

Lea Fürth KRIESBACHER

MY MOTHER LIES BENEATH THE ASPHALT IN BUDAPEST

Photo

Lea Kriesbacher

She was born in Zagreb on April 11, 1927, to parents Desider Fürth and mother Margita, née Stern. Her mother and many other relatives did not survive the Holocaust. After the war, she returned with her elderly father from the camp and exile to Zagreb. She attended the "partisan" school "Marshal Tito" gymnasium and studied linguistics at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb. Until her retirement she worked in foreign trade as a simultaneous interpreter (English, German, and Hungarian) and foreign language correspondent. From her first marriage she has a son who lives in Germany with four children. She has two granddaughters in Slovenia and two grandsons in Germany.

We were not wealthy, but we were far from poverty. Father earned enough to provide my mother and me with a settled and carefree life.

But then the fateful year of 1941 arrived. The synagogue was, as far as I know, ordered to be demolished by the then mayor of Zagreb, a former butcher from Dolac, Werner.

Who was implementing the Aryan measures? The Ustasha authorities headed by Ante Pavelić, through announcements, posters, the wearing of yellow scarves on the chest and back, and later badges. We were expelled from school immediately, in the first days after the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia.

Since my parents were citizens of neither Yugoslavia nor the NDH, in June 1942 we illegally crossed the Hungarian border over the Drava River, fleeing to Budapest. We hid without any documents and barely survived by taking on occasional work. Relatives helped us somewhat, but not as much as they could have, or as they had promised before we arrived.

In the spring of 1944, more precisely on March 19th, Germany occupied Hungary, and the most radical anti-Jewish decrees and laws began to be enforced there. Jews were required to wear yellow six-pointed stars and were herded into ghettos. At the end of April, the deportation of Jews from all of Hungary began, except from Budapest, so that all Jews from the provinces had been deported by mid-July. On October 15, 1944, the government of Miklós Horthy was overthrown and the "Arrow Cross" — the so-called "Nyilas Keresztes" —

came to power, establishing a reign of terror and launching the most brutal persecution of Jews in Budapest as well.

In November 1944, our turn came.

First, they separated me from my parents. We set off on foot because trains could no longer pass, as the Red Army had surrounded Budapest and fierce artillery attacks had begun.

For six days and nights they drove us toward the Austrian-Slovak border. We had no food, no clothing, no shoes.

When they were about to hand us over to the Germans, I managed to escape and return to the city with the army that was heading out to defend Budapest. I knew the language and dialects of various regions well, so I, still just a girl of 16 or 17, begged the soldiers to take me along, claiming I had lost my peasant parents who were fleeing from the Russians. Anti-Russian propaganda was in full swing at the time.

When I returned, I ended up in the newly opened ghetto, as I had nowhere else to go. My parents had already been taken away. I never saw my mother again.

The Red Cross had opened several houses that were in ruins, poorly sheltered. They took in children whose parents had been forcibly separated from them — many didn't even know their own names or who they belonged to.

The fascists found us on December 24, 1944, and took us to the Danube to shoot us all and throw us into the river. Among us was also a group of children who had been in the so-called protected house of the Red Cross. Our great stroke of luck was that at that very moment the Russians opened fire with Katyusha rockets, and the fascists fled. And we — each grab a child and run! That is how we made it back to the Red Cross and somehow survived those horrors, without food or water, infested with lice, until the soldiers of Stalin's army arrived.

I found my father a few days later, completely broken. Mother had been killed, buried somewhere beneath the asphalt in the center of Budapest. Everywhere there were the carcasses of horses that starving people were tearing apart and boiling to eat.

My elderly father and I joined a repatriation transport and, around May 25, 1945, returned to Zagreb.

The Pest Ghetto*

On November 16, 1944, the so-called Jewish Council was informed that a decision had been made to establish a ghetto for the remaining Jews of Pest. Around 63,000 people were to be housed in the ghetto, averaging 14 persons per room. The relocation into the ghetto began at the end of November. The column of unfortunates was robbed, abused, and killed along the way by the Arrow Cross.

The ghetto was enclosed by a high wooden fence with gates guarded by heavily armed Arrow Cross members and police officers.

The population grew day by day to nearly 70,000 by the day of liberation. As for food, the caloric value of the allocated rations was not permitted to exceed 790 calories — yet even that was often unavailable. The number of people dying of hunger grew daily. Enormous piles of refuse were everywhere. The improvised hospitals presented scenes from Dante's Inferno. The majority of patients arrived in critical condition; there were hundreds of suicide attempts, many wounded from Arrow Cross attacks, many sick with infectious diseases, and more.

Arrow Cross and SS raids into the ghetto — looting, round-ups, massacres, on-the-spot shootings or executions on the banks of the Danube — continued without interruption, right up to the day of liberation.

** The above text is published at the choice and wish of Eva Timar, a recently deceased member of the Editorial Board, and is an excerpt from the book by historian Prof. Randolph Braham, "The Holocaust in Hungary."*