead, without any kind of provocation, by a drunken Hungarian soldier, and left lying there for the rest of the day.

Chief Rabbi Dantzig, head of the Sephardic Jews, eulogized the victim in the presence of a great mass of people before an open grave, and I must say that he warned us all that this is just the beginning; we should brace ourselves and remain strong and united. He said that there were some very hard times ahead of us, and advised us not to lose hope, that the peril should soon pass. The next days, pressure on us increased and was building up. Notices were posted that all Jews were to wear yellow arm bands, six inches wide, on their upper arms. Jewish store owners

were instructed to post a notice on the windows of their stores marked "This is a Jewish Store." A curfew was ordered that no Jew should be found in the streets between 7:00PM and 7:00AM. The rationed food staples were cut in half for the Jewish population and our ration cards were stamped with a huge "J" for identification.

Hungarian soldiers, armed with rifles and fixed bayonets and assisted by local Hungarian school teachers, were going from house to house, searching and confiscating all valuables, jewelry, silver, candlesticks, watches, even removing jewelry and earrings from women and girls wearing them at the time. All foreign currency was taken; approximately twenty dollars per person was allowed for keeping.

All radio sets had to be wrapped, sealed, and turned into the Postal Service so that we would not be able to listen to foreign broadcasts. For all of these confiscated valuables we received an official receipt; needless to say that was the last time we ever saw those items.

I must point out that the Hungarian authorities performed their task with great enthusiasm and without the prodding of the Germans; they stayed in the background for the time being, keeping busy with other matters. These German troops were all Wehrmacht and no S.S. Einsatzgruppen or S.D. appeared on the scene as of yet. That was to come later.

The Hungarians also grabbed Jewish men on the streets at random, and forced them to march to the railroad station to load coal into the steam locomotives, under soldiers guard, for no payment of course.

The Hungarian population didn't show any sympathy or understanding at all, and seemed to enjoy immensely the goings on. They were laughing and poking fun at us getting ready to take over our houses, businesses, and fields which came a short time later.

On the last day of Pesach, 1944 the order came. All Jews, along with their possessions, would be moved to the ghetto of Sighet. Approximately twelve streets were designated for that purpose, each family to one room. These streets were located in the poorest and most poverty-stricken part of town where very poor Jews and Gypsies lived. The gentiles and Gypsies were relocated in the confiscated Jewish better homes. All Jewish owned businesses were locked up, sealed for inventory. The ghetto was surrounded with wooden planks and topped with barbed wire. Hungarian troops, armed with rifles and machine guns, had orders to shoot if anybody tried to leave the ghetto.

Food was trucked in, and community kitchens established in the synagogues - free of charge, paid by the Jewish community. Wealthy Jewish businessmen were picked up in the ghetto, arrested, taken out, and held for ransom. The only other Jews permitted to leave the ghetto were marched under armed soldiers to shuttle back and forth, on foot, to the railroad station to load coal, day and night, in the locomotives. The trains had to roll to get the supplies to the Eastern front where the war was going on. This situation lasted approximately ten to twelve days, then Eichman;'s gang arrived to Sighet, headed by his right hand aide, Captain Wisliceny, head of the S.D. (Sicherheitsdienst). Arriving with the S.D. were a few dozen S.S. troops, wearing the skull emblem on their collar and armed with the notorious Schmeisers Machine guns.

We were then systematically marched one quarter at a time to a nearby synagogue with a maximum load of 25 kilos per person, from our few remaining belongings. We slept the one night on the bare floor and benches with orders that if anybody attempts to leave they would be shot without warning. The Hungarian soldiers took up positions outside the synagogue,

surrounding us with heavy machine guns, this time pointing them at us all around the synagogue. The next morning we were ordered out with our belongings to form columns in the synagogue courtyard. We were then surrounded by the Hungarian troops for a final inspection and search for hidden money or jewelry. Some of the younger women were singled out and forced to strip naked for a final inspection, just in case they had hidden any valuables or precious stones in their bodies. Women who refused to cooperate were beaten and hit on their heads with rifle butts.

Soon we started marching towards the railroad station through the streets that many would never see again. During our march I noticed that the gentile, civilian population among which included some of my best friends and former neighbors, schoolmates and playmates, were all watching from their windows. They laughed and spat at us, enjoying the sight immensely. I looked back, and as far as I could see - there was discarded bedding, luggage, and clothing littering the streets. It had been too heavy to carry, and the poor souls were just leaving it all behind. I also noticed that at the head of the column the Satmar Rabbi Yehudah Teitelbaum was also marching. He wore his caftan and stramel, and the only thing he was carrying was his tallis bag.

