

A Light in the Darkness: My Mother's Story of Survival

by Peter Wigmore

Once, when I was five years old and living in Australia, I noticed my mother had a mysterious, blue ink number tattooed on her arm. When I asked her about it, she told me that she had survived the Holocaust. She could not bring herself to say much more about it. Many years later I learned that my mother, Rosa, was a survivor of concentration camps. I also learned that she was forced to receive cruel medical experiments that left her physically and emotionally scarred for life. Convinced that these experiments affected her ability to have a healthy child, she blamed herself for my Cerebral Palsy. I do not blame her. I think this is one reason she kept silent with me for so long about her life during the war, but also because she wanted to protect me. I wanted to know more about my mother's experiences during the Holocaust and more about my family, but I did not know how to ask her.

Later in life, after we had moved to the United States and I was working as a teacher, I passed by a classroom and overheard them talking about the Holocaust. Afterwards I approached the teacher and told him that my mother was a Holocaust survivor. He asked me to come in and speak to his class. At first, I did not want to tell my mother about it because she did not speak in public about her experiences. Not only was she worried her English wasn't good enough, reliving and telling people about what she went through hurt too much. But, to my surprise, she encouraged me! In a way, the distance I had from her past led me to be more comfortable in sharing my mother's story, and I share it with you now.

My mother was born Rosa Adler, on September 8, 1923, in Utcas, a small community surrounded by the Carpathian Mountains of Czechoslovakia (present day Ulič, Slovakia). Rosa was the second eldest child. She had three sisters: Margaret (Margie), Gitta, and Dina; and one brother, Moishe (Morris). My mother and her siblings lived together with their parents, Herschel and Esther; and Herschel's parents, Joseph and Dina, in one house. They were a traditional Orthodox Jewish family, strictly observing Jewish religious rituals and customs. For example, they maintained a Kosher home, where among many rules, they did not mix dairy and meat products.

Herschel Adler, Rosa's father, was a financial manager of a lumber mill that was far away. He left home every Sunday evening and returned the following Friday afternoon. My mother was close to her father, and she told me that she often rushed to meet him when he came home.

Life was very different back then. Not everyone owned a car, and to get anywhere most people, including Rosa and her family, walked or rode in a horse drawn wagon, regardless of the weather. Those who needed to travel long distances, and could afford it, went by train. The height of technology was owning a telephone, a record player, and a radio. Weekends were mostly spent with family, visiting friends, enjoying a city park or perhaps hiking through the mountains. While this was a picturesque country life, it would change dramatically when my mother was just 15 years old.

In the fall of 1938 the Nazis occupied parts of northwestern Czechoslovakia. The Nazis claimed a right to this territory, because they believed it had been wrongfully taken away from Germany after the First World War. By the following year, they arranged for their Hungarian allies to take charge of the southernmost region of Czechoslovakia, which included my mother's hometown of Utcas. Influenced by their Nazi allies, the Hungarian government began to implement harsh, racist, anti-Jewish laws that directly impacted my mother and her family.

First, these laws took away their citizenship. This meant they no longer had any rights, including the right to vote. Another law stated that Jewish people could not attend any kind of school. In spite of this discrimination, Jewish communities actively resisted by continuing to host classes in secret, at private homes, or in community centers. At 16, Rosa was one of the rebellious teenagers who attended these secret schools.

Further restrictions made it difficult for Jewish people to keep their jobs. Jewish professionals, such as lawyers or teachers, lost their licenses and were not allowed to work. People who worked in factories or mills were also fired from their jobs for being Jewish. As a result, Rosa's father could no longer work at the lumber mill, and the family lost their primary source of income.

In addition to these discriminatory laws and the hardships they created, Rosa and her family also suffered another great loss. Her father Herschel died on July 11, 1939, of tuberculosis—an often-fatal disease that affects the lungs. After his death, the family relied on the support of other family members and the village's Jewish community.

Without Herschel to guide them, Rosa's mother Esther did not know what to do about the growing danger from the Nazis. Around this time, one of Rosa's uncles, who was living in St. Louis, Missouri, encouraged the family to immigrate to the United States. However, my mother's family did not want to leave their home, so they remained in Utcas.

There are some pieces of my mother's story that she never shared with me. What happened between 1939 and 1941 is a time I do not know much about.

In 1941, the Hungarian government officially joined Nazi Germany in the war against the Allies. This meant things in Utcas became even more restricted. The Hungarian government continued to follow the Nazi's example and created and enforced their own version of racist laws. These laws resulted in Jewish and non-Jewish people not being allowed to interact—professionally, romantically, or socially. For example, if someone was not Jewish but had a Jewish doctor, that person could no longer go to that doctor.

To further prevent any kind of social mixing, the Hungarian government did not allow Jewish people to go to public parks, theaters, or attend concerts. Jews were forced to limit their grocery shopping to one set hour of the day, and could only shop at the one or two remaining Jewish shops. In response, the families in the village helped each other by sharing food.

By early 1944, it was clear that the Nazis were likely to lose the war. As a result, the Hungarian government tried to join the Allies. The German government found out and in response, they invaded and occupied Hungary in March.

