

CHAPTER

4

The Ghetto

My father came home from forced labor in the autumn of 1943, when I was fourteen. A few months passed, and during this time he seemed to brood more and more inwardly about some calamity in the making, although he said absolutely nothing to me about it. He was increasingly disillusioned and bewildered by what was taking place around him. As for my mother and me, we were happy, of course, that my father was home, and we did not stop to ask if something worse might be in the making for us.

Early in April 1944 we began our preparations for Passover. As we had every year, we cleaned the house, got rid of the leavened foods, and stored away the utensils that we were forbidden to use on the eight sacred days. My father and I went to pick up the special matzohs we had ordered ahead of time. We cooked and baked and otherwise prepared all the traditional foods of the holiday as though we were living in the most normal of times. The irony that we were preparing to celebrate liberation amid increasing persecution was lost to us.

The Passover of 1944 would be the final period of "normalcy" of my early years, a poignant epilogue to my youth and family and to a stable and centered life. We were, for one last time, together as a family. We had our two seders with the tra-

ditional prayers and food and songs. We attended holiday services in our synagogue, wearing the new clothes we wore every Passover, as though nothing had changed. By this time, rumors were already afloat that the Germans had penetrated Budapest. (The occupation had actually begun on March 19, a month before.) But despite the trepidation and anguish we felt on hearing this news, the beauty and tradition of the holiday comforted us.

On April 16, 1944, a day that will be imbedded in my memory as long as I live, the gendarmes knocked at our door. The leader ordered us to leave our homes no later than twenty-four hours after the time of notification, and to assemble at the Jewish schoolyard. We would be allowed take along only some necessary clothing and food. However, we were told to take with us all our money and jewelry. When we sought to know where we were going, we were told curtly, "Just follow orders." We were not stupid or foolhardy. We knew we could question nothing without the risk of severe punishment. But we sensed that we would be leaving our homes for a very long time.

We were still in the midst of Passover, as I recall, since we hadn't yet changed our dishes and cutlery back to what we used the rest of the year. How grateful I am today that I had even fourteen years of happy Passovers surrounded by my loving family! We still had a working farm, and we had all our animals to care for. We therefore asked our neighbors to come in and feed the cows and other creatures and to give them water. One could not simply walk away from live animals. They demanded responsibility and attention. These neighbors did take on the responsibility of caring for the animals. But they also appropriated everything that belonged to us and other Jews. And they did it the very day that we were ordered to report to the schoolyard. No one came with legal papers that gave them a right to take possession. But they did take possession of our

houses and stores. Our other belongings—were dragged outside and left exposed to the daytime sun, to be purloined and plundered. What we did not lose on the spot was taken from us in the schoolyard on the following day.

April 16, 1944, was the day everything stopped. All the beauty, all the order, all the timeless traditions, all the joys of family life ceased. We now faced a gaping darkness, a terrifying unknown.

As I later learned, we were in Zone 1, one of six “zones,” each representing a different geographical area of the country. Our zone was constituted by Carpathio-Ruthenia and Northern Hungary. The population of this zone would later be the first to be transported to Auschwitz. The reason was, very likely, that the Hungarian authorities considered this particular population to be an “alien.” or “non-Magyarized” element. It was also the plan of Adolf Eichmann, Hitler’s right-hand man in Hungary, to keep the Jews of Budapest, who were the most “sophisticated” and “assimilated” in Hungary, in the dark as long as possible so that they could not escape into the countryside to hide. The Budapest Jews in Zone 6 were the last to be taken.

On the very next day we reported to the schoolyard, as we had been ordered. All families had to register when they got there. We were told curtly and emphatically, “Hand over all of your valuables, especially money and jewelry. You’re not going to need it, since you’re going to be resettled. Just follow orders.” I wanted to ask them, although I would never have dared to say it aloud, “How is it that you know where I’m going, and I don’t?”

However, there was absolutely no resistance or attempt to evade the orders given. One was too petrified to question or disobey the gendarmes unless one wished to risk life and limb in a beating or even worse. The gendarmes knew who was Jewish,

of course, because for almost a full year we had been forced to wear yellow Stars of David on our clothing. One had only to point a finger at one of us (“There comes a Jew!”) for us to experience humiliation and, even worse, brutality. We had been devalued, dehumanized, and persecuted.

