

# My Father: Ladislov, Lazslo, Laci, Leslie

by Sue Johnson

Ladislov, Lazslo, Laci, Leslie, ...my father bears a name from every country where he lived. But to me, he was Dad. I only learned about what my father had endured during the Holocaust when I was in middle school. I am going to share his experiences with you because education about this history was incredibly important to him. When I was learning about my father's life during the Holocaust, some parts were disturbing and scary. I don't want to hide the truth from you, but have chosen to share only some of those more painful experiences because my father was much more than what he endured. If at any point while you read this piece, you feel distressed, I encourage you to take a deep breath or a break and then come back and finish when you are ready.

The fact that you, as students, are learning about the Holocaust is a direct result of the efforts of my parents, and other local Holocaust survivors. Both my parents were denied higher education and religious education because of discriminatory laws that were a part of the Holocaust. This is why they felt it imperative to testify before the State legislature in Salem in support of a bill requiring that Oregon youth be educated about this history.

My father, Les Aigner, was born June 3, 1929 in Nové Zámky, Czechoslovakia — very close to the border of Hungary, a neighboring country that would later become allied with the Nazis. As events in the Second World War unfolded, the Hungarian government took control of Nové Zámky, which meant that my father's hometown was given a new, Hungarian name: Érsekúvár. Just like my father, his hometown had a few different names, depending on the changing national borders of the area.

Les wasn't no different from any average teenager. He would tell you that he loved his parents, Julius and Anna, his sisters, Erika and Marianna (Marika), and his grandmother, Jenny. They were not rich, but they were comfortable. They had food, clothes, and each other. During the Jewish holidays, his grandmother's home overflowed with his large extended family of more than 40 aunts, uncles, and cousins. My father called it "a constant family life." By contrast, at the end of the war, only five family members survived.

Growing up, Les attended two schools. In the mornings, he went to a Jewish day school, and in the afternoons, to Yeshiva (Hebrew school). My dad was often mischievous and got himself into trouble. One time he went to play hide and seek with his friend on the Sabbath (the Jewish day of rest and worship) in his only good suit. They leapt on and off huge piles of burlap sacks, the dust whirling around them. When he came home with a torn and dirty suit, his mother was upset and admonished him, "Wait till your father gets home!" and similarly, his father said, "Wait till your mother sees this!" — and that was the last he ever heard of that!

Les's father Julius operated his own business as a moving man. He owned a flatbed horse-drawn wagon and employed other men to help move merchandise. My father remembered when he would accompany his father to the train station to pick up loads of supplies, lumber, and foodstuffs to be sold at the market. If he was lucky, the delivery might be of oranges. Les would sit among the fragrant crates of fruit and gobble down as many oranges as he could before they dropped the load at the merchants.

His mother Anna, my grandmother, was a homemaker, which was hard work. Water had to be brought in by the bucketful from the well in the courtyard of their rented home for drinking, cooking, bathing, and laundry. Anna kept a kosher home, which meant the family followed Jewish dietary rules. Since there was no refrigeration, except a below ground root cellar, Anna had to be clever about cooking for the Sabbath. Every Friday she would make a big *cholent*, a stew with beans and meat and barley in a large cast-iron pot. Then she would wrap the lidded pot with newspaper and tie it with string. Then it was Les's job to carry the wrapped pot to the local bakery. After they finished baking for the day, the bakers would place the *cholent* of the Jewish townspeople into the still hot brick ovens, and cover them with the hot ash; there they would sit and slowly bake overnight. The following day, after services at the synagogue, my dad would return to the bakery and carry home his family's *cholent* to be enjoyed by all.

Even though Les had an enjoyable childhood, there were some hardships. In the early 1930s, antisemitism and Nazism were on the rise. As a result, my father was often bullied because he was Jewish. It is difficult for me to think about the times he told my brother and I of being chased and bullied in the streets by other children as he and his friends walked home from school. Many times they would run for safety to the home of the friend who lived closest, but they didn't always make it before they were caught and beaten, or had rocks thrown at them.

In the fall of 1938 the Nazis occupied parts of Czechoslovakia. They allowed the Hungarians, their new ally, to annex (take over) the southernmost region. The territory given to Hungary included my father's hometown, which they now called Érsekúvár. The restrictions against Jews began there in 1940. All Jewish people had their business licenses taken away, and suddenly, my grandfather Julius did not have a way to support his family. Upon hearing that such business restrictions were not in place in nearby Budapest (the capital city of Hungary), Julius found a job in a paper factory and decided to move his family there in 1941. However, since Les was in his final year of school, he stayed behind with his grandmother Jenny in order to finish his studies.

