

Tibor Messinger

My name is Tibor Messinger. For over 40 years I did not reveal to anyone, not even to my own family, what happened to me as a Jewish slave laborer for the Nazis during World War 2. I thought nobody would believe me. Foolishly I thought I could forget it, but it always came back to haunt me in my dreams or more accurately my nightmares. Finally I realized that I would be responsible to keep all these experiences to myself and not let others know about the atrocities perpetrated under the disguise and protection of war. To remember the three years spent in labor and the concentration camps during world war 2 is not an easy task to talk about.

Even I have trouble believing that the world watched as six million men, women, children and even babies were murdered because their only crime was that they were born Jewish. I will try to give you as accurate reenactment of what I can remember during the Holocaust but there are some episodes that still feels like part of a dream. When I started to make notes for the first time of my experiences, it was July 1984 which happened to be 42 years after the event but let me start at the beginning.

I was born May 26th, 1918 just before the end of World War 1. My father was a sergeant in the Hungarian army Later he told me that at that time the future looked bright for a middle income family. Due to his ability to speak several languages he had a fairly good job as a sales manager at a wholesale house dealing mostly with foreign buyers. He was fluent in German, Romanian, Yugoslavian, and of course Hungarian where we lived. He was born in Yugoslavia in 1875 but at that time that part of Yugoslavia belonged to Hungary.

My parents had three children. First was Josef, then Julius born in 1916 and last me born in 1918. My mother was born in Poland in 1886 and she had one brother who was born in Czechoslovakia. My father came from a large family of 10 children, only one of his brothers survived the Holocaust. The other nine were all killed by the Nazis.

At age six I was enrolled in the accelerated elementary educational system which took us eight years to complete. When I was 14 I graduated from school which in this day would be the equivalent of a high school education in the United States. I did not continue college like my brother Josef. We had school six days a week and on the Sabbath we rested and attended religious services.

When finishing school at age 14, it was customary for the family to convene and decide my future occupation. I was never consulted, this was not in the rules. My mothers only brother came from Czechoslovakia for this conference was the deciding vote. They decided I should become an electric instrument maker since I had small hands and could handle small parts of the instruments. I went to a trade school for three years but I did not like the work and decided when I graduated I would not do that type of work. So now I was 17 with the winds of anti-Semitism getting stronger and stronger.

In 1938 Hitler's Germany invaded and occupied Austria. This made the relationship with Germany and Hungary even closer and more restrictive against the Jews. World War 2 broke out and Hungary indicated complete sympathy with Hitler and its ideals. At that time we had Hungarian citizenship. My father and all our relatives thought since he served in World War 1 with good military records, with several medals and citations, that nothing would happen to us or our families. However, the government soon revoked our citizenship. We still naively believed the government would protect us which proved to be one of our several mistakes.

In the summer of 1940 Germany would begin to ask for labor forces from Hungary. I reported for a three month tour of duty to build railroad tracks in northeastern Hungary. After three months I returned home and went back to work. On May 1st, 1940, my mother passed away after suffering at length with cancer. At that time we were grief stricken but in a short time realized how lucky she was because she surely could not have survived the next few years in the hands of the Nazis.

In 1941, Hungary declared war on both the Soviet Union and the United States. Germany declared any Jew found in Hungary that was born in Russia had to be gathered and taken to Poland to be executed. This group included my best friend also named Tibor. In 1972 I got to meet up with him after all those years and he told me what happened to him and his family after they were arrested. They marched them to Poland where they then gave his father, mother, brother and himself shovels to dig their own graves. After that they had to lie down on the ground. They were then all shot in the back of the head. Even though this killed his parents and his brother by some miracle the bullet went one side of his skull and out the other side without hitting any vital parts and the soldiers left them for dead. But somehow he recovered and eventually joined the Russian army and fought until the end of the war. You can see how bad things were getting. We organized a group who wanted to escape to another country but I could not allow myself to leave since my father was 67 years old and was not in good health.

On May 26th, 1942 I was to report for the second time to go to a labor camp for three months. Since it was summer I only took summer clothing. I will never forget standing at the train station with my father as we held each other finding the separation very difficult. There were 500 Atlas guards at the train station which was being run by the Arrow Cross party which were sympathizers with the Nazi party. Unfortunately they became our guards during this time and they were ready to outdo the Nazi party members by demonstrating their hatred against the Jewish people and every way they could. Immediately they made us wear yellow armbands to show that we were Jewish and had to wear it all the time. One of the favorite pastimes of the commanders was to pull off our yellow armbands which we then had to sew on again. But by ripping it off they would say that it was not put on properly and then they would punish us by beating us with a walking stick many times and so severely that we could not move for a week.