At the schoolyard we waited for the inhabitants of the smaller towns around Tolcsva to assemble. Meanwhile our belongings, which we were never to see again, were being placed upon wagons owned and driven not by strangers, but by neighbors and long-time friends, people with whom my father had done business. My father was shocked to see one of his lifelong friends, with whom he had served in the First World War, driving one of the wagons. I was shocked and saddened that the people who had known my parents most of their lives, and whom we had regarded at the very least as neighbors, were helping themselves to whatever portable possessions they could manage to take from our houses. They also voluntarily and cheerfully helped the authorities to get rid of us Jews, marching us from our homes to the schoolyard and then to a ghetto, an enclosed area where we would live apart from them, deprived of all comforts and of even our basic needs. And few offered a word of sympathy or consolation.

From the schoolyard we proceeded to Satoraljaujhely, which was to serve as our ghetto. Mothers with infants and the elderly, including my grandmother, were permitted to ride. The rest of us were forced to go on foot. We walked nonstop for a day and a half. My mother had spent the full twenty-four hours we had been given to leave our homes preparing food for us to eat along the way: smoked goose, cheese, and hard-boiled eggs. We ate hungrily, perhaps realizing that provisions would be scant from now on. We found out later that we were right, since in the ghetto all food was rationed severely.

When we finally got to the ghetto, we saw the other members of our family who lived in our region, Zemplén Megye. Satoraljaujhely was the county seat of the region and its largest metropolis. The ghetto was situated in a dilapidated area of the city near the railroad station, a fact that at the time had little significance for me. However, this was not the station where luxury trains came in, the trains that transported people on business or on holiday. That station was in the middle of the town. To our station, as we would later realize, came the freight trains that transported a very different kind of cargo: human beings destined for annihilation. Gypsies had lived in this part of town before being driven out by the Hungarian authorities. They, too, would soon be targets of mass murder.

The ghetto was to be closed off from the outside world, but I remember that at the gate we encountered two of our gentile neighbors, members of the Kovacs family, who brought us some provisions, embraced my mother, and expressed their sorrow for what was happening to us. However, they were the only ones who did so. I don't remember their given names today, but I remember the sorrow and pity in their faces and the way my mother wept.

One of the few consolations my family had in the ghetto was that we were all in the same place and could care for each other. As long as I had my mother and father, I felt protected. As a child who was close to her extended family, I found some pleasure and comfort in the fact that my cousins, my aunts and uncles, and I could still be near one another in the ghetto. We saw each other constantly. We sat, talked, prayed, and reminisced. However, we never discussed "concentration camps," a term with which we were hardly familiar. While we were there, no one spoke of the future; we clung as much as was pos-

sible to our past. Whatever bleak thoughts parents or other adults harbored were kept to themselves.

We were in the ghetto for only a few weeks. Our provisions were meager. As many people as could be were placed in a single room. There were no fewer than ten people in a room, many of them strangers to one another. Our room was lit by a kerosene lamp. We had no electricity, no plumbing, and no heating. We slept on the floor, on mattresses stuffed with straw. However, there was a laundry, so we washed our clothes regularly and tried to keep as clean as we could under the circumstances. We tried also to cook the little food we had. Food was rationed to each family, and we made the best of the situation. A group of us would pool our food and make something consisting of the pooled ingredients. Our family—aunts, uncles, cousins—used to eat together. Whoever had more of a certain food item would divide it among the whole group.

Our rations were so meager that I was perpetually hungry. I was unused to being without food, and I kept thinking and talking about my mother's ample and delicious meals from the past. I had particularly loved her fried chicken. She had managed to salvage a jar containing some chicken fat, and one of the "luxuries" of my existence at that time was for my mother to take some bread and fry it in melted chicken fat, so that the bread resembled fried chicken. I would proceed to devour it ravenously, with eyes closed, imagining myself devouring fried chicken. To me, at that time, this was the most delectable of treats. Although I am not in the same condition today as I was in the ghetto, when I am alone at home, I still sometimes fry a piece of bread in chicken fat and eat it. In that way I feel a closeness to my mother.

We had no hygienic facilities. There was one outhouse for our section of the ghetto, and it was to serve everyone. (Each

section of the ghetto had about a thousand people; the population of the entire ghetto was around four thousand.) However, the children, including me, were told not to go there early in the morning because the outhouse had to be "cleaned up." During our time in the ghetto, many suicides took place in the outhouse. Several people, who perhaps knew or sensed what was going to happen and found it impossible to face their fears, slashed their throats or wrists there in the early hours of the morning. We children were not allowed to go to the outhouse, no matter how extreme our need; we had to use the potties in the rooms until they cleaned out these outhouses, because the adults didn't want the children to see the bloody residue of self-slaughter.

Around us was a terrible sense of aimlessness and desperation. Life seemed to have lost its purpose during those agonizing days. People tried to survive amid oppression, hunger, illness, loss of dignity, and loss of faith. I still carry with me the memory of men standing around all day, wearing their prayer shawls and phylacteries, perpetually praying to God. I would ask myself what they were praying for. Was it rescue? Was it release through a merciful death?

