

Judith and Andrea Silberger



(courtesy of the USC Shoah Foundation)

Judith Silberger Guttman and her fraternal twin sister Andrea were born on October 11, 1923 in Kosice, Slovakia. The city was known for its legal center, concerts, beautiful museums, libraries, and vibrant intellectual life. During that time, Kosice had a significant Jewish population.

Judith and Andrea grew up in a large house with a big backyard on the main street across from the superior court. Their home possessed a large library with many books by famous writers, some which were sent from the United States by their uncle so they would stay current with the times. Their house had law offices, a printing firm, and a roaster to roast imported coffees. The twins' parents were highly educated and well respected—their father, Josef, was an attorney and a leader in the city; their mother, Ernestine, a concert pianist and piano teacher. They had help in the house and governesses who taught them German language and history until they were sixteen.

Judith liked chemistry, and Andrea excelled in music. Andrea went to a Hungarian conservatory, and during her audition, she was introduced as &Jewish from Hungary.& The sisters played chess, piano, and tennis together. They went to the theater and saw movies; they especially loved *The Wizard of Oz*. The twins had both Jewish and non-Jewish friends. After school they had piano lessons, higher mathematics, German, and French. They spoke Hungarian and German at home. They learned German because their parents grew up in Austria-Hungary and had a great respect for the language.

As young girls, Judith and Andrea didn't experience much antisemitism because of their Josef's high position in Kosice: he was an attorney to some of the most influential Catholic families in the city.

When troops arrived in Kosice, Judith remembers being about 20 years old. Soldiers were looking for a nice home and chose to take the Silberger's. Ernestine had stored all the silver and beautiful glass in boxes in the basement, but the Germans found everything and took it. Every night, Hungarian gendarmes with tall feathered hats, uniforms, and long knives and guns forced the evacuation of the families. They were not allowed to take anything but their coats and hats. Judith and her family were on the last transport on May 27, 1944. First they were taken to a brick factory for about two weeks, where they slept on bricks and had only a small blanket to cover them. They were watched closely.

The guards at the brick factory told the Silbergers they would be transferred to Belgium. Judith was excited at his news, because she thought she would find a nice French husband there. But of course this was a lie, and it made Judith very angry, because she had grown up reading German literature that focused on German virtue.

When the doors of the cattle car opened at Birkenau, Judith remembered Josef Mengele standing on the platform, pointing to the left and right. People in striped uniforms tried to whisper warnings to the families. Mengele called for twins; Andrea did not want to step forward, but Judith grabbed her hand and did so. The girls tried to say goodbye to their parents but lost track of them amid the confusion. After they were taken away to the showers, a Slovakian girl cruelly pointed to the smokestack and told the twins their parents were being burned there. Nevertheless, Judith continued looking for them for weeks.

Judith and Andrea were not placed in the barracks with the other twins; instead, they temporarily lived in a building filled with dead bodies. The twins received one meal a day. One day, Mengele noticed Judith and commented that she looked like she came from an aristocratic family: she had long fingers and white teeth. Judith replied that her parents were highly educated but not aristocratic. Mengele was impressed that the twins knew German. Mengele allowed the two girls to keep their hair and dresses. Mengele wrote down Judith's name, and Andrea became the liaison between an SS office and their new barrack.

Judith and Andrea were moved to one of the hospital barracks. Before the war, Judith had been a medical technologist; eventually at Birkenau she became a translator to the doctors and kept track of prisoners entering and leaving the hospital. In addition to her hospital responsibilities, Judith also spent time with the other twins. She and Andrea went out in the fields with them to find peas and green beans, and Judith let the twins eat them. On one of the walks to the forest, they saw young children's bodies ready to be burned. Judith always tried to figure out a way for Andrea and her to escape.

Judith secretly wrote down the names and addresses of the prisoners who passed through the hospital. These notes were later discovered by the SS, but it was during the chaos of the evacuation, so Judith's life was spared; she was not hanged.

On several occasions Judith tried to help other prisoners. When prisoners died, Judith distributed their portion of food to the patients. She also hid a pregnant friend she knew from school in Kosice, but eventually the guards discovered the friend and took her to the crematorium. Mengele learned that Judith was trying to save a prisoner and informed her that she was next to go to the crematorium. Somehow Judith found the courage to stand up to him by offering to clean his boots! He was so taken aback that he never bothered her again.

Judith remembered the twins being kept clean, and some were able to stay with their mothers. Many of the twins were younger than she and Andrea. Judith did not witness any of the twin experiments, which were performed in other buildings. And she and Andrea were never subjected to experiments; Mengele seemed to consider them differently from the other twins. However, doctors did examine and take pictures of them. A Czech woman named Dinah Gottliebova (Dina Babbit) drew and painted Judith naked, because Mengele said Judith was a "perfect specimen."

In January 1945 Mengele ordered the prisoners on a death march. Judith remembered a German boy she knew giving her a coat and a loaf of bread. The loaf was so heavy that Judith asked Andrea to carry it. During the march, Judith watched an SS guard shoot a girl right in front of her. The guard told Judith to put on the girl's shoes, and if they didn't fit, he would shoot Judith as well. The shoes fit. After a few days, the survivors were crammed on an open train and travelled for about a week. They ate dirty snow for food.

Finally they arrived in Ravensbruck concentration camp. They found rotten potatoes and started to eat them. A few days later Andrea came down with typhus but willed herself to get well. From there, the prisoners were taken to a smaller camp, and because it was spring, they could sit outside. A Slovakian doctor named Dr. Berman told Judith she was severely ill and took her to Prague for tests. Andrea was able to accompany her. Judith remembered the Czech doctors caring for her, keeping her at the hospital for six months to make sure she was recovered.

A friend from Kosice brought Judith and Andrea back to their hometown. When they arrived, they found their home had been turned into a department store. Judith went to the Jewish cemetery to put flowers by her grandparents grave, but she couldn't locate it because it was completely overgrown with thorns. She found very few possessions from before the war. One of her father's clients had hidden some of her family's possessions underground on the property of a Hungarian dignitary. Judith gave the family her father's watch to show her gratitude.

Judith and Andrea didn't stay in Kosice long because they received a telegram from an uncle that the International Red Cross was trying to get them out of the country. In May or June of 1946 they were among the first to leave Czechoslovakia. Judith left for New York and then moved to York, Pennsylvania, to live with her uncle. A second uncle was there, and Andrea worked at his hardware store. Judith learned English at a college, and within two or three months, she passed the written and oral exams. While in college, she worked in a pastry shop, even though she didn't speak English well. She worked very hard, and every day she ate one dozen chocolate cookies.

Eventually, Andrea and her husband moved to Cleveland. Judith followed later.

Judith met her husband, Burt Guttman, at a party. He was from Slovakia. He had served in the U.S. Army and was an attorney who specialized in international law. They married on May 27, 1947. After Burt's death in 1984, Judith moved to Washington, DC and served as an interpreter for the U.S. Justice Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Burt and Judith had two children, Les and Corinne. In later years, Judith volunteered at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Andrea passed away in 1993 from cancer. Burt died in 1984. Judith lived to be 88 years old; she died in 2012.