

## **Istvan Hargittai: Our Lives**

### *My Brother*

His original first name was Sándor, affectionately Sanyi. Because of our difference in age, seven and half years, we were not very close in our childhood. I never followed him around and by the time we could have done things together he was gone from home. Later, we spent some time together, not years or months, at most some days at a time. On such occasions it was a revelation how much we could tell each other. Sanyi has lived in Israel since 1978, where his first name became Alex. He is now retired and his main occupation is helping his son, who is a veterinarian. Sanyi has a lot of experience in medical instrumentation, his primary area of work, although he had tried other things too.

Sanyi knows much more about a crucial period of our life, the deportation in 1944-45, than I do. He has been a reluctant storyteller, but a few years ago there was a special occasion that gave me and Magdi and our children an opportunity of learning more about this dark period of our lives. It was in 1995, Sanyi was back in Budapest for a visit, and our children happened to be at home. Sanyi spent a whole afternoon with us and I asked him about those fateful years. As he warmed to telling us the story, we were glued to our chairs, as if time had stopped. I learned a lot about him, about our family, and about my life.

### *Brother's Story*

There are things that are too painful to remember. I was born in 1934. I was mother's second pregnancy, the first was an extrauterine pregnancy, and it took years before she became pregnant again. We lived in Budapest, at 9 Bécsi Avenue, in a two-story house, which we owned, but occupied upstairs only. Our home also housed Father's law office. Father used to go to the court in the morning and in the afternoon he received his clients. I often hid beneath his desk during his clients' visits and he did not mind it. He was patient and understanding, and we were very close. He used to take me to his parents' home. They had come from the northwest, from the western region of Slovakia, to Hungary and lived in Óbuda. Óbuda is now part of Budapest, its third component beside the better known Buda and Pest. Our grandparents were very poor and their home was small and crowded. Grandfather first had temporary jobs and later he worked in the brick factory. By the time I was born he had died. The family was large and father had many siblings. Our grandparents had 13 children of which 8 survived childhood and our father was the youngest. Grandmother lived with a daughter and her two sons. Father helped them a lot; he loved his mother. She gave Father and me meals, simple food that we did not cultivate much at home. Mother almost never came to see Father's family.

Father had a revolver in secret and he shared this secret with me and this made me proud. Mother, Father, and I often went swimming. Mother stopped swimming when she became pregnant with Istvan. Father represented large companies. His specialty was unfair competition. He wrote a book about it, which had to be published together with a non-Jewish co-author. It was a courtesy from his "co-author," to give his name to the book without charging

for it. Father had a judge's qualifications in addition to being a lawyer, but never worked as a judge.

I started my schooling in the Kolosy Square School but after the first grade I had to transfer because all Jewish pupils had to leave that school at that time. It was about 1941. From the second grade I went to the Ürömi Street School where the teacher of physical education ordered the Jewish children to step out of the line because he did not want us to participate in the exercises. Somewhat later, we were barred from the singing class as well. Once I was invited to a birthday party. The parents of the boy were my father's clients. I proudly brought a present for my classmate. When I rang their bell, his brother opened the door. He recognized me and told me that I was a Jew and he sent me home with a kick.

Father was called into the army. Due to his schooling, he had the right to wear a nicer uniform than those without schooling and, in addition, he had an insignia indicating that he served as a driver. At that time very few men had a driver's license in Hungary. Enlisted men without schooling had to salute him and I felt proud. However, soon enough he was stripped of his uniform and he had to wear civilian clothing with a military cap. He was also kicked out of the drivers' unit. He had to join a forced labor unit and I saw him last when he came back for a brief visit before departing to the front. He took me into his office and told me that from now on I was the man in the house and he told me never to forget that we loved each other. I was 8 years old. I kept going to school and one morning I was called out of my class. I was told that my father had died and I went home.

After a while mother decided that it might be safer for us to be in the country than in Budapest. We moved to Kiskunhalas, about one hundred kilometers south of Budapest, where we had some distant relatives by the name of Dobo and rented a small flat in their block. The humiliation in my new school was indescribable. We were there when Germany occupied Hungary. Everybody was scared, the Dobos, mother, and I too. We were in downtown Kiskunhalas when the German tanks started rolling into the town. At that point Mother decided to move to her birthplace, Orosháza, a town of 36 thousand in southeastern Hungary, about 220 kilometers from Budapest.