So sheltered had been my existence, and so much had I taken for granted the comfortable and well-insulated life of a dearly loved only child, that I found it terribly difficult to sustain the deprivations of those weeks in the ghetto. Those weeks, which in retrospect were comparatively few and were far from the worst part of my experience, became my initiation into a new life, a life that was to be overwhelmingly shocking and terrifying.

One of the most difficult aspects of ghetto life to adjust to was its utter boredom and purposelessness. To the best of my recollection, we had no set routine. We started each morning washing ourselves at a basin, which my family had to share with

the other families in our room, after which we proceeded to say our morning prayers. Then we had some meager portions of bread, or an egg if one was available, or some cheese if we could find a morsel, and some tea. If there was enough milk, the very young children were given it. Usually we were assigned some cleaning jobs around the ghetto, or perhaps some tasks in the laundry. The men and the older teenagers, both boys and girls, were taken to clean the streets of Satoraljaujhely with large brooms. I am certain that this was done mainly to demean the Jews before the gentiles. The younger children among us stayed and helped our grandmothers and mothers. We socialized as best we could with the other ghetto children. I amused myself with my cousins and with many friends from Tolcsva. This was the most pleasure we Jews could hope for and the most tolerable part of our sojourn in the ghetto. We behaved well, with decorum and restraint, because we knew in our hearts that something was deeply wrong and that we might be at the threshold of some final upheaval.

We were under the "leadership" of a *Judenrat*, or Jewish council (in Hungarian, *Zsido hitkoszeg*), but the real authorities were the Hungarian gendarmes, who constantly watched us, and who mocked, tormented, and abused the Jewish populace of the ghetto. The municipal authorities, including the mayor, sanctioned the brutalities, at the very least. The mayor of Satoraljaujhely, Indar Varo, and the captain of the *gendarmerie* were condemned to death after the war. It must never be forgotten that the cruelty we had endured to this point stemmed not from the Germans, but from the indigenous population of Hungarians, as there was never a single German visible in the ghetto.

Many Jews, of course, had no idea of what awaited them, and believed that their ghettoization was "precautionary" because of military operations in the area. There were some

"oversights" by the Hungarians of the usual restrictions set by the German authorities. These oversights took advantage of our ignorance. For example, Hungarian-Jewish children under the age of ten were exempted from wearing the yellow Star of David; however, they were not to be exempted from deportation and eventual murder. The gendarmes treated them as if they were their elders. Jewish men still attached to military labor units were taken also, though these military labor units were considered indispensable to the nation.

Only two circumstances made the ghetto bearable for me. My father had there a Jewish friend with whom he had served in the First World War. To him he had pledged that, if both survived that war and had children of opposite sexes, those children would become betrothed. This was commonplace in Orthodox Jewish communities of the time. My father's friend had a son, and this young man was in the ghetto with us. He was seventeen or eighteen, and I was fourteen. My father reiterated the pledge to this young man. The young man begged my father to let us marry then and there. My father refused, saying that times were too uncertain in the ghetto, but that if both of us survived the war, we would then surely be able to marry. I survived, but the young man did not. I found out after my liberation that he had been killed in one of the camps. But his presence in the ghetto made the experience more bearable for me.

The other thing that made the ghetto bearable for me was the incessant throb of memory of joyous times in our agricultural community, with its simple natural pleasures, and of family life surrounded by the beauty of our traditions. Memory of that life, and yearning for reattachment to that life, however futile, somehow kept me going.

On May 25, 1944, little more than a month after our arrival, we boarded a train to leave Satoraljaujhely, bound for

what we thought was a labor camp. We were certain no harm would come to us. As I have mentioned, there was a Jewish council, and an elder was chosen by the Germans to direct us. In our ghetto the head of the council was a man named Lapy Klein. He was under the jurisdiction of the gendarmes, and he was powerless to do anything but spur us on. Earlier he had been responsible for the welfare of the poor. He had supervised charities in the Jewish community. None of us doubted his sincerity or his loyalty to the community. When he instructed us, his anguish was visible on his face. There is no doubt that his heart was breaking even as he spoke.

As we proceeded to the train, I walked between my parents, holding onto their hands. My grandmother walked on the other side of my mother. Aunts, uncles, and cousins walked behind us. This was to be our final walk together on Hungarian soil.

Suddenly I saw my first German officer, dressed in an immaculate uniform and brimming with authority. Beside him was a fearsome police dog. I feared to look up at the officer. I could only hear his voice barking orders at us in his language. I began to whimper.