After a few weeks we were told we would be taken to Russia to work. My father came to see me as we were getting ready to leave the train station and we held each other and cried. This was the last time I ever saw my father. I can honestly say it was one of the saddest days of my life.

We were then moved to the Russian front to work. Our commander was a man by the name of Murray. He was a Hungarian officer, and he was one of the most feared and vicious officers we were to encounter. He was more brutal than the Germans because he took great delight in beating people. He liked to separate family members so he sent my brother Julius to the Russian war zone days before me. Six months later my brother was dead. He was brutally killed not just because he was Jewish but because he was overweight. He was sent to Lieutenant Toronyi who was more of a sadistic killer than Colonel Murray. Later I found out that Toronyi ordered the Hungarian guards to put my brother Julius outside his barracks when the temperature was 25 below zero and to throw water on him until he froze to death. My brother was 31 years old and married at the time and was the gentlest person I had ever known.

Shortly after my went to the Russian front we were then sent there also. Colonel Murray told us none of us would return alive and that the guards were told they could not go home until all of us were dead.

After several days on a train we arrived in Kiev and then walked for five days to a different town where we were put into a large barn which had no doors or windows. The weather was getting very cold but the guards took our clothing off our backs to keep themselves warm laughing saying we do not need clothing because we wouldn't be going home anyway. The guards had us dig underground stables to protect their horses but as the winter froze everything the digging became more difficult so this slowed down the process which made the beatings from the guards much worse. They beat and kicked us whenever they wanted to and we were completely at their mercy. we never got enough food so many people started to die by starvation.

After three months of this we were taken to the war zone to build trenches and bunkers and to do work too dangerous for the guards. Remember these guards were volunteers and had a deep hatred for Jews. They were always ready to cause us suffering and death especially when they had been drinking a little. They had the rifles and the power to do with us as they pleased. In the summer of 1943 I saw something I will never forget. We were digging trenches in the woods when we heard the screaming voice of a child. We ran to the edge of the woods where we found a 10 year old girl lying there with her stomach ripped open bleeding to death. Before she died she told us that a German soldier rammed his bayonet into her abdomen and we watched in horror as her mother screamed and we watched this poor child die.

During this time, the Russians were attacking and this caused the Germans to retreat and we had to retreat with them. One day our unit got a new commander who was once again Lieutenant Toronyi, the inhumane beast who killed my brother by freezing him to death. He was more a medieval torturer than a human being. We watched many people frozen to death as he told the guards to throw water on them for no good reason, or other times he would just order them to be shot on the spot. He always took our food and clothing away from us.

The Russians were getting closer to the Germans in battle. We wanted the Russians to win but every time they would attack the Germans there was the risk that we would be shot also or have a bomb dropped on us since we were amongst the Germans. We escaped many close calls during this time with bombs dropping all around us.

So from May 1942 until August 1944, we survived two Russian winters, walked all over Russia, the Ukraine, and Poland, always retreating on foot, and almost never having proper clothing or food. Two years on the run. Many things happened to us too numerous to remember for those of us who survived.

Some things I do remember was when it was 40 below zero, the sick ones with high temperatures were chased in to the cold and then buckets of water were thrown on them. When a doctor asked for medication for the ill, the doctor was beaten to death with a shovel just because he was Jewish. Another time a guard asked a Jewish man for his leather overcoat and when the man refused he was just shot to death. At one time a barn was designated a hospital but when they told the soldiers to retreat and they knew they would have to transport the sick they just set the barn on fire. If any of the sick patients ran out from the barn they were immediately machine gunned down. These atrocities never ended.

One job we were assigned to was to walk along the railroad beds. The reason for this was the Russians had planted bombs and they were blowing up trains regularly. So we were being used as human mine detectors.

One time I was punished by the beastly commander Toronyi. My sentence was to be hung with my hands tied behind my back from a tree so that my feet barely touched the ground for 30 minutes a day for six days. The guard who carried out my sentence was named Palinkas who seemed to enjoy hurting me and also my friend George who received the same sentence. Palinkas hit me and George in the head with his rifle butt fracturing our skulls. Blood was covering our faces but we couldn't do anything about it since we were tied up. As I think back, I find it unbelievable how much we could withstand. These guards did not have the courage to shoot us out right, as an SS guard would have. Rather you could tell they enjoyed torturing us and watching us in pain and suffering. Later this man Palinkas was sentenced to 15 years in prison after the war. Today is a free man working in a factory in Budapest.

This went on until Aug 1944 when we were told we were going to be moved again. We thought this transfer was just going to be another work assignment but then we were turned over to the Ukrainian SS. We knew they were more brutal than anyone we have had to encounter. We were put in a cattle car and for four days travelled not knowing where we were going. We had no food and very poor sanitary conditions. We arrived at Flossenburg concentration camp on December 25th, 1944.

We were in front of a huge gate and the camp was surrounded by three wire fences about 15 feet high with vicious dogs running between the fences. We were lined up five in a row to march through the open gate to a big courtyard. There were watchtowers everywhere with soldiers holding machine guns looking down at us. Uniformed SS men were all around us. They started beating us with rubber hoses and screaming telling us to take all of our clothes off and drop everything, including our jewelry. They packed us into a room and many were crying saying they are going to gas us. My friend George who had gone through the past two years with me stood next to me and we held hands and he told me to hold on and die like a man. We were saying to each other that after all the suffering we had been through since 1942 that we were going to die now. Then cold water came down upon us, but we were packed together to closely to wash, but we saw after that we were given striped clothing to wear so we know that we were not going to die just yet.

The other prisoners who had been there longer stated it was much worse earlier. Any rules infraction meant automatic death. Even if you dropped your plate or your plate broke, the penalty was hanging. For the smallest infraction, people were beaten to death by the SS. On that day, December 25th, they took all of us into the courtyard. We were jammed in the courtyard and the SS brought out six of us prisoners who looked like skeletons wearing striped pants with naked upper bodies shivering in the cold. Their hands were tied behind their backs. We watched in horror as they took the six skeletons near the Christmas tree and hung them saying they were broken into a warehouse where some food was stored and this would be their punishment. After they all died with their bodies jerking violently everything was silent. Some of my comrades threw up. I felt that I could not cry or give up, but that site has always been implanted in my brain. I can still see it clearly today and all its horror. I had dreamed about it many times since December 25th, 1944, and its a night that none of us who were there will ever forget.

Time wore on and somehow we continued to survive the SS who still beat us and even joked who we would all see death. But by this time the end of the war was approaching and the SS was less brutal to us because they felt the war would be over soon, and they would have to answer to their actions. They transferred us to Czechoslovakia where the Italian guards would punish us. We worked at that time but we were very weak and worked very slowly in a factory trained to build airplanes. When we left there we were transferred to Terezin, another concentration camp. We looked like skeletons at that time, and rumors spread when we got there that we were going to be executed. We wondered why they would bring us here for that when they could have done it many times before. However after a very short time the big doors opened and I thought I was dreaming, I could not believe what I saw.

Several well dressed young ladies and many nurses wearing a familiar Red Cross insignia walked toward us smiling. What a wonderful site after 3 years. After suffering hunger, beatings, kickings, banging by our wrists, inadequate clothing in the bitter cold and gradually losing weight, I was, weighing about 60 pounds when they found us, I thought I was seeing a mirage. I blinked but I still cannot believe that they were carrying food for us. I knew there was a G-d, but I wondered where he had been hiding for so long. This was May of 1945.

We were lucky because the head of the Terezin concentration camp had received orders from Berlin to execute all 33,000 of us. Luckily he did not follow through with that order. Instead he had accepted an offer from the International Red Cross that if he spared our lives he would receive a large sum of money and free passage to Switzerland for him and his family. The war ended on May 8th, 1945. The Germans had fled by this time and the Russians had arrived.

On May 9th, 1945, I had my first day of freedom but I was so weak I could not move. My friend George who went through the past three years with me went and got a nurse and several people carried me on a stretcher to a hospital where doctors diagnosed me with typhus. The doctors took their time and slowly restored me to some health. I did leave the hospital and I decided to try and go home to Budapest Hungary to see if any of my family was still alive. I remember George had to help me up the few steps into the train because I was too weak to climb them still. My first stop was Prague. This was in June, 1945 and then I left and got back on the train and went to Budapest. Everyone in Prague treated me incredibly well but everyone in Budapest treated me the opposite. Nobody wanted to help me in Budapest, but I did finally get home and found my brother Josef. This was the first time we had seen each other in three very long years. We both cried and felt wonderful, we couldn't even find anything to disagree about! He told me that my father had died in a Budapest ghetto in December, 1944.

I had heard that they were going to bring Toronyi to trial and the newspaper stated that any person that could testify against this beast should come to the trial. So I went to the courtroom and sat in the balcony in case we were needed but it didn't take long before he had enough proof against him and the court sentenced him to death by hanging. The court allowed him two hours to say goodbye to his family, a privilege none of his victims received. Outside in the courtyard I watched the hanging wondering about the justice of the sentence, one life for 425 others, including my brother.

Initially I shared an apartment with Josef. I had been used to sleeping on the hard ground and therefore a soft bed gave me sleepless nights. Therefore I simply slept on the floor. The constant bombings in Budapest had left the city with very few glass windows. Since winter was coming many people needed to cover the open windows. My brother was a supervisor for a company which sold and installed chemically treated heavy paper for this purpose so I took a job at my brother's company supervising the installation of the substitute windows. It was through this job that I met my future wife Ilona. She had been looking for a job and when she applied at the factory, I hired her. Over the next few months, we saw each other very frequently and decided to get married.

We did not have a visa but decided we did not want to stay in Hungary and live amongst the people that killed most of my family. So we decided to go to Austria but we had to cross over the mountains by foot in the middle of the night to get there. So Josef, Ilona, myself and some friends left and went to a displaced persons camp where I became a driver for the chief doctor there. The doctor was transferred then to Vienna where he took all of us with him. Even though we were married in Hungary when we fled we had no papers with us so we got married in Vienna. In March of 1948 our daughter Stephanie was born in Vienna. However we were living in the Russian zone of Vienna and wanted to cross the border illegally to get to Salzburg which was the American zone. Even though our daughter was only 6 months old, when we walked across the mountain by foot at night we had to tape our daughters mouth shut for the whole night so that she would not cry out so we could be caught by the Russian border guards. While in Salzburg, President Truman signed the displaced persons act which then allowed us to apply for a visa to enter the United States.

We were given permission to enter the United States and were scheduled to leave. So in 1949 our destination to where we were to end up was determined by chance. The Lorain, Ohio Jewish community signed affidavits for 24 families. This meant that they agreed to take care of these families and keep them off the welfare rolls for five years. When we applied for our visa, our file was randomly picked to go to Lorain, Ohio. How lucky we were because the people of Lorain treated us wonderfully. We took a ship across the English channel and headed toward America. We cannot tell you the excitement we felt when we saw the Statue of Liberty. We cried. Its a day we'll never forget. From there we took a train for 15 hours from New Jersey to Lorain, Ohio. The women for the Jewish welfare group were waiting for us at the train station. I will always remember when one woman pulled a roll out of her purse and handed it to my daughter who ate it very quickly. That day was the last time in our lives that the word hunger was ever used.

Initially, life was hard because we did not know English. So we enrolled in the evening classed at the Neighborhood house to learn. I was able to get jobs at first but in 1955, Ilona was pregnant with our son Ron and I needed to find a better paying job so I became a representative for the Metropolitan Life Insurance company. We stayed in Lorain until 1965 when we moved to Brook Park, Ohio for a better paying job with a different insurance company.

In 1972, I was able to travel to Budapest to visit my childhood friend Tibor who was shot in the head but survived miraculously. After 31 years we met again but this time on opposite political sides but it didn't matter. He was a communist and I was a Democrat, but we hugged and cried and talked through the night. He died in 1973 shortly after our reunion.

My brother Josef continues to live in Germany. He is doing well raising his daughter. Unfortunately his wife died of cancer at a young age. But I am fortunate that I still have him.

I did get to meet with George, the man who went through all three years of torture together and without a doubt the man who saved my life. We hugged and talked throughout the entire night until the sun came up but we still weren't finished with all we had to say. George did tell me that Colonel Murray was also caught, tried and hung for his war crimes which was appropriate for such a vicious man.

We cannot lament the past, we cannot change it. It has surely affected me many ways both physically and mentally. Many times I've counted my losses; my father, my brother, four uncles, four aunts, many cousins, hundreds of friends and I still miss them terribly. In addition, I lost some of my most productive years, those years of age 24 to 27 which I spent as a prisoner, and from then until I was 30 starting my life over again in America. I had lost all of my teeth due to improper nutrition plus many other health problems which has emerged. Yet one of the most serious problems is not physical, it's the nightly dreams which ceaselessly make me relive my experiences.

For 40 years, I could not talk at all about my life during the war. Now that I can talk, I have fewer of these dreams. Yet both in my dreams and in my waking hours, I still have flashbacks. I believe I'll never be free of these nightmares and I'll just have to always live with them. Despite their unpleasantness, they are also good, because they remind me and this is very important that I will never forget. We must never forget! Thank you