Soon we had to move into the ghetto there, which was created in a lumberyard. Before this move, there was already a curfew for Jews in Orosháza. There was a lady, the wife of the baker, Mrs. Löwey, who, every morning, threw a bag of fresh rolls into our open window. It was a unique show of defiance and solidarity. A married couple that refused to move into the ghetto committed suicide. Three of us children were taken to their home to tidy it up and prepare it for inventory. The dead bodies were there, they had to be stripped and they were taken away in blankets. It was my first meeting with cadavers and I was horrified. I was 10 years old.

In the ghetto, detectives and gendarmes came looking for hidden money and jewelry. Everybody was subjected to humiliating

body search and they beat people up. I still hear in my ears Mother's screaming as she was being beaten. Uncle was especially heavily beaten. He had bone tuberculosis in his youth. He spent some time in a sanatorium in Switzerland and was operated on in Paris. A piece of his leg bone was taken out and implanted into his hip. He had to use crutches, but after the beatings he could not move even with crutches for a while.

One day we got the order to move to the railway station with as much luggage as we could hold in our hands. Although it was early in the morning, many people lined up along the way as we were walking to the railway station. Some threw stones at us and spat on us.

### *Trains Moving*

We had to board cattle carriages. They locked them and left us there standing for hours. Then the train took us to Békéscsaba, the county seat, about 30 kilometers from Oroshaza, where we moved to the ghetto. The next station was Debrecen, a larger town, at another 50 kilometers to the northeast. The ghetto there was in a brick factory and it was terribly crowded. There was no food and barely anything to drink. We were hungry there for the first time and there was no water. One early morning we had to line up in the yard and a gendarme officer ordered us to submit all our papers. The original order may have referred to our documents, but the gendarme interpreted the order literally and they took away all papers, note books, toilet papers, everything. When this was done, they moved us to the railway station where we boarded, again, cattle carriages.

Most of what I remember is that I was thirsty. I was begging for water. Mother was always cool and calm and had this reassuring effect not only on us but on other people as well. The carriages were so crowded that we all had to be standing. A pail was placed in one of the corners and the carriage was locked. The gendarme then appeared and distributed very spicy sausage and onions. There was no bread and no water. They called us dogs and fed us like dogs and we all ate the sausage and the gendarmes were laughing. The train stood and people were losing their minds from being thirsty and they could not make it to the pail and within a few hours there was already the first dead in our carriage. They did not let us remove the dead body and by the time the train started moving there were several dead bodies. I remember the smell, the thirst, the crowd, and the dead. After a while the train stopped and started moving back. It did not move back to Debrecen though, just away from our original direction.

This was a decisive moment but for a long time, even after liberation, we knew nothing about its significance. It was much later that we found out that originally our train started for Auschwitz but then it was diverted toward Austria.

At one point and it was probably the state frontier, the train stopped, the Hungarian gendarmes left and boarded trucks and German soldiers took over. When the gendarmes left, the Germans

opened our carriages, one at a time, they let us dispose of the dead bodies and they also let us take water from a nearby well. This was though a temporary relief because I became thirsty again and Mother told me later, I developed hallucinations.

When we arrived in Strasshof in Austria we saw for the first time uniformed Ukrainians. They all had sticks and as they opened the carriages, they beat everybody with their sticks, making the people move out of the carriages and line up. They separated the men from the women. The children of 10 years old and younger stayed with the women. We entered the Strasshof concentration and distribution camp. We came to a square and we all had to strip naked. I was terrified. The Ukrainians and the Germans made sure that people got quickly rid of their inhibition. The men had to do the same at the other end of the square. We had to leave our clothing there. In a large barrack we were waiting for the showers and the doors of the barrack were locked. We did not know anything about Auschwitz where gas came out of the shower instead of water. Here it was water and it was warm and I still remember how good it was. Then all our body parts, especially those with hair, were disinfected, it smelled bad but nobody cared too much about it. They took down our names and fingerprinted us and took photographs of us. At the other end of the barrack we got back our clothing. We all got our places in barracks with three-level beds. Everybody was dead tired but we had to make a formation again. It was then that we received the characteristic meal of the concentration camp, for the first time. We called it Dörrgemüse;<sup>i</sup> it was cattle-turnip soup with a piece of bread.