We finally arrived at the railroad station. I noticed on the tracks a very long freight train with all the windows barred with barbed wire, and a long line of troops, Hungarian and German, lining up on both sides of the train. There I found several cars already filled up with sick people they evacuated and brought along on stretchers, and were just dumped in the wagons. They were from the local hospitals and all Jewish, of course. They also evacuated the local mental hospital, and I noticed the crazed people, some laughing, gesticulating, and some just staring like in a vacuum, not comprehending what it was all about.

I kept close to my mother, father, and sister. My brother was in the Hungarian army at the time in uniform with a yellow band at the Russian front, picking up mines and loading trucks, and this sort of thing. The Hungarian army used Jewish boys to pick up the mines so that the Hungarian soldiers would not be blown to pieces.

Finally, our time came for embarkation. With the help of the Hungarian troops, and now the S.S. in full action, they began pushing, shoving, cursing, and hitting us with sticks. They packed us in real tight, approximately eighty persons in these cattle cars, on the bare floor, plus our remaining possessions. I had on myself two suits, a leather jacket, a rain coat on top, just to cut down on the 25 kilograms allowed weight (I thought I would outsmart them). In the wagon I found two buckets - one filled with water and one empty that was to serve for our natural needs on the trip.

The doors were then shut. I managed to get a look through the barbed wire window and saw an armed guard on each step armed with a machine gun. According to the Hungarian authorities as they told the Jewish leaders in Sighet, we were going to be taken deep inside Hungary to perform agricultural work and relieve the labor shortage as most of the Hungarians were out of the country fighting Communism and it will be a nice, patriotic gesture on the part of the Jews to help out. I took all that talk with great reservation and just wished I had an alternate choice. After several hours on the trip, the bucket was overflowing; the heat and stench were unbearable and we were packed in so tight you could barely move at all.

We were rolling the whole day and night. Early in the morning the train stopped at a railroad siding to fill up the engine with water. I noticed from the window and signs that we are someplace in Slovakia. I then realized we had left Hungary. I yelled out through the window to

a uniformed railroad worker and asked him in German if he happened to know where we are heading. Instead of answering me he made a gesture with his finger across his neck, as to say you'll get your throats slit.

By then I realized that we are in for the worst. The train started rolling again. I told my father what I just experienced. He cut open the lining of his coat where he had hidden some money. He also had a golden-tipped Parker fountain pen he got as a gift from his brother when he came to visit the States in 1938. He made his way to the window and threw it all out and told me he wouldn't need it anymore; and he was so right about it. I vividly remember my reaction to this and admit that for the first time I feared for my life. I also realized that we are approaching soon the end of the line. I produced my siddur, got up, and started praying the Sh'monah Esrai of Yom Kippur, hitting my chest and reciting the Al Chait while crying out of control. I was nineteen years old at the time, and I was saying the Vidui, the prayer you say before death. Other people joined in, including my Dad.

We made one more stop at Cracow, Poland to fill the engine again, and spent one more night on the wagon floor. At no time was the door opened to empty the bucket or give us water or food. On the second morning we found our first victims found dead on the wagon floor. A noted doctor who specialized in ear, nose, and throat surgery, named Dr. Junger, injected his wife and teenage daughter, Sari, and they were all lying dead on the floor.

Finally, around 4:00 in the morning we arrived to the notorious camp at Auschwitz. I noticed a sign on the gate saying in German "Arbeit Macht Frei" meaning "Work Makes You Free." The train came to a stop, the doors opened, and horrifying sights and sounds confronted me. German S.S. with huge dogs, inmates dressed in the blue and white striped uniforms were



all yelling at the tops of their lungs in German: "Out with you swines - leave everything behind - line up - make it fast!" They were pulling us out of the wagon, hitting, yelling, and cursing for maximum effect to scare the life out of us. Children were screaming, running loose, abandoned without their parents. In the distance tall chimneys spewing huge flames and lighting up the sky, and the smell of flesh and smoke all over the place. It was a horrifying sight; a Dante's Inferno a hundred times over. I got separated immediately from my mother and sister, and that was the last time I saw of them.

In conclusion I would like to say that my mother was gassed and cremated immediately on arrival; she was 46. My father struggled through ten months of hell with me in different labor camps, finally dying of hunger, his body swollen, on the eve of Passover 1945. With the help of three fellow prisoners we tied pieces of rope around his legs and wrists, dragged his naked corpse on the ground several hundred feet, and dumped his body in one of those huge mass graves on top of the other many bodies already lying there. And this was just the beginning... or the beginning of the end.

Thank you very much for listening to one of the thousands of tragedies which happened between 1939 and 1945.

Albert Rosenthal