

ORANGES (Part 1)

by Sharon Weisz

My mother, who escaped death at Auschwitz and Lippstadt, chose when she would actually die. Not that she chose TO die, only WHEN. I believe that. After a second, then completely debilitating stroke that left her in a coma in 1995, somewhere around Day 13 she made a conscious decision of when it was time to go. For starters, she waited until my rabbi, who had become her friend, would be in town and could, therefore, officiate at her funeral. Then, there was the question of yartzeit, remembrance. She dutifully marked the dates, vague as they were, for her own parents, but also observed her sister's yartzeit, my Aunt Hannah, whose life was destroyed by the effects of the war (but that's another story, one that involves so many mental facilities from Bellevue in New York to County USC Medical Center in Los Angeles). Mom chose to die on a particular day so that her yartzeit precedes Aunt Hannah's, and they would be observed on consecutive days, always remembered as one.

There was another time when she did choose to die, though she never totally explained how she escaped death. My mother arrived in Auschwitz early in May of 1944, to that evil selection platform where I recently stood, with her mother, her two sisters and her grandparents as well as a number of other relatives who had all been deported together from the ghetto in Munkacz (housed in the brick factory own by her cousins, the Sajovicz family). It was then Czechoslovakia, now Ukraine. She watched as her oldest sister Serene refused to leave their mother when she was sent in a different direction than she and Hannah. She would never see either of them again. By the end of that year, she didn't know where Hannah was either, and in a fit of hopelessness, she headed for the electrified barbed wire fence. I can only assume that had she actually grabbed the fence she would not have survived to tell the tale. Perhaps the electricity was off, and all she did was cut herself severely because she did end up in the infirmary for her trouble. According to records I found in the Arolsen Archives, she was transferred to Lippstadt, a work camp under the auspices of Buchenwald concentration camp, on January 4, 1945. And perhaps she actually did choose NOT to die because had she stayed in Auschwitz, she would have been ordered to join the Death March that began on January 17 as the Soviet army approached the camp. Very few would survive that ordeal.

I was never told much about the factory in Lippstadt, only that there were a lot of women. It may have been part of IG Farben, the infamous chemical and munitions company. I do know that on the evening of March 31, 1945, the captives were all marched out into the nearby woods, and at some point before dawn, they realized that their Nazi guards had abandoned them and fled. The women were alone, and coming up the road, in a long formation of trucks and tanks bearing red, white and blue flags, was the American army. Mom would say that it was the first time in her life that she ever saw a Black man. The soldiers handed out food and chocolate, which, of course, made some of the starving women quite ill. It was April 1st. For them, the war was now over, and April Fool's Day was always celebrated as a holiday in our house.

Mom befriended an American army chaplain, who helped her to find out that her sister Hannah was still alive after being liberated by the British army at Bergen Belsen. He

agreed to take her there, where she found her sister barely alive. She kept in touch with him for many years afterwards. Mom and Hannah made it to Prague with the help of the Red Cross, and it was there that my Great-Uncle Al was able to make contact with them and, subsequently, make arrangements for their emigration to the United States. Of dozens of relatives in the family, he was only able to locate and sponsor five of them who were still alive.

The survivors came over on the ocean liner, the MS Gripsholm, a Swedish-American luxury liner that had been chartered by the U.S. State Department to repatriate POWs and other nationals immediately after the war. Some time in 1946, it became the first ship that would bring passengers rather than troops to the United States, departing from Stockholm. The way my mother told it, my great-uncle had to deposit \$100 U.S. for each of them in a bank in Sweden in order to confirm their passage on the ship and to ensure that they would not become dependent on the government there. After making their way from Prague, they were instructed to go to the bank to withdraw the money and bring it with them. Mom treated herself to a pastry on the way to the dock and brought the rest of the money back to her uncle. Her cousin Alice, known for her vanity, bought a new dress!

I still have the menus and other souvenirs of the Gripsholm's voyage to New York, along with vivid memories of the great ship itself. You see, whenever we drove to New York City from our farm in New Jersey, Mom always diverted onto the Westside Highway to see if the ship was in dock, and she would once again recount the story of her voyage to America.

My mother had been trained in Budapest as a seamstress, so she was able to parlay those skills into a good job in New York. The first thing on which my mother decided to spend her hard-earned money was the painful removal of a souvenir from Auschwitz—her tattoo. In those days, the sophisticated tattoo removal processes did not yet exist, so she bore a burn scar on her arm for the rest of her life.

Hannah became a manicurist, and the two of them found a small apartment in the Bronx. I never knew who it was that introduced my parents to each other, only that it was a mutual friend, which seemed far-fetched. My Dad had his own convoluted story, which I was only told in detail when I was in my 30's because Dad thought, however harrowing his story was, it wasn't as terrible as Mom's.