Once Les completed school in June, 1943, he joined his family in Csepel, Hungary, a town on the outskirts of Budapest. By this time, the Arrow Cross, another fascist and Nazi ally party, had taken power in Hungary. They followed the Nazi's example and subjected Jewish people to many dehumanizing policies. By April of 1944, my father's whole family was required to wear the yellow star of David, displayed on their outer layer of clothing, declaring to all that they were Jews. They could be chased, beaten, and ridiculed by anyone who saw their star.

Les's father was conscripted into mandatory public service to dig trenches and help with the war effort for the Hungarian army on the Russian front. Now the family once again had no income. Sixteen year old Erika was taken away as a forced laborer to a paper factory. She was only allowed to return home once to visit, using a special pass. Now only Anna, Marika, and Les remained to fend for themselves. Soon, they were forced into the Csepel ghetto — a walled off area of the city where the Jews were forced to live, isolated from the outside world. Here they lived in cramped quarters: two families occupying every room of each small apartment, barely room to lie down. Food was scarce, mostly potato and cabbage soup brought in by the Arrow Cross. Only fear of what was to come was plentiful.

By this time, the war was going very badly for Nazi Germany. The Hungarian government tried to join the Allies,

but the German government found out and in response, they invaded Hungary in March, 1944. Because of Hungary's betrayal, it was one of the last eastern European countries from which Jews were deported.

In July, 1944, after one month in the ghetto, the Nazis ordered my father and his family to pack whatever belongings they could carry and forced them, along with hundreds of fellow Jews, into an internment camp by the train tracks. Here, the family had little food and water, and were exposed to the hot sun. The guards treated them cruelly; dogs were trained to prevent escape, and barbed wire surrounded the camp. Like their fellow Jews, Les, his mother, and little sister lay on the bare ground at night, crowded together for days in misery and fear. The Nazi occupation resulted in over 430,000 Hungarian Jews being sent to concentration camps. Most were transported to Auschwitz, where 80% of Hungarian Jews were immediately sent to the gas chambers and killed.

Then, the trains began to roll in. The internees were being relocated, and no one knew where the journey would end. Crowds of people were forced into cattle cars at gunpoint, about 80 people into one cattle car. No one had room to move or breathe in the stifling heat. Only half the group could sit at one time, the rest had to stand. They took turns standing at the edges of the car, where a breath of fresh air and a glimpse of light came through the wooden slats. There was no food, no water, and only a barrel in the middle of the car to relieve themselves. The stench was sickening, and many of the prisoners became ill as the train rolled endlessly along. Some people died due to the horrible conditions.

Finally after days of traveling, the train arrived at its destination. When the cattle car doors were rolled open, the prisoners stumbled out, blinded by the sudden daylight. They heard the Nazi guards screaming orders in German, a language they could not understand, and the hysterical barking of the guard dogs. They had arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau, a large killing and slave labor camp in Nazi-occupied Poland. The prisoners were shoved, pummeled, and beaten into separate groups: men on one side, women and children on the other.

They then went through "selection," a process in which Nazi doctors chose who would be used for slave labor and who would be immediately sent to the gas chambers and killed. My father and his family each stood before a Nazi doctor<sup>1</sup> who, my father said, "would point to the left or the right, and it meant life or death." The Nazis knew they could not easily separate mothers from little children, so even though these women were fit to be slave labor, they were sent to die with their young children. At fifteen years old, Les was separated from his mother Anna and his sister Marika to go with the other men. He watched as his mom and younger sister, who was only nine years old, were herded away. He wanted to follow them, but a Polish prisoner pulled him back and said, "Stay here. You are strong." Les didn't know what the man meant, but he did what he was told. He felt confused, scared, and alone. Many times my father told me, "my sister looked back at me and gave a little frail and knowing wave, my mom turned her head away....." Unbeknownst to my dad at that moment, this was the last time he would see his beloved mom and sister.

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<sup>1</sup> Les was certain that this was Dr. Josef Mengele, a Nazi physician who later became infamous for his cruel medical experiments that were conducted on concentration camp inmates against their will. He was often referred to as the "Angel of Death" by Auschwitz survivors because his role in selections meant he was the one choosing who would live or die. Mengele escaped to South America after the war and died there in the 1980s. He was never brought to justice for his crimes.

Les had passed the initial selection, and then he entered the main camp at Auschwitz where he would be held for the next four months. Over the heavy iron gates at the entrance hung the words “Arbeit Macht Frei” (“Work will set you free”), but this was a cruel lie. The Nazis had no intention of setting any of these prisoners free, through work or any other means. When he entered the camp, Les’s head was shaved, he was given a blue and gray striped prison uniform and wooden clogs to wear, and was assigned to a barrack. These structures had originally been built to house horses but were converted to house nearly 800 prisoners. There was no room to stand around. Down the center of the A-frame building ran a long channel of brick stove, for warmth, though often there would be no heat. In the back of the barracks were crude rows of toilets, mere holes cut into wooden planks, side by side. There were row upon row of bunks, stacked three high. They were made of wood and had no mattresses. When Les crawled into his bunk, he laid side by side with ten other people on a single long wooden bed. He could not get out until the row had emptied. He could not sit up. He could barely move. Everyone had also received a blanket. To try and create some comfort, many people buddied up with a bunkmate so they could place a blanket under them and use the second blanket to cover them.

Worse than the cramped and uncomfortable quarters was the hunger. “Food was life,” my father told me many times. Each morning they would receive a cup of *ersatz* coffee, a coffee substitute made from acorns and water, which was not very clean or good. Lunch and dinner consisted of thin vegetable soup, mostly cabbage and potato and a small piece of dark crumbling bread that Les suspected was partially sawdust. Seven men were given a small pot of soup and a loaf of bread to divide, and they would pass the pot around, each taking a spoonful until it was consumed. Each person watched the others with eagle eyes making sure he would not take more than his share. The bread was divided evenly using a makeshift scale comprised of a piece of string, two nails, and a twig: each morsel accounted for. My father said that he and the other prisoners likely were only given about 700 to 800 calories of food per day, nowhere near enough to provide good nutrition or strength.

While in Auschwitz-Birkenau, two remarkable incidents occurred which probably saved my father from complete starvation. One day while marching through the camp, he found a knife in the dirt. He quickly hid it in his shoe. If it had been discovered he would have been beaten or killed, because prisoners were not allowed to have or use knives. Les was then in great demand among his fellow prisoners, to help divide the meager bread rations. His reward was to be able to keep a few extra crumbs for himself. Another time, when the camp guards asked for volunteers to work, my father raised his hand. To his good fortune, it was a job in the kitchen, chopping cabbage and potatoes. He was able to sneak mouthfuls of raw vegetables when the guards looked the other direction. While this helped him to survive starvation, it also brought new troubles into his life.

One day, while working in the kitchen, Les was talking to a fellow inmate, and he did not hear the guard tell him to stop talking. In a flash, the guard grabbed the nearest tool, a pitchfork, and flung it at Les. The pitchfork pierced his foot. Even worse than the pain, Les realized this had put his life at risk. He was allowed to hobble over to the prisoner “hospital.” It was not a real hospital because there were no medications, and no supplies, but there was a wonderful doctor, Dr. Epstein, who was also a Jewish prisoner. He did what he could for the sick, beaten, and starved inmates. Luckily, Les was allowed to rest and stay off his feet because a hobbling Jew would have a target on his back, being deemed ‘useless’ by the Nazis.

After only a few days, however, Dr. Epstein ordered some of the prisoners in the hospital to return to their barracks, my father included. Les begged the doctor to let him stay, but the doctor would not allow it. My father recalled telling Dr. Epstein, "I don't have a chance out there!" Even so, Dr. Epstein pushed Les out of the hospital, and he limped back to his barrack, even more dejected and fearful. But, that night, a truck rolled up to the hospital, and anyone who had not walked out the day before was taken to the gas chamber and murdered that night. Dr. Epstein had knowingly saved my father's life by forcing him out the door that day!

Les was now at even greater jeopardy due to his injury. Selections, deeming who was fit to work, happened frequently at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Each time, prisoners were forced to stand before a Nazi doctor or officer who would choose, once again, which of them would live and which of them would be sent to be killed. Knowing he was at risk, my father made a bold decision to find a way to transfer out of the camp without having to go through another selection. With much difficulty, he saved two portions of bread to use as a bribe, hiding it in his shirt, and approached a prisoner wearing the flannel uniform issued to those who were being transported out to another camp. He offered this man his bread in exchange for switching uniforms and, therefore, exchanging destinies. Les was in luck. This man, who was selected for relocation, was desperate to stay in Auschwitz to remain with his father. Les never knew his name or what became of this man and his father, but he was always grateful.

Soon, Les left in a cattle car once again, this time appreciative of the fact he was not being made to march on his injured foot. The next day, he arrived at one of the eleven Kaufering concentration camps in Landsberg am Lech in southern Germany. These were labor camps with thousands of prisoners forced to work on huge bunkers, which would be used to repair German aircraft. The walls of these massive structures were ten feet thick, constructed of reinforced concrete. The slave laborers were forced to carry the dry concrete in the front of their shirts up to the work site, load after load, breathing in the concrete dust. It was dirty, heavy, life-draining work for the emaciated prisoners, and especially for Les, with his injured foot. Once, an exhausted prisoner accidentally fell into the huge wall, breaking both his legs. The guards would not allow the work to stop. They forced the prisoners to continue pouring concrete, and this became the poor man's grave. My father said this upset him even more years later than at the time it occurred, when it was a mighty struggle to live just one more day. It wasn't that Les did not want to help save the poor man, but it was a matter of powerlessness. He was physically weakened from hunger, and he would have faced certain death at the hands of the guards if he had tried to help.

Les was at the Kaufering camps for three months. And then, misfortune occurred once again. While he lay sleeping close to the stove, inmates accidentally spilled boiling water into his shoe — the same foot he had injured before. He was again moved to a hospital barrack, in Kaufering Camp IV and it was here that Les contracted typhus, a disease caused by lice. He became ill and feverish. A week later, when he woke up, he was weakened but able to stand. The others who had been in the hospital barrack were gone; they had all died of typhus.

At the beginning of April 1945 another small miracle occurred: somehow the Red Cross was allowed to conduct an inspection of the Kaufering camps. My father recalled, "they didn't have too much to inspect" but they did pass out blankets, cans of meat, and Borden's canned milk to the prisoners. Some fellow prisoners devoured the food instantly, and then died because their systems became overwhelmed with the protein rich



food. Les nursed his stash along one bite at a time, making it last for days, because he did not know when he would get food again. This was his good fortune.

The Allies were getting closer to the German border, and their guns could be heard by the prisoners and guards in the camps. The Nazis began to retreat, to pull back further into Germany. Part of this plan included hastily prepared evacuations of the camps. Les and the other prisoners were again loaded into cattle cars and sent to Dachau, a larger concentration camp that was also in Germany. To get there, the Nazis ran two trains parallel to one another, one filled with Nazi soldiers, and one filled with prisoners. The Nazis thought this would protect themselves; perhaps, they thought that the Allies would not bomb or fire upon the trains to avoid killing the innocent prisoners inside. But it is difficult to know whether the Allied pilots who were ordered to fire on the trains would have been aware of this situation. Unfortunately, by the time the trains arrived at Dachau, the roofs on the cattle cars had been ripped to shreds by the artillery of the planes. There were more people dead than alive. My father recalled that men on both sides of him had been shot and killed. This train later became known as the "Death Train."

Les spent about two weeks in Dachau, experiencing the same lack of food, care, or proper shelter he experienced in the other camps. He was weak and barely hanging on to life. Finally, on April 29, 1945, the American 45th infantry arrived, and they liberated the prisoners of Dachau. Les witnessed many inmates who sought vengeance, beating the remaining Nazi guards until the American soldiers had to pull them off. For my dad, however, being freed was the best day of his life. He said it was his second birthday! Now 16 years old, at the time of his liberation, he weighed only 75 pounds. He spent a full month in an American field hospital recovering his strength. Even towards the end of his life, my father remembered what it felt like to lie between clean sheets, and to be cared for by compassionate people. He said it was heaven on earth!

Les eventually was strong enough to return to Budapest, where miraculously, with help from the Red Cross, he was reunited with his father Julius and his sister Erika. In addition, he eventually found two cousins and an uncle who had also survived. Everyone else in this once large family had perished. Les's father searched for his wife Anna and youngest daughter Marika in vain. Before my father had left Auschwitz, he had learned from a fellow prisoner that his mother and nine year old sister were among those immediately murdered by the Nazis in the gas chambers at Auschwitz. So great was Julius's anguish, that Les could never bring himself to tell his father the circumstances of their death. And in turn, Julius never asked Les about what he had suffered during his incarceration in the camps. It was too much for them to bear all the pain.

Several years later, and still living in Budapest, Les's father remarried and Les was introduced to his own wife. In March of 1956, my father's relatives, Emma and Zoltan Rotschild, thought that Les might connect with a young work colleague of Zoltan's. Her name was Eva Spiegel, and she was also a Holocaust survivor. On the day of the meeting, Les watched a beautiful young lady in a coat two sizes too big for her walk up the stairs to the Rotschild apartment. (Eva later admitted to Les that she, her mother, and her sister, had to share this one coat between the three of them.) After a somewhat awkward half an hour, with the Rotschilds looking on, Les asked Eva if she would care to join him in a walk to the Espresso Coffee house. Eva leapt at the chance to get away from the uncomfortable situation, and the rest is history! 59 days later, in May, 1956, they were married. My parents were married for 65 wonderful years and virtually inseparable throughout their life together!

On October 23, 1956, the Hungarian revolution against the Soviet occupation broke out. It felt like war all over again. There were tanks on the streets, Soviet soldiers shooting into apartments (including Eva and Les's home), and there were lines for all kinds of food and material goods. There were restrictions on travel, no freedom of speech, and any protest against the Communist regime ended in imprisonment. Antisemitism also continued to be prominent. As my parents waited in line for food, they overheard the conversation of the two men behind them, "First we'll take care of the communists and then we'll get the left-over Jews!" My parents knew at that moment that they would not stay to raise a family in Hungary, and they had to escape.

On Christmas Eve of 1956, Les, Eva, his father, and stepmother traveled by train to the Hungarian border and used their last Hungarian currency to pay a local farmer to get them as close to Austria as possible. Here, with snow to their knees, they crossed the border with flares shooting overhead by Russian border guards. When the flares lit the night sky, they all lay in the snow under white sheets. This allowed them to blend in with the snow, so they could avoid being captured. After a very cold journey, Les, Eva and the others were welcomed into a small school building in Austria, where the townspeople brought food to the tired, hungry, and frightened refugees. Eventually, Les, Eva, and Les's father and stepmother got to Vienna, Austria, where they obtained an affidavit of acceptance to the United States. They were sponsored by my father's stepbrother, Lester Schonstal, who was also a Holocaust survivor and who had made his new home in the United States.

The Aigner family sailed for ten days across the Atlantic Ocean from Bremerhaven, Germany to New York City. They arrived in January of 1957, but, as refugees, they were placed in Camp Kilmer, New Jersey for two weeks to process their documents, receive inoculations against disease, and be interviewed about their backgrounds. Les and Eva decided to settle in Portland, Oregon because Les's father and stepmother were going there, and that's where Les's stepbrother had arranged for the four of them to share a furnished apartment.

They felt wonderful about being in America and feeling safe. They had food to eat, and there were no guns firing over their heads. In those first years, Les and Eva worked hard; they cleaned houses, did odd jobs, and went to English language school in the evenings. They saved their pennies in the hopes that soon they could start their own family. With Lester's help, my father eventually got a job as a machinist. Meanwhile, Eva attended cosmetology school where she cleaned the school in lieu of having to pay tuition.

Eventually, they did start their own family. I was born in 1960 and my brother, Rob, was born in 1964. Les and Eva now had a new life, a young family, and happier moments to focus on. While Les never forgot what he had endured during the Holocaust, he did not allow the dark memories or his nightmares to overtake the enjoyment he found in his new life and his new country. When my brother and I were in our teenage years, our parents shared their difficult experiences during the war and the Holocaust with us. And in later years, my parents began to share their journey with the community to teach acceptance and to educate against hate, racism, and antisemitism. They continued this work until Les suddenly passed away on August 18, 2021. He was 92 years old. I could not have asked for a better father. My dad was incredibly involved in all our activities as we were growing up. He was a gentleman, with a warm and beautiful smile who loved to laugh and joke. He was kind and loving, and always wanted to help everyone. Essentially, Les was a wonderful human being, and I was proud to call him my father. May he rest in peace.