Over the next month, the Nazis moved very quickly to isolate the Jewish population. They took away Jewish people's telephones and radios, and began requiring them to wear a yellow patch in the shape of the Star of David on their jackets to mark them as Jews. The Nazis also enforced a daily curfew, which meant that Jewish people in town were not allowed to leave their homes after a certain time, and if they were caught they could be arrested.

By late April 1944, Hungarian Jews were forced into ghettos, sections of a city or town that were isolated and blocked off, sometimes by walls or gates. Here, the Nazis forced thousands of Jewish people to live in cramped, unsanitary conditions. One day, they gathered all the Jewish people in Utcas and sent them to the town square.

My mother recalled that late one night there was a knock on the door, and standing there was an "elegantly dressed officer." He told Rosa and her family that they had to quickly pack, taking whatever they could carry—clothing and any family valuables. The house and neighboring area was surrounded by armed military, so there was no way to resist these orders. Rosa and her remaining family gathered their personal possessions and were driven in a truck to the village's square.

Once they were in the town square, Rosa, her family, and the other Jewish people of Utcas were forced onto boxcars (traditionally used for transporting cows and livestock). The Nazis lied and told everyone they were being sent to work at a factory to help with the war effort, and that they would return to their homes after the war. This led Rosa and others on the train to feel that they were going to be okay.

On the train, conditions were awful. There were no seats, no windows, and no bathrooms. There were small openings at the top of the cattle cars where some air could come through but people were packed into the car so tightly that it felt very cramped and this small amount of air did not help. There was also nowhere for people to go to the bathroom other than one bucket in the corner, which quickly became full. People on the train also had no food or water, other than what they may have brought with them, which ran out quickly.

My mother once told me that the train ride was long. They stopped periodically, and each time they would pick up more people. At one of these stops a woman in my mother's car started begging for food from anyone on the station's platform. A guard standing there was annoyed by the woman, so he shot and killed her. Unfortunately, the bullet passed through that woman and also killed my mother's uncle, who was standing behind the woman. Until this moment, Rosa had continued to hope that she, her family, and the others on the train were being relocated. My mother now quickly realized that they were in much more danger than she had thought.

Eventually, the train reached its destination: Auschwitz-Birkenau, a concentration camp and killing center located in southern Poland. To the best of my knowledge, Rosa and her family arrived sometime between June and July 1944, on what would have been a sunny warm day. Initially, my mother said she found it momentarily refreshing to step off the train and be outside in the fresh air. But she quickly realized that this was not a good place.

When the boxcar doors opened, everyone heard the shouting guards and growling dogs. They were ordered to exit the boxcar as quickly as possible. Men were directed to one line, while women and children were sent to another. It was at this point that Rosa was separated from her brother, Morris. Then she, her sisters, her mother, and her grandmother each came to stand in front of a Nazi guard who decided which of them would

stay and work, and which of them would be sent directly to die in the gas chambers. Tragically, Rosa's mother, grandmother, and younger sister were sent in the opposite direction of Rosa. My mother did not know it at the time, but she would never see them or her brother again.

Rosa and her other sisters Margie and Gitta were chosen for forced labor in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Their clothes and any remaining possessions were taken away, their hair was shaved, and they were each given a prisoner's uniform. This made all of the women look very similar to each other, removing any sense of their old lives or individuality. Rosa and the other prisoners were also forced to get tattoos on their forearms. This is how my mother received the number A-9823. This number replaced my mother's name. It was a permanent reminder that, to the guards, Rosa was no longer a person.

During her imprisonment at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Rosa and the other prisoners were part of a slave labor system. They were forced to complete various, often physically demanding tasks; but they did not receive nearly enough food or water to remain healthy to do the work. My mother once recalled that they would eat anything they could find. She told me that the guards would throw potato peels into mud, and they would laugh at the sight of the prisoners fighting each other simply to get a piece of mud-covered potato peel. The cruelty of the guards is hard to comprehend.

When they were provided with the watery 'soup' that was their dinner, Rosa and the others were given a slice of bread to go with it. This bread was often made with sawdust rather than flour, but it was vital to the prisoners. Sometimes, they would hide their bread for the days when they were not fed at all. My mother remembered being discovered once with some hidden bread, and she was severely beaten for it. However, by some miracle, Rosa was able to keep working and moving one day at a time.

In addition to the forced labor and the insufficient food rations, my mother was also subjected to unwanted cruel medical experiments that would affect her health for the remainder of her life. In September of 1944, Rosa was sent to the Hygiene Institute at Auschwitz. Once again, the Nazis had purposefully used language that did not reveal the horrifying truth.

The Hygiene Institute at Auschwitz was where infamous Nazi doctor Josef Mengele was known to have conducted harmful and painful medical experiments on prisoners without their consent. I do not know why he chose my mother, but nevertheless, for nearly two months Rosa was exposed to different diseases to test how her body reacted to the viruses. My mother recalled that during this time, Dr. Mengele would visit her daily to check her vital signs. He was not a caring physician, but a man misusing his education and skills.

Mengele was obsessed with attempting to prove Nazi racial ideology that Jews were inferior and more susceptible to diseases. At some point near the end of October 1944, Mengele had Rosa injected with a dose of rheumatic fever. Normally, a patient with this illness would be given the antibiotic penicillin to treat it. My mother was not. Without this medicine a person could develop a heart defect, or they could die. My mother obviously survived, but she struggled with a defective heart for the rest of her life.

She was so traumatized by this experience and so afraid of Mengele, that decades later she had nightmares in which she thought he would enter our house and try to kill her. She struggled to believe that he really was dead and could no longer harm her.

Rosa endured these cruel experiments for two months; and during that time, the Allies had successfully re-taken France from the Nazis and were pushing the Nazis into retreat, back to Germany. In response to this, the Nazis began to relocate prisoners to produce materials for the war. On November 14, 1944, Rosa was placed on a train with other prisoners who had been deemed fit for work and sent to the Ober-Hohenelbe concentration camp. At this camp, my mother was assigned to work making radios. She had no previous experience with electronics. Still, she did the best she could and tried to make it to the next day.

By February of 1945, the Soviets had advanced into the region. They eventually made it to Ober-Hohenelbe and liberated the camp in May. It is hard to imagine the emotions of the day Rosa was set free, and what she must have been feeling. Rosa and the other liberated prisoners were once again treated with dignity. They were provided with clean water and good nutritious food to help them recover their health. After six weeks in the hospital, the doctors determined that my mother had sufficiently regained her strength enough for travel. The Red Cross gave Rosa new clothing and some money so that she could go back to Utcas.

There, in June of 1945, Rosa was reunited with her older sister Margie. They later learned that their mother, grandmother, and siblings (Dina, Gitta, and Morris) had not survived. In Utcas, Rosa and Margie were able to re-take possession of their family home, which was rare among Holocaust survivors. Even though they had their family home back, it was too hard to live there without them. They decided to sell the house and move to Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia, in late 1945.

At this time, my mother had lost her faith. She could not see how God would have allowed such horrible things to happen and therefore had given up being a practicing Jewish person.

Sometime in 1947, Rosa met Louis Loeffelmann¹, my father, at a doctors' office in Prague. He was an economics professor, who was not Jewish but whose family had also been negatively affected by the Second World War. They dated for only a few months before they got married in February 1948. My mother used to say that part of the reason she fell in love with my father was because he was so much in love with her. My father was a very caring person, and I think part of his attraction to Rosa was based on him wanting to help her.

When the Communist regime took over in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the same year my parents married, things were once again dangerous. As a professor, Louis was considered an intellectual, and therefore, a potential enemy of communism. He became concerned for his life. Many of his friends had either "disappeared" or were found dead after being questioned. My parents decided they had to flee the country.

Louis used his father's connections in the Czechoslovakian army to allow him and Rosa to secretly cross the border into Germany. There, they were given lodging in a displaced persons camp run by the United States Army. My parents hoped to gain a U.S. immigration visa to join Rosa's sister Margie and her husband Henry in New York (they had immigrated in 1947), but they were denied because of Rosa's heart condition.

However, by late 1948 the Australian government was allowing people to immigrate if they worked for two years in a government sponsored position. The Australian government also provided free travel for Holocaust survivors looking to make a new start in another part of the world. My parents immediately applied for this program, and they soon set sail from the port city of Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

¹ Louis changed the family name to Wigmore in 1956.

In Australia, Rosa and Louis settled in a suburb of Melbourne, a city on the southern coast. They both worked as nurse's aides for a couple years. I was born in 1950, and my parents were informed of my Cerebral Palsy when I was two years old. We lived in an apartment building behind a synagogue, which my mother secretly attended on the High Holy Days (important holidays that celebrate the Jewish new year). Even though my mother was attending services, she had still not fully returned to practicing the Jewish religion. At this time, I still did not know that I was Jewish, because we openly celebrated Christmas and Easter in a non-religious way.

In 1957 we immigrated to the United States because my parents wanted to find better care and treatment for my Cerebral Palsy. We settled in the Bronx, a part of New York City where Rosa's sister Margie and her family lived. That is where my mother started regularly attending synagogue again, and my father converted to Judaism to support her. We began to keep a kosher house, attend services together as a family, and celebrate Jewish holidays. Even then, neither Rosa nor Louis spoke about the war or what my mother had endured.

In 1962, my parents decided we would move to San Francisco to seek further help for my Cerebral Palsy. After a series of operations I was able to walk completely on my own for the first time in my life! My parents and I were very happy about this, and I began to do well physically and academically. Still, my mother felt it was her responsibility that I needed so much care, and it was hard to convince her otherwise.

When I was 17 years old, my father died of a massive heart attack. This was a very difficult time for me and especially for my mother. She said she felt that her life was filled with tragedy, even though there were moments of light in the darkness.

Rosa lived to be 90 years old, and still she was haunted by nightmares. Even though she tried to protect me from these painful memories, I did eventually learn more about her experiences in Auschwitz. I believe that sharing my mother's experiences, and indeed, learning about other survivors, can motivate us to act—to stand up to racism, antisemitism, and intolerance when we see it. Doing so will help us to make the world a better place now and in the future.