Dad was from the small farming village of Sarkoz (translated from Hungarian as "the middle of the mud") or Livada ("orchard") in Romanian, a few miles from the big city of Szatmar (Satu Mare) near the Trans-Carpathian Mountains. Satu Mare, which to this day a beautiful city, is near the Hungarian-Romanian border, but when Dad was born, it was all still Austria-Hungary.

Some time in 1937, my Dad's oldest brother Leslie (Laci) received a letter from his friend Moric Pataky, who had left their hometown for a new life in Nicaragua. The letter basically talked about opportunities in his new country, beckoning his friend to join him there, but ended with the chilling words: *You must leave. Europe will burn.* Leslie, who by then was married to my Aunt Stefi, decided his old friend could be right and made plans to leave Romania. Because my Dad was a bachelor, they invited him to join them. Uncle Leslie was a businessman and banker by profession, while my Dad was meant to inherit the family farm, two very divergent backgrounds. My uncle Andrew

(Bandi) was married with a child, so he and his family stayed behind along with their parents.

They obtained all of the appropriate visas for Central America and the United States and purchased passage on the Cunard luxury liner, the Queen Mary. It departed from Southampton in England and headed for the Panama Canal. It was 1938. They disembarked at the port of Punta Arenas in Costa Rica from where they would travel to Nicaragua. While walking along the waterfront, speaking Hungarian, they were approached by a gentleman with whom they shared a language, a furniture maker named Mr. Ferencz. He told them they would not like Nicaragua, and that there were better opportunities in Costa Rica. They explained that they were committed to travel to Nicaragua where Mr. Pataky was awaiting their arrival, but that they would be in touch if they returned to Costa Rica.

In Nicaragua, they started a silk factory, but the climate and the working conditions were brutal. I was told they were befriended by the ruling Somoza family, including the infamous dictator Anastasio, but one would conclude that they could only have started a business at that time with the blessing of the Somozas, who were the biggest land owners in the country. By late 1938, they decided to go back to Costa Rica where they reconnected with Mr. Ferencz. What they did there is unclear, but they made plans to reembark on the Queen Mary when it came back to Punta Arenas in late August of 1939, and head to New York. On September 1st, while they were on the ship, Germany invaded Poland, and World War II officially began. Upon arrival at the port of New York, they were informed that their visas for entry into the U.S. were no longer valid, and they were sent to Ellis Island for detention and deportation back to Romania.

Because they had money and valuables they had brought from Europe, they were in a better position than most to negotiate their status. Via a Jewish agency, they applied for entry to Canada, vowing to buy a farm and help the war effort there. On New Year's Day, 1940, my father, uncle and aunt entered Canada through the port of Montreal and settled in Ontario's Niagara Peninsula, right on the border between Canada and the country that had so unceremoniously rejected them. Good to their word, they bought a farm in Niagara Falls and tried to contact other relatives that had stayed behind in Romania in order to sponsor their emigration, but it was too late for that. My grandparents—Ignatz and Rosa—would perish in Auschwitz, as would my aunt Anna, who my middle name honors, and my uncle Andrew's family. Andrew would eventually join the family in Niagara Falls, with his second wife Margaret, a childhood friend with whom he reunited after the war ended. They all became Canadian citizens.

So how my parents managed to meet in New York while my Dad was visiting from Canada will remain a mystery to me. They were 14 years apart in age, but they shared a common language, heritage and heartbreak. When their relationship became serious, Mom basically told Dad that she didn't survive Auschwitz to become a Canadian. They were married in New York in 1949 and bought a chicken farm in New Jersey, in the area that is now called the Jersey Shore. I came along a year later, actually born in Lakewood, New Jersey because our hometown of Toms River did not yet have a hospital. My sister Robin was born two years after that.

Life on the farm was pretty idyllic, and the Holocaust did not permeate my early childhood. Dad sold eggs to local restaurants and other vendors, and we led a quiet life filled with the regular visits into New York City to see relatives who reciprocated with

visits to the farm. There were also car trips to Atlantic City where the boardwalk with its Crayola colored benches and famous diving horse were major attractions and memories. I started school—kindergarten and the first grade, which was interrupted by my first airplane trip to Mexico City for an extended visit to my aunt and uncle, my mother's brother Eugene and his wife Greta, who had survived the war in Cuba and were also unable to enter the U.S. afterwards.

Then one day in 1957, Dad announced that he was going on a trip with our family friend Calvin Mermelstein, also a survivor from Mom's hometown who owned the delicatessen in nearby Lakewood. They spent a week visiting Florida and then another week in California, and when they returned, they announced that we are all moving to a town called Los Angeles. I concluded that they liked the oranges better in California.