In the morning, as in every morning from now on, we had to make a formation in the square, it was called the Appell. They counted us and then gave orders to people who were selected for work within the camp. In Strasshof there was no outside work. One evening then we had to go back to the railway station and board carriages again. We spent the whole night in the standing carriage. There were various rumors including the one that the persecution of Jews was over and we were to return to Hungary. There were always some that had sure tips. The train took us to Vienna. There we were in the hands of the German Todt organization<sup>ii</sup> whose troops were better than the Ukrainians and those Germans we had encountered in Strasshof. We boarded trucks on the Vienna railway station and we were taken to a school building at 10 Bischoffgasse in Vienna.<sup>iii</sup>

### *Schooling in Vienna*

A German officer and soldiers were at this camp and we had to line up in the yard. There the Lagerführer made a long speech in German, which was translated into Hungarian. The speech may not have been that long, I just remember it as very long. We were all very anxious about what was going to happen. He spoke about order, sanitation, and discipline. In the classrooms we found three-level beds and the families could make their accommodation together. Our family consisted of Mother, Uncle Pista, Aunt Éva,

Grandmother, Istvan and I. Our belongings could be placed under the beds. The Lagerführer made an inspection and soldiers accompanied him. He had a stick with which he turned everything around and he gave orders to the soldiers to collect things that he found were not necessary for us to have. I only remember some toys among the things they took from us.

The first day after our arrival the people got their work assignments. Mother was directed to be helper to a roofing master who turned out to be a humane Viennese man. He often shared his sandwich with Mother who pretended to eat it and brought it back for us. Children younger than 10 years old stayed behind in the camp during the day. Children above the age of 15 were considered adults and went to work with the rest. Children between 10 and 15 years old formed a special labor unit. I was in this unit, which had about 20 children. We were taken to bombed-out buildings, immediately following the bombing. We had to reach places that adults could not have reached. We had to bring out cadavers and wounded people and all the valuables. If we found just limbs or other body parts we had to bring them out as well. It was a cruel and frightening job and dangerous too.

Falling down killed some of us. They were replaced then by younger children. The German guards were not brutal just for the sake of tormenting us, but they required unconditional discipline. When they ordered us to climb to a place, however dangerous it was or to walk on a beam however unstable it was, they expected blind obedience. When any of us appeared hesitant, they let out a round next to us from their machine guns to frighten us. I have sharp memories of various events. I remember when we were carrying a heavy container and when the guard sensed that I wanted to pause, he gave a round and I did not dare to stop. From the heavy weight and the fright I wetted my pants. It was so cold that the urine froze along my legs. I remember my shoes, which were in a terrible state and we did not have stockings and used newspaper pieces to wrap our feet. In one of the bombed-out homes I found a pair of shoes that would have fit me and I changed into them. Upon my return downstairs, the guard noticed this, he became very angry and ordered me to return and change back the shoes. This episode stayed with me more sharply than many more horrible events. I could not figure out why he did not let me have a better pair of shoes. At about that time, I started having dreams about Father. He came for us in my dream and engineered our escape. In other dreams, we went for long walks in the woods just as we used to when we lived back home and he was still alive. Such dreams I still have occasionally, and I am now 61 years old.

Istvan, who was 3 years old, was a good child throughout the deportation. He was quiet and withdrawn. When soldiers entered the room he always hid behind Mother.

The sick in the camp were moved to the attic. So was grandmother when she became sick. It was a final move because seldom did anybody return from the attic. Nobody tended the sick. Their meals were placed at the entrance to the attic and those in

better condition among the sick distributed the food and reported in the morning about the recent dead. One morning then grandmother was among the dead.

### *Vienna 2002*

In June 2002, I visited our former camp, Lager 12 at 10 Bischoffgasse in Vienna. It was my first visit to the former camp site and I am the only member of our family who has ever visited the place since World War II. There was no trace of the former camp there, outside or inside the school,<sup>iv</sup> as if the camp might have not existed. I almost felt embarrassed, but the director had vaguely heard about some camp. She showed me the school and took me to the attic, where they keep the old year books. In the one for the year 1944/45, there were only short notes, and not a word about the camp that operated on the premises of the school. I found that part of the attic to which a staircase leads and which I recognized from Brother's narrative. I was there, alone for a few moments in empty, dusty space, held up by heavy wooden beams, and I felt very close to my grandmother.

On that visit, I contacted the Research Center of the History of Jews in Austria and they sent me photocopied material of the trial of the Lagerführer of Lager 12.<sup>v</sup> There were about 130 pages, mostly testimonies of former inmates, that is, surviving Jews from Hungary, also, testimonies by Viennese people, who lived nearby, and could see some of what was going on in the camp. There were enclosures in the material, and I found my name in the listings as Stefan Wilhelm (Stefan is the German equivalent of István).

The testimonies described how Franz Knoll, the Lagerführer, beat not only the young but also 80-year-old people, how he locked people up in the cold cellar in wintertime without food, how he stole the rations and had them delivered to his home by the prisoners, and how he tried to hide his loot, from the prisoners, in three big boxes after the camp had been liberated by the Russians. He was characterized by former prisoners and neighbors as brutal, inhuman, ruthless, and sadistic. A former inmate described how she had to witness the slow dying of hunger of her infant son, her pleading in vain for help to the Lagerführer, who then did not let her be there when her child was buried. Witnesses described how others, including children, perished in the camp. There were close to 600 grownups and about 60 children incarcerated there, and the Lagerführer referred to them as if they were things rather than human beings in his testimony. He repeatedly referred to children as children only for the age group between 0 and 10 years old.<sup>iii</sup>

Franz Knoll was born in 1894 in Vienna. He did not have much schooling, did not have any profession, and before the Nazis elevated him to positions of importance, he used to work mostly as a waiter. He joined the Nazi party in 1932, that is, long before the *Anschluss*. He was accused not only of the crimes he committed as the Lagerführer of Lager 12 but also of other crimes committed during the preceding years in other positions.

I have no expertise in legal matters, so it is only my impression that the trial was meticulous, preceded by a meticulous investigation during Knoll's long detention of about 22 months. Knoll pleaded not guilty, but the Court found him guilty and on August 20, 1948, it sentenced him to 18 months of imprisonment. The Court considered several mitigating conditions, among them his partial confession, the difficulty of his service, his reduced sense of responsibility, and his duties of supporting his wife and underage child. The Court also ordered to deduct Knoll's detention from his prison term. Thus, when the sentencing was over, Knoll walked free.

### *Brother Continues*

There came a time when I felt very tired and very cold and ulcers covered my whole body. I was terrified that they would move me to the attic. I could not go out to work and they transferred me to the Vienna Jewish hospital, which had a children's wing. There, a nurse cleaned every festering ulcer and it hurt. Their marks are still visible on my legs. My whole body was covered with gauze. There was a kind old doctor who promised me that I would be well soon. He explained to me that it was malnutrition and a lack of vitamins that caused my ulcers and that the war would be soon over. Mother later told me that she was afraid that she would never see me again.

One day the nurse told me that the hospital would be evacuated to Germany and I helped packing. That very night there was a heavy bombing raid; the children's wing was completely destroyed. We were in the cellar where one of the bombs broke a gas pipe. The nurses and doctors immediately placed soaked towels before our mouths. We were then extracted from the cellar through an emergency exit. This bombing may have saved me from evacuation to Germany. After the bombing I was sent back to our lager and I continued working. My original group was full and I was assigned to a different group that was sent to the Schoenbrunn Castle to harvest poppy seeds. Many of the parks in Vienna were used for growing useful crops.

In the camp, Uncle organized seminars about Zionism, about our future, about the fight against anti-Semitism, and about the need to create our own country in Palestine. I attended as many of his seminars as I could and there were many because he could organize them in small groups only. I was like a sponge and absorbed everything what I heard. I learned to love Uncle at this time. Before that he used to irritate me with his aggressive manners.

About the Viennese I have some good memories. Once when we were being escorted by the German guards in the street, a lady ran up to me, removed the scarf from her neck and wrapped it around mine. The German guard noticed this and slapped her so forcefully that she fell. There were some older gentlemen who came to work on the bombed-out houses and occasionally they gave us a piece of bread. The German guards could not stand such kindness and punished the old men if they caught them at such an act.

I could speak German. I used to have a German governess, went to a German language kindergarten, and spoke German with my paternal grandmother whose mother tongue was German. They did not speak Yiddish; they spoke German. We also used to spend some vacations in Austria with Mother's relatives.

