



SURVIVING THE ANGEL OF DEATH

THE TRUE STORY OF A MENGELE TWIN IN AUSCHWITZ

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were to take note: The armies were now in power, so we were to welcome them! We heard the soldiers singing, "We are Horthy's soldiers, the best-looking soldiers in the world."

That night, my mother and father allowed the soldiers to camp in our yard; the commanding officer slept in our guest room. Mama treated the officers like company: She baked her best torte and invited the officers to dine with our family. I remember that there was much conversation about good food, and Miriam and I were excited to sit at the table with these important men in uniform. It was a pleasant evening, and the officers praised Mama's cooking and baking. Before they went to sleep, they kissed her hand as they thanked her, a courtly habit of many European and Hungarian men of the time. Early the next morning they left, and our parents seemed to be reassured.

"See?" said Mama. "There is no truth to the talk that they are killing the Jews. They are real gentlemen."

"Why would people tell such stories?" Papa asked, not expecting an answer, much less disagreement from my mother or anyone else in the family. "You're right. Nazis will never come to a small village like ours," he concluded. This we were to take as fact. Papa had said it.

Yet late at night, behind closed doors, our parents listened to a battery-operated radio. They spoke to each other in Yiddish, a language none of us girls understood, as they discussed the news. What was it they were hearing that could be so secret? That could make them try to hide it from us girls?

Our relative freedom came to an abrupt end one morning in March, that year we turned ten. Two Hungarian *gendarmes*, or policemen, arrived in our front yard. Soon they were pounding on the door.

"Get your belongings! Gather them up. You are going to be moved to a transportation center." This was not a request; it was a command. "You have two hours to pack."

Mama barely had the strength to get out of bed. Papa and our older sisters bundled up food, bedding, clothing—all the necessities they could think of. Miriam and I wore matching dresses and took two other sets of identical clothes.

As the policemen marched us out of our home, everyone in Portz watched us leave on the one road that ran through the village. Neighbors came out of their farmhouses and lined the road. Our classmates from school just stared. No one tried to stop the *gendarmes* from taking us away. No one said a word.

I was not surprised. Once word got around that we had tried to leave in the middle of the night, conditions had continued to get worse; the harassment from the villagers and their children had grown uglier and more frequent.

Even Luci, Miriam's and my best friend, stood very still, her eyes not meeting ours as we approached her house. She did not say she was sorry nor give us anything to remember her by to take on our journey. Just before we passed her house, I glanced at her. She looked down. In silence we left the home we had always known.

We were bundled into a horse-drawn, covered wagon. The policemen took us to a town called Șimleu Silvaniei,

had brought. We struggled and huffed while the ghetto commandant strode back and forth with his hands on his hips shouting, "Isn't it nice that I get to see the children of Israel living in tents like in the days of Moses?" He laughed uproariously as if he had told himself the funniest joke on earth.

Our entire family stayed in the same tent. Every time the sky darkened and it began to rain, the commandant barked through a loudspeaker, "Take down the tents! I want them to be built now on the *other* side." There was no reason for this except simple cruelty. By the time we took down our tents, crossed the bridge, and set up our shelter again in the mud, we were soaked.

Mama was still very weak from her illness, and living outdoors in the rain and cold just made her worse. At night Miriam and I slept close together, our small bodies giving each other warmth and comfort.

During our stay, the head of each family was taken to the headquarters for interrogation. One day, German guards came for Papa and took him away for questioning. They believed my parents were hiding gold and silver or had concealed valuables at our farm; they wanted to know exactly where. But Papa was a farmer and his only riches were his land and the crops he produced. He told the guards he had no silver except our Shabbat, or Sabbath, candlesticks. Four or five hours later they carried him back to our tent on a stretcher. He was covered with whip marks, oozing blood. They had burned his fingernails and toenails with the flame of candles. It took him many days to recover.

mors circulating among the grownups in the ghettos that Jews sent to Germany would be killed. So we thought that if we stayed in Hungary, we would be all right, we would be safe.

The guards told us to leave our belongings, that everything we would need would be at the labor camp. Nevertheless, Mama and our older sisters took a few valuables from our tent. Papa carried his prayer book. Miriam and I put on our matching burgundy dresses.

The guards marched us to the train tracks and herded us into cattle cars, pushing and shoving until one car was packed with eighty or one hundred people. The guards made Papa responsible for our car. Papa was told that if anyone escaped, he would be shot. The doors were slammed shut and sealed with a metal bar that slid into two handles. Barbed wire covered four small windows up high, two on each side. How could anyone escape?

