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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

One Year in the Black Hole of
Our Planet Earth
A Personal Narrative

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I was born on November 4, 1924, in Gheorgheni, a small town in the Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania, which belonged to Romania at that time. My father, Dr. Endre Rosenfeld, was a general practitioner, and my mother, Dr. Jolán Harnik, was a dentist. My sister, Anikó, is two and a half years younger than I am. My parents were assimilated Hungarian Jews, who had started learning Romanian only when they transferred to the university of Cluj from Budapest after World War I. We spoke two languages at home: Hungarian, and German because we had German (or rather Sächsische or Schwäbische) governesses. My parents did not know Yiddish, nor did I ever hear my grandparents or my divorced grandmother from Debrecen speak this language.

In September 1940, northern Transylvania, including our area, the Székelyföld (Seklerland), was annexed to Hungary. Tragically, the lot of the northern Transylvanian Jews was thrown in with that of Hungarian Jewry. From October 1940 until June 1943, I attended the newly founded Jewish Gymnasium in Kolozsvár (Cluj), because a numerus clausus quota system suddenly deprived thousands of Jewish youngsters of a public education. This was the happiest and most fulfilling period of my youth, maybe of my life. We students were preparing feverishly for the *matura* examination in the spring of 1943, but we also had fun at dancing parties.

In December 1943, after graduating from the Jewish Gymnasium with an excellent-graded matriculation certificate, I went to the Notre Dame de Sion Institute in Budapest, where I studied French and English. Quite a few students there were Jewish, and the nuns were equally kind to all of us.

On Sunday morning, March 19, 1944, the German army marched into Hungary and occupied the whole country. It was the beginning of the end for Hungarian Jewry. It was almost three months later, on Friday morning, June 2, that two gendarmes came to our home to escort my family to the local police station. I started to sob when my mother was ordered to hand over her wedding ring. She had a strong character, and while she rubbed her finger with soap, she sternly chided me: "Aren't you ashamed of humiliating yourself in front of them?"

We spent that sleepless Friday night on the bare floor of an office at the police precinct. The sudden degradation and predicament of our highly respected family seemed so absurd, so unbelievable, as if it were happening to other people. None of us cried. Most Jews from our town had already been deported to an unknown destination.

On June 6 we were herded into cattle cars, with more than eighty people to a car. No one had enough space to lie down or to sit on the floor with legs outstretched. Our rucksacks and shoulder bags served as seating cushions, and from time to time we stood up and sat down, to alleviate muscle pain. We were so cramped for space that it was quite a task to reach the toilet bucket in the middle of the car. The stench was unbearable. Those sitting close to the bucket held up sheets for some privacy, because, after all, we were civilized people.

When we crossed the Slovak border at Kassa and the SS had collected us from the Hungarian gendarmerie, my self-controlled father, a veteran of World War I, broke down and wanted to commit suicide. He was anguished that he had not concealed his morphine, which the gendarmes had taken away from him in the ghetto. My mother gently chided him: "How can you talk like this? You have two children."

We reached our final destination in darkness, in the early morning hours of Saturday, June 10. A deadly silence prevailed for several hours. Not for a moment did my sister and I fear extermination. It was beyond our wildest pessimistic fantasies. Of the eighty-odd tormented souls of our cattle car, only three were ultimately to be condemned to life in hell in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Prisoners in striped uniforms yelled instructions in German and Hungarian: "Get out quickly, leave everything behind, and stand up in separate rows, women and men. Those who are ill, or cannot walk, will travel in trucks. The physicians among the men should stand over there with their first-aid kits." As we waited for the fulfillment of our destiny, we saw the doctors' group at our left, and our father with his kit, for the last time.

Our turn came in front of the SS "doctor," who turned to my mother and asked, "Kannst du gut laufen?" This simple German verb had only one meaning for us, namely, to run. But it turned out later that for them it meant "to walk," or "to go on foot." She said hesitatingly, "Not so well." The officer made a sign for her to go to the right, and for us to go in the opposite direction. Our forty-six-year-old mother was murdered because of a semantic misunderstanding.

We were led through a small forest toward a red brick building, the Sauna (bathhouse). There were low benches along the wall of a long corridor-like anteroom, the undressing room. We were instructed to leave our clothes behind, neatly tied, and to remember where we had put them. We were allowed to take our shoes along, however, which saved many lives during the Death March and throughout the harsh winter.

We entered a large hall in which several women barbers (not hairdressers) were set up. Working as if in a race against time, they rudely cut our hair, leaving us bald and clean shaven everywhere on our entire bodies. The culture shock proceeded as our female bodies were stripped of their fig leaves and exposed to the lascivious gaze of the German soldiers. Oh, no! It was a fleeting, terrifying, agonizing thought. But the soldiers couldn't care less. I decided not to feel ashamed, humiliated, degraded, defeminized, or dehumanized. I simply looked through them. It was an act of defiance, although no one else realized it.

I was given a long black evening gown to put on. Who could have been so foolish as to bring it there? Empty-handed, we were marched to our lodgings, a huge barren compound surrounded by electric barbed wire, with rows upon rows of rudimentary wooden huts, most of them unfinished, and no blade of grass as far as the eye could see. It was the quarantine B III Lager, dubbed Mexico for its poor condition, as we were to learn later. The huts had no bunks, just the wooden floor and an unfinished, leaking roof. At the entrance was the small room of Hella, our *blockowa* (a veteran Jewish inmate who was head of

the block), and her cousin Annie. The block was divided into two wings, and at the other end was a small latrine that could be used only at specific times. A makeshift open-air latrine was at a distance from our block. No scrap of paper of whatever sort could be found anywhere, and there was no water. A nearby ditch ran with brownish dirty water, whose origin could not be determined. Signs reading "Seuchengefahr" were posted to warn of epidemics.

As soon as we had occupied our living space on the floor, I tried to approach our omnipotent, probably omniscient blockowa. "Where are our mothers, children, and grandparents?" Hella pointed toward dark clouds of smoke with flames shooting up here and there in the distance. "There are your mothers and children going up in smoke just now. Cholera yassna vengerki"—this phrase sounded like swearing, the last word clearly meaning us, Hungarian women. "Why have you come here now? You had good times, while we were dying. Don't say you didn't know." Hella realized that I was reasonable, and she told me to pick up a few "pebbles" from the walkway. At closer inspection one could see that they were crushed coke with discernible fragments of bones! The pervasive stench was almost unbearable. Most of the women lived, or rather vegetated, under a haze of self-deception. "They are burning garbage" was the common illusion.

One day, also in the early days, I had an embarrassing encounter in the latrine. My respected and beloved literature and history teacher from our Jewish Gymnasium, Dr. Magda Gönczi, was sitting next to me. It was humiliating to meet her there in the filth and stench, one year after my graduation. Coincidentally, another literature teacher from our school, Lenke Steiner, was in the same block, as were other former pupils, though not my friends. Maybe my presence there, the former star of our school, induced these two teachers to deliver impromptu lectures on literature and to suggest that I recite poems. We had a captive audience. After the war, nobody could tell me where, when, and how these two dear teachers had met their end.

Soon we were all so weak and ill that nothing mattered, except being able to get up from the hard floor in the morning (after about a week we each received one thin blanket). Sanitary conditions kept deