



Istvan Domonkos

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In 1940 our country joined the axis alliance; which consisted of Germany, Italy and Japan. Peter, my brother, joined up as an officer, but in 1941 he was ordered to remove his uniform and like so many Jewish men and women, he had to sew a yellow armband onto his civilian clothes. This was the beginning of the Anti-Jewish Laws in Hungary. In the summer of 1942, he was sent to the front, and a year later my father was notified that he had died.

I was forced into a labour camp in October 1942 and the first thing I did was get in touch with my father, telling him what we needed. This became a regular thing so we formed a Care Committee, and used to apply to what became known as, the Committee of Ex-Servicemen of the Jewish Community for what we needed. The committee raised the money for these supplies from wealthy Jews and later they made this a country-wide organisation.

In 1944, when Germany occupied Hungary (in order to keep us as allies) they immediately made my father an administrator for the Jewish Council. He spoke German quite well, but they didn't know he was Jewish. The Jewish Councils were set up in Nazi-occupied Europe and were obliged to communicate the wishes of the Germans and the local collaborating authorities to the Jewish communities. Some people considered the members of the Jewish Council as traitors while others thought that they did everything they could to save those doomed to die. The first thing the Germans did was to appropriate all the Jewish fortunes they could. They demanded all sorts of things, for example, 100 blankets, 50 typewriters, a piano for General X, and usually it was required within 24 hours. My father had a good team who knew where to go for these things, but it wasn't a pleasant situation.

In the same year, they also started taking Jewish women from Budapest, my mother included. She was put on a barge on the Danube, which sank into the icy water, and all the women on it perished. At the same time my sister was assigned to a death march. Somehow, my father managed to find out that the march would stop in Borgondpuszta for a while, and entrusted a man called Zoltan Ronai, also a Jew, who had very good contacts with the police, with rescuing her.

Karl Eichmann (SS lieutenant colonel, one of the main organisers of the annihilation of the European Jews) got more aggressive and increased his threats against the Jewish people. Jews were secretly being deported from Hungary, but when it was found out, they were taken back to the internment camps. Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish humanitarian, was sent to Budapest, having received information from the Jewish Council that many Jewish people had been deported. After Wallenberg's visit, Eichmann summoned three of the Jewish leaders and kept them in detention without food and water. My father might have been among them but I don't know – it was best not to know about everything. Eichmann ordered the deportation of about two hundred people to Kistarcsa Internment Camp from where most were deported to Auschwitz.

On 15 October, the Germans made Ferenc Szalasi, who was pro-Nazi and head of the Arrow Cross Party, Prime Minister. While the tanks were moving down the streets, my father managed to go to the office but nobody else dared to go out. He called Lieutenant-Colonel Ferenczy, the highest-ranking leader of Jewish matters in the Hungarian government, to tell him that they were in very serious trouble. Ferenczy had said in the past that he wouldn't let any more people be deported and they wouldn't be Eichmann's servants. However, now he said that the Jews got what they deserved and he hung up.

When the Arrow Cross decreed the setting up of the ghetto my father was made the security officer. The ghettos were like small countries – there were districts, a ghetto police, institutional food, and leaders for every block, whose task was to draw up a list of names to give to the Arrow Cross men. They provided medical care, and dealt with the deceased. In the beginning we were able to take the dead to the Jewish cemetery, but then Arrow Cross men forbade it and from then on, the funerals were held in the courtyard of the Dohany Street synagogue. And later, there were so many dead, that the poor things were just piled up in a room.

My father was on good terms with Raoul Wallenberg, so the whole family got a Schutzpass, which enabled us to travel to Sweden where we were protected by the Swedish Royal Embassy until it was safe to return home.

I met Katalin Schwartz, in the ghetto and later married. My parents weren't happy about it because they wanted me to continue my studies, however I couldn't go to university because of the anti-Jewish laws. In 1947, our first child, Judit, was born, and later, our son Peter. We lived simply, but we had everything we needed. We never had a car and we didn't go on holiday. My wife was a trained seamstress and managed our financial life very skillfully. When the war was over, a friend and I started a sound recording company, which unfortunately didn't work out so I got work as an electrician, repairing war-damaged houses. Everything would have been all right, but then when Rakosi, acting Prime Minister of the Hungarian Communist Party, was in power, he didn't seem to want the tradesman to work, and they set very high taxes, which were unbearable so I gave it up.

In 1947 my father was decorated, and in 1950 he retired. But three years later, after Stalin's death the secret police, acting on the orders of Rakosi, caught him. Similar to Stalin's political purges, Rakosi was arresting, jailing, and killing both real and imaginary enemies. The secret police were feared and hated by the Hungarian working class because of their record of torture and murder, and because of the privileged position they held in Hungarian society, receiving between three and twelve times the average workers' pay. They kept my father in prison for more than six months, before taking him to the hospital. Before his imprisonment he was well built but it was a wreck of a man, weighing just under half his normal weight that they took to the hospital. He lay unconscious for days, and he never walked again. Later he told us, that they had taken him to the prison, stripped him and forced him to make a confession. He died soon after he came out of hospital, on the 25 February 1954.

My wife Kaitlin died in 1990 and she wasn't buried in a Jewish cemetery. She wasn't religious any more. Like so many other Jews, she could not understand how the Almighty could let this happen.

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