### *Homebound*

Originally we arrived in Strasshof in June 1944 and were returned to Strasshof from Vienna at the end of March or beginning of April

1945. It happened on this occasion that there was a heavy bombing attack and bombs were falling everywhere. The Germans did not open the carriages, they did not let the people out until the bombing was over. We were met again by the ruthless Ukrainian and German guards and their sticks. It was a huge camp and it was very crowded. Then one day the German guards disappeared and there were more Ukrainians and they became even more ruthless. Nonetheless there was change in the air. The prisoners broke into foodstuff storage rooms. Children excelled in this. At first I was reluctant and somebody told Mother that I was hopeless, that I was not good enough even for stealing. Then one day the Ukrainians also disappeared. Now everything got loose, storage rooms were broken in and we were feasting on whatever we could find. The next day the first Russian soldiers entered the camp.

The Russians set up a military kitchen and the former prisoners ate as much as they could and quite a few, literally, ate themselves to death. Mother prevented us from overeating. When a Russian sanitary unit arrived, they put an end to this extravagance. By nightfall another danger appeared. The Russian soldiers raped every woman in the camp. This all happened before our eyes. The rape of Mother fell out of my memory for a while but then it returned and has stayed with me. The next day the Russians had to leave and the former prisoners started their long journey home.

On our way home, once a Russian truck picked us up, but not much later we had to jump off because one of the soldiers aimed his rifle at me. It was somewhere around Bratislava when Uncle, who no longer used crutches, was arrested by the Russians. They were taking prisoners for their so-called "little forced labor." However, later we learned that many seized for it ended up for years in Siberia. Uncle felt a lot of responsibility for us, and much of the time he was pushing a cart with István in it. Uncle became especially suspicious to the Russians when they understood that he spoke several languages. They thought that he was a spy. He could finally escape by telling the Russians that his children were just around the corner and to prove this he produced Istvan's chamber potty from his backpack.

Back in Budapest, we could not return to our home because a Soviet command post occupied it. The only thing we could get back from our home was some books. The Russians carried them out for us into the street. Mother charged me with guarding the books and some passers-by took some of them when they realized that only a child was guarding them. We found refuge with some friends nearby and Mother baked pastries and sold them at a railway station. Then we moved to another friend, and finally we moved to Orosháza.

In the lager, Istvan and I spent very little time together. Upon our return from the camp to Budapest, my bond with Istvan started forming and I started feeling responsible for him. Mother was away most of the time and I was charged with watching István. Istvan had dysentery in Budapest. When he got well and we moved to Orosháza, his nature changed. In the camp he used to be quiet and



withdrawn and now he became aggressive. I felt that I had to protect him because Uncle was constantly teasing him. Mother tried to discipline him, which was counterproductive and enhanced his stubbornness. This may have been a reaction to the happenings of the past year. Istvan used to cry a lot in the camp. From now on I never saw him crying. It was as if he had grown up. He was soon to be 4 years old.

Re-reading Brother's narrative, I alternate between having the sensation of watching a movie and living it through as my three-year old self. I am grateful that I have a witness who could tell me about it.

I see a link to Sanger since for both of us an older brother was important although in a very different way. Then there is one more point of intersection. While we were in the camp, Sanger was a conscientious objector. However, he has changed his mind about taking such a stand in similar circumstances and I wonder whether having learned about the horrors of World War II has helped him to change it.

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<sup>i</sup> In loose translation, dried vegetable stew.

<sup>ii</sup> The German organization of civil engineering for public works was named after a civil engineer by the name Todt. This organization used a lot of slave labor, Jews and POWs. Often the SA provided the armed guarding services for the Todt organization.

<sup>iii</sup> See, also a recent monograph, S. Szita, *Magyarok az SS ausztriai lágerbirodalmában (Hungarians in the Austrian Camp Empire of the SS)*, published in Hungarian by the Jewish Cultural Heritage in Hungary Public Foundation, Budapest, 2000, pp. 201-202. There were a total of 585 inmates, including 59 children in Lager 12, according to the census of September 1944.

<sup>iv</sup> Of about 50 former camp sites, there is a commemorative plaque on only one in Vienna.

<sup>v</sup> I thank Ms. Eleonore Lappin (St. Pölten, Austria) for it.