Miriam and I pressed close together. There was no room to sit or lie down, not even for young children like us. Even though I was just a little girl, I could sense that something awful was about to happen. Just seeing our parents so powerless, parents that I had always seen as our protectors no longer able to protect our family, had turned any sense of safety I had completely upside-down.

For days, our train rushed along the tracks, the endless sound of the clacking interrupted only by an occasional hoot of the train's horn. Not only did we have no place to sit or lie down, we had no food or water, and no bathrooms. I remember being very thirsty, my mouth pasty and dry.

the cries resounded with the ultimate and most unimaginable pain of human loss, emotional grief, and suffering.

I felt as though I was watching things happen to someone else. Here and there I glimpsed layers of barbed wire fences, bright klieg lights, and rows of buildings. The SS guards strode among the groups of people, as if searching for something.

Suddenly I felt like I had landed in my body again. I looked around, and I felt Miriam's quaking frame next to mine. But where was Papa? And where were my older sisters, Edit and Aliz? I searched desperately, holding tightly to my mother's and my twin's hands in a death grip. I could not find the rest of my family. After four days of such close proximity to my older sisters and Papa, in my bewilderment and confusion I had lost them.

I never saw them again.

I held tightly to Mama's hand. An SS guard rushed by. He was calling out in German, "*Zwillinge! Zwillinge!*" Twins! Twins! He barreled past us, then stopped short, whirled around, and came back. He stood in front of us. His eyes traveled back and forth from Miriam's face to mine, up and down our matching burgundy dresses.

"Are they twins?" he asked Mama.

She hesitated. "Is that good?"

"Yes," said the guard.

"They are twins," replied Mama.

Without one word, he grabbed Miriam and me, tearing us away from Mama.

We screamed and cried as we were dragged away. We begged him to let us stay with her. The German guard paid no attention to our pleas. He pulled us across the railroad tracks, away from the selection platform. I turned my head and saw my mother, desperate, her arms outstretched toward us, wailing. A soldier grabbed her and threw her in another direction. My mama disappeared into the crowd.

After that everything happened quickly, so quickly. Guards separated people on the selection platform into groups. One group had young men and women. In another, children and older people. Miriam and I held on to each other as we were brought to join a group of thirteen sets of twins who had come from our train transport: twenty-six children, all frightened and confused.

A guard brought a mother and her twins to stand with our group. I recognized her! It was Mrs. Csengeri, wife of the storekeeper in Șimleu Silvaniei, the town near our village. Her twin daughters were eight years old, and when we shopped at her store, she and Mama liked to talk about the problems of raising twins. She and her girls stayed with our group. Why had the guards let their mother come with them and not ours with us? I did not have time to ponder the question much before things started happening again.

After half an hour, an SS guard led us to a big building near the barbed wire fence. As soon as we entered the building, we were ordered to undress. I felt numb again, not part of my own body. This was all a nightmare, right? It would end the second I opened my eyes, and Mama would be there

to comfort me, right? But I was not dreaming.

All of us were given short haircuts. The barber explained that twins received privileged treatment: We were allowed to keep some hair. Luckily, I had learned some German, so I could understand what was being said on a basic level. As I watched our long braids fall to the floor, I did not feel so very privileged.

Next we took showers. Our clothes had been fumigated with some sort of anti-lice chemical and were returned to us. Wearing our own clothes was another "privilege" we twins got that other prisoners did not. Miriam and I put on our dresses, but now each had a big red cross painted on the back. I instantly hated that red cross on my dress. Wearing the dress did not feel like a privilege. I knew that like the yellow star they forced Jews to wear in the ghettos, the Nazis were using that red cross to mark us so that we could not escape.

Right then and there I decided not to do anything the guards asked me to do. I would give them as much trouble as possible. In the processing center, prisoners' arms were being tattooed. We watched as the prisoners went up one after another, were told to hold out their arms, and had their arms pinned down while the instrument seared numbers into their flesh with acute pain.

Not me. I was not going to be a sheep anymore. When my turn came, I struggled and kicked. The SS guard grabbed my arm. The feel of his grip twisting my skin dissolved my resolve. "I want my mama!" I screamed.

"Hold still!" ordered the guard.

filthy. The stink inside was worse than the stench outside. There were no windows on the lower part of the walls for light or ventilation, only across the top above our heads, which made it suffocating. A double row of bricks forming a bench ran down the middle of the barracks. At the end stood a three-hole latrine, another privilege for twins; we did not have to go outside in the big public latrine to go to the bathroom. There were a few hundred twins from ages two to sixteen. We spotted Mrs. Csengeri's daughters there, too, but we did not speak to them at that time.

That first night a pair of Hungarian twins who had been there a while showed us the triple-decker bunks. Miriam and I had a bunk on the bottom.

When the evening meal arrived, all the other children rushed to the doorway. Dinner consisted of a two-and-a-half-inch slice of dark bread and a brownish fluid that everyone called "fake coffee." Miriam and I looked at each other. "We can't eat this," I said to one of the Hungarian twins.

"It's all you will get until tomorrow," she said. "You had better eat it."

"It's not kosher," I said. At home on the farm, we only had kosher food—food that fulfilled the requirements of Jewish dietary law—that Papa blessed before every meal.

The twins laughed at us, but it was not a kind laugh, more like a boy-are-you-stupid laugh. And they greedily wolfed down the bread that Miriam and I offered them.

"We're glad to have the extra bread," they said, "but the two of you are going to have to learn to eat everything if you

want to survive. You cannot be fussy, and you cannot worry about whether or not something is kosher.”

After the meal the Hungarian twins and some of the others briefed us. “You are in Birkenau,” they told us. “It is part of Auschwitz, but it’s three kilometers from the main camp. Auschwitz has one gas chamber and one crematorium.”

Miriam said, “I don’t understand.”

I asked, “What is a gas chamber? What is a crematorium?”

“Follow us, and we’ll show you.” The twins led us to the back of the barracks near the door where the barracks supervisor did not notice us. We looked up at the sky. Flames rose from chimneys that towered over Birkenau. Smoke covered the whole camp and fine ash filled the air, making it as dusky as the sky after an explosion of a volcano—it was that thick. Again, we were hit by that terrible smell.

Even though I was afraid to ask, I heard myself saying, “What are they burning so late in the evening?”

“People,” said a girl.

“You don’t burn people!” I said. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“The Nazis do. They want to burn all the Jews.”

Somebody else said, “Did you see how the Nazis divided the people arriving on the trains into two groups this morning? They are probably burning one group right now. If the Nazis think you are young and strong enough to work, you are allowed to live. The rest are taken to the gas chambers and gassed to death.”

I thought of Mama who was so weak after her long illness. I thought of Papa, clutching his prayer book.

Every day, every child had to be counted, dead or alive. Dr. Mengele knew how many twins he had, and no corpse could be disposed of without following procedure.

That first morning an SS guard waited at the front of the barracks. "Doctor MENGELE is COMING!" she yelled. The supervisors seemed nervous, twitchy with anticipation of the great man. Miriam and I stood at attention, not daring to move or breathe.

Dr. Josef Mengele entered the barracks. He was dressed elegantly in an SS uniform and tall, shiny black riding boots. He wore white gloves and carried a baton. My first thought was how handsome he was, like a movie star. He strode through the barracks, counting twins at every bunk, with an entourage of eight people accompanying him. We later found out that the group included a Dr. Konig, a girl who was the interpreter, and several SS guards and assistants. Mengele was never escorted by fewer than eight in his entourage at these barracks checks.

When Dr. Mengele stopped at the bunks containing the three dead bodies, he flew into a rage. "Why did you let these children die?" he screamed at the nurse and SS guards. "I cannot afford to lose even one child!"

Our nurse and the supervisors trembled.

He continued counting until he came to Miriam and me. He stopped and looked at us. I was petrified. Then he moved on. The other children told us that he had been on the selection platform the day before when we had arrived. He was the one who made the selections of the prisoners

Until that moment I had stopped thinking about my family. Maybe it was due to the bread we ate each evening that supposedly contained not only sawdust but a powder called bromide that made us forget memories of home, a sedative of some kind. Whatever it was or was not, I could not feel sorry for myself, for Miriam, for anyone. I could not think of myself as a victim, or I knew I would perish. It was simple. For me, there was no room for any thought except survival.

At night Miriam and I lay in our bunk with two other sets of twins. We snuggled close but did not talk or whisper. If I had told Miriam how hungry and miserable I was, it would have only made things worse. In the darkness I heard a whistle, a car, or motorcycle going by. Noises of marching, moaning, vomiting, barking, and crying punctuated the hush of camp—an orchestra accompanying the pervasive human misery.

Occasionally when our supervisors were asleep, our old friend from the neighboring village, Mrs. Csengeri, sneaked into our barracks to see her twin daughters. She was a smart, quick-witted woman. Upon her arrival at Auschwitz, she had convinced Dr. Mengele that she could help him by giving him information about her twins, so she had been allowed to stay in the women's barracks. Mrs. Csengeri brought her children food, underwear, hats, things she had taken or "organized." "Organizing" was camp language for stealing from the Nazis. I envied those girls for having a mother who was still alive and caring for them; Miriam and I had only each other.

“Why aren’t they feeding us?” I asked. “We should be getting bread.”

Vera said, “No one here gets anything to eat because people are brought here to die or are taken from here to die in the gas chamber.”

“They don’t want to waste food on the dying,” said Tamara.

I cannot die, I told myself.

I will not die.

That night I was too sick to feel hungry. I found it hard to sleep without Miriam beside me, cuddling. In the dark I heard people moaning and screaming in pain. Their screams cut into me. I had never heard so many voices wailing, howling, and bellowing.

The next day a truck came. The sickest people were thrown onto the truck bed to be taken directly to the gas chamber. They shrieked and struggled as some of them were tossed on top of people who were already dead.

“Am I going to the gas chamber?” I thought. The gas chamber was always there, next to the crematorium belching its stink of burning human hair, bones, and flesh into the air all around us. The gas chamber was a real possibility for any of us in that camp—but more so for those of us in the infirmary. Twice a week those trucks would come. Years later, I learned that right before the bodies were thrown into the crematorium, a group of workers would pull out gold teeth and remove any jewelry. The Nazis collected an average of seventy-six pounds of gold from the bodies every single day. Someone was getting rich.

happen. Maybe we were saved by orders from Berlin to stop gassing the Jews. The Nazis by then must have known they were losing the war. Maybe they wanted to hide the evidence of their atrocities.

Then in early January, 1945, the SS began to order people out of the barracks to go on forced marches. "*Raus! Raus!* Out! Out!" they shouted. "Everybody out! We are taking you away for your own protection." We heard that thousands of people were now being marched deep into Germany.

"I am not going to leave the barracks," I said to Miriam. "I am not going on any march." I figured that the Nazis had not been particularly nice to us when they were winning the war, so they certainly would not be any nicer when they were losing it. We stayed.

To my surprise, no one came to get us. The Nazis were in such a hurry to get everybody out that they did not bother checking each barracks. Some of the twins remained with us, including Mrs. Csengeri and her daughters. At the time I did not know that many people had also chosen to stay behind.

The next morning we woke up and realized we had missed roll call. We discovered that the Nazis were gone . . . or so it seemed. We saw no guards, no SS, no Dr. Mengele.

The joy and happiness we felt! The Nazis were gone! Now we were on our own. I spent my time trying to find food, water, and blankets to keep my sister and me alive.

One of the men prisoners had cut an opening in the barbed wire so that we could walk from one camp to another. Two girls and I went to search for things, roaming from area

to area. I badly needed shoes. I was still wearing the ones from home that I had on when I had arrived at Auschwitz. The soles kept flapping open. I tied them with string, but it was still rather hard to walk. Miriam's shoes were in better condition because she had stayed in the barracks to guard our few belongings whenever I went out organizing.

The girls and I went to the place where the Nazis had kept all the clothes, shoes, and blankets they had taken from the prisoners. It was a huge building the Nazis called "Canada," perhaps because they saw the country of Canada as a place of abundance. Piles of belongings rose to the ceiling. I rummaged through shoe after shoe after shoe, but I could not find any that fit, so I finally chose a pair that was two sizes too big. I filled the toe areas with some rags and tied them with string. At least my feet were now warm. I grabbed some coats and blankets for us and brought them back to the barracks where we bundled up.

One afternoon I went to the kitchen to organize food. A couple of kids and some grown-ups who had stayed behind were already there taking bread.

Holding four or five bread loaves in my arms, I heard the strange sound of a car. "The Nazis are gone, so whose car is coming?" I wondered. We ran outside to see. There was a Jeep-like car, and four Nazis holding machine guns jumped out and began spraying bullets in every direction.

I remember seeing a barrel of a gun pointed at my head, three to four feet from me, then I faded away.

When I woke up, I thought I was dead. All around me I saw bodies.

OK. So we are all dead, I thought. Then I moved my arms. Then I moved my legs. I touched the person beside me, but there was no movement. Her body was cold. Aha! *She* was dead, but I was alive!

I stood up, thankful to be alive. I thought it must have been a guardian angel that made me faint before the bullets hit me, because I did not have any time to think or do anything to save myself.

I raced back to the barracks. "Miriam?" I called as I burst inside.

There she was. "What happened?" she asked, eyes rounded with fear.

"The Nazis are back!" I said and added, "I wonder why they are back? They almost killed me!" I told her what had happened and how terrified I had been. "We don't have any bread. I was so frightened, I just ran for my life."

"Oh, Eva," she said, "what if you had been killed?"

We did not talk about that "what if" anymore. We just hugged and hugged.

That same night we were awakened by smoke and heat. Flames shot down from the roof. We could feel searing heat from the flames through the barracks walls. The barracks were on fire! We grabbed our stuff and ran outside. The Nazis were back at the camp, no longer in hiding, probably trying to destroy the evidence of their crimes.

Flames reddened the sky as far as we could see. SS guards had blown up a crematorium and the building called Canada. Shirts and dresses from Canada flew through the air amidst

the sparks and ashes. The Allies were attacking and bombs lit the sky. It looked like the whole world was on fire.

Thousands of people surged out of the rows and rows of barracks. The same SS guards I had seen at the kitchen lined us up for marching. "Anyone who doesn't march quickly will be shot!" screamed a guard. He shot randomly into the crowd as a warning.

"Miriam, stay with me," I whispered. We did not know where we were going. I held onto her hand very tightly. We worked our way into the middle of the group. It was safer than being in the front or the back where we might attract attention. If they started shooting, we would be surrounded by other people.

The crowd swept us along. Being pushed and jostled in that big crowd, it was a struggle to stay in the middle. The SS kept shooting randomly as they herded us. Around us as bodies fell to the ground, our fear increased. All of the children and the older people who had not been taken in the earlier marches were in this march. Later we learned that 8,200 people, including us, marched from Birkenau that night. In one hour, 1,200 were killed on the way. Only 7,000 people arrived at the barracks.

Forced by the wave of the crowd, we finally arrived back at the barracks in Auschwitz. It was still the middle of the night, but the brick buildings glowed in the klieg lights. Not knowing what would happen next, people started pushing hard, shoving to get inside the two-story building. Miriam and I also raced toward those barracks for shelter.

The SS guards inexplicably disappeared.

And somehow, I cannot remember how it happened, somehow in the shuffle I lost my twin sister.

"Miriam?" I called. "Miriam! Miriam! Where are you?"

I whirled around and around. She was not there, not anywhere!

As I began to panic, my heart clobbered in my chest, my breath rushed out of me in short bursts, my face burned hot despite the cold. My eyes, darting this way and that, filled with fearful tears.

"What if Miriam winds up in another barracks?" I thought.

"What if she gets transported somewhere?"

"What if she gets hurt?"

"What if she dies? Who would know to tell me?"

"What if I never see her again!"

I left the two-story building and half walked, half ran from barracks to barracks, calling her name. "Miriam! MIRIAM! MI-RI-AM!"

I asked anyone and everyone whether they had seen a girl who looked just like me. "Her name is Miriam," I told them, "Miriam Mozes. Please, please. Have you seen a girl named Miriam?"

Some kind people must have seen my desperation, my panic. They helped me by joining in, yelling her name: "Miriam Mozes! Miriam Mozes!" But no matter where I went, no matter where I looked, no matter how loudly I yelled, I could not find her.

After awhile, when Miriam did not answer, the people stopped helping me search. "Keep searching," they urged me, pity in their eyes, their own exhaustion making their bodies limp. "She has to be here somewhere."

"Miriam! Miriam!" I did not let thirty seconds go by without yelling her name.

While I saw pity and concern in some people's eyes, other people did not care, could not be bothered. So many of them had had enough and did not have even an ounce of concern left for anyone else. "So you're looking for your sister? Big deal! I don't have anybody."

I wanted to yell at them that Miriam was more than a sister. She was my other self. Our survival depended on each other! I could not stop to think about these hopeless souls. I had to find her. I had to.

I kept searching. "Miriam! Miriam!" I cried, my voice growing more hoarse, fainter. I was hungry and tired. But I did not allow myself to sit down to rest. I did not stop. Terrified, I went from one building to another, unable to give up my search. So many emaciated people, their thin prison garb clothing their pitiful bodies, were blocking my vision everywhere I looked. There seemed to be so many other people! They all looked the same to me because they were not Miriam. What could have happened to her? In one quick moment, dashing for safety, we had been separated! What had we done? I kept on.

My legs shuffling forward, my arms pumping to keep me moving, I did not let myself think of hunger, of the pains in

my gut, of the dryness making my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth. None of it mattered. "Miriam! Miriam Mozes! Miriam!"

Hours and hours, minutes and minutes, seconds and seconds—all piled on top of another in my panic. I had been searching for twenty-four hours. No Miriam! She could not have simply disappeared. I refused to accept that. Where was she?

I was stumbling about in a near-stupor of desperation and exhaustion when I went through yet another doorway.

"Miriam! Miriam Mozes! Miri—"

I bumped into someone about my height. "Sorry!" I was about to lurch past the person when it hit me: It was Miriam.

"Miriam! MIRIAM!" I fell into her arms. She fell into mine. "Where were you? I've been looking, looking, looking! What happened?"

"I have been searching for *you*!" she insisted. "What happened to you?"

We hugged, we kissed. Gripping one another we both slid to the floor to rest, crying and hanging onto each other.

"Eva, where were you?" she asked me through her tears. "We made such a mistake by racing. I thought I would never see you again."

"No. I could not think too much about that. I had to find you!" I insisted. Then I admitted the truth to her. "I was desperate."

I sank into her arms, feeling like it was Hanukkah. It was a miracle!

I had the strongest feeling of relief and love that I have ever felt in my whole life. I pulled away to look at her scrawny face and then put my arms around her again, holding her tight. Those twenty-four hours of searching for her had felt like forever. The more I held on to her, the more I felt sure we would never be parted again. "I am so glad I found you," I told her, filled with more emotion than I could express.

Miriam reached out her hand. "Look!" she said. There she held a piece of chocolate. "Someone gave me this when I was searching for you."

My eyes opened wide. She offered it to me.

I broke it in half, and we savored it in this sweetest of moments.

"From now on, always hold my hand," I said. "Never let go."

Miriam agreed. "Yes, we must never be separated again."

"This is our lucky barracks!" I said.

"Then let's take a little nap here," Miriam said, sinking lower against the wall. "I'm so tired."

Our hands tightly entwined, our bodies close for comfort, we shut our weary eyes. No matter what happened next, we knew we had each other.

had never worn those Auschwitz uniforms before. I was already wearing two coats because it was so cold. Underneath our coats and dresses, Miriam and I carried everything we owned: food, bowls, blankets—things we regarded as treasures.

We stood at the very head of the line and held hands as Soviet soldiers marched us out of the barracks between the high, barbed-wire fences. A nurse holding a small child in her arms walked beside us. Huge cameras kept filming, filming. I looked at the cameraman and wondered why he was taking our picture.

“Are we movie stars or something?” I wondered. I was very impressed with it all. The only real movies Miriam and I had seen were the ones starring Shirley Temple that our mama had taken us to in the city.

To my surprise, after we had all walked through the fences, the cameraman sent all of us back inside and directed us to march out again. With nuns, nurses, and Soviet soldiers accompanying us, rows and rows of twins filed back into the barracks, then right back out again. We repeated the action several times until the cameraman was satisfied. Years later I found out that he wanted to capture the scene as part of a propaganda movie showing the world how the Soviet army had rescued Jewish children from the fascists.

At last, for the final time, Miriam and I, hand in hand, walked out of the barracks in matching striped uniforms. Miriam and I had survived Auschwitz. We were eleven years old.

Now we had only one question: How exactly would we get home?

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we spoke mainly Hungarian, that was a small relief.

So we went into town and found what they told us was true: We could ride the streetcars for free. Over and over, Miriam and I rode the streetcar from one end of town to the other. The sheer joy of being free, feeling the wind in our ears, and being able to choose what we did was so liberating to us.

Through the older girls, we learned that some survivors of Auschwitz were being held in a displaced persons camp at Katowice, including our friend from home, Mrs. Csengeri, and her twin daughters. One day I thought of a plan to get us out of the monastery.

"Come on, Miriam," I said. "We're going to see Mrs. Csengeri."

"Why?" asked Miriam.

"Just come with me."

We hopped on a streetcar and went to the camp. When we found Mrs. Csengeri, I began talking a mile a minute. "You were my mama's friend," I said. "We don't want to stay in the monastery, but they won't let us leave because we can't find our parents."

"Yes, I know," she replied. "But why are you telling me all this?"

I paused and then blurted, "Would you sign a paper saying you are our aunt and get us out so we can go home?"

At first, Mrs. Csengeri said nothing. Finally she said, "OK. I will go to the monastery with you and sign the papers." She paused and then added, "And then I will take you home with me."

I was overjoyed.

In March of 1945 Miriam and I moved into the camp with Mrs. Csengeri and her daughters. We lived in a room in the barracks and shared it with a lady, Mrs. Goldenthal, and her three children.

Mrs. Goldenthal's twin boys, Alex and Erno, were our age, and I discovered that they had been selected at Auschwitz for Mengele's experiments like us. Mrs. Goldenthal had stayed with them, and I found out later that she had hidden a younger child, Margarita, underneath her long skirt. She had come into the camp with the child hidden in her dress and during her entire stay there, even in the Nazi barracks where she had kept Margarita under the mattress during inspections, she and the other women had helped conceal her child.

Now Mrs. Goldenthal and Mrs. Csengeri took care of all of us. They washed us and boiled our clothes. They got rid of the lice. Mrs. Csengeri sewed dresses for Miriam and me out of big Soviet khaki tunics. Wearing that dress made me feel like a little girl again. She even fixed special food for us. Miriam and I almost felt like a family again, being cared for by adults, the way it used to be.

The Soviet soldiers in charge of the camp gave us bread and a half a ruble every week to spend on anything we wanted. Sometimes Miriam and I went to the outdoor market in town to buy an apple. Normally we were given plain food that filled us, such as bread, potato soup, and meat. An apple was a luxury that we were thrilled to have.

small fire, and cook something in a pot. The Soviets gave us bread and rations, but we had also taken along some food. I no longer had to worry about feeding us. Mrs. Csengeri took over and never complained. When the conductor called that the train was about to leave, we hopped on again.

We were heading toward Romania. On the train we sang and talked. Mrs. Csengeri and Mrs. Goldenthal said they were going to save the striped prison uniforms they had worn at Auschwitz and testify to the world what had happened there. "I'll tell my story," Mrs. Csengeri kept saying. "I will tell what these monsters did to us." Back then I did not understand why that was so important. I could not imagine who would want to hear about Auschwitz, but the women kept discussing it. The question came up as to whether their husbands had survived. I wondered if anybody in my family had survived besides Miriam and me. Nobody really knew.

Sometimes we passed through villages and towns that had been destroyed by bombing. Brick buildings lay in ruins. Rubble covered the ground. Some places seemed altogether abandoned. We went from Katowice in Poland to Czernowitz near the Romanian border. At the outer edge of the city we stayed at a camp that may have been a labor camp or ghetto. We remained there for about two months and thought we were getting closer to home.

One afternoon we were told to pack up, and we were loaded into another cattle car with bunk beds. As the train rumbled on, the grownups realized that we should have al-

ready reached Romania; Transylvania had become part of Romania again, it was no longer Hungary. Mrs. Csengeri watched the signs and said we were going deeper into the Soviet Union. When the train crawled uphill, some people jumped off and rolled away from the tracks. "Where are they going?" I wondered. For years I wondered what happened to them. Later I realized that many people were frightened of the Soviet Union and did not want to live under communist rule.

After a week we arrived at a refugee camp in Slutz. It was close to Minsk in the Soviet Union. We lived there for a couple of months with former prisoners from all over Europe. Finally we were grouped according to our home countries.

One day in October we started back into Romania. Our first stop was Nagy Varad Oradea, Mrs. Goldenthal's town. She and her children went home. I was so envious! I wanted to be back in our home! That night the rest of us stayed in a hotel near the train station and had dinner there. The food was very, very good, consisting of baked potatoes and fried eggs with seasoning, with apples and ice cream for dessert. For once, we were full after we ate. A Jewish agency gave us the money to pay our bill. Every town that had once had a Jewish population now had a Jewish agency to take care of displaced persons like us and help reunite families.

The next day we boarded another train and rode south to Șimleu Silvaniei, Mrs. Csengeri's town. She invited us to stay overnight. In the morning we thanked her for taking care of us and took the first train to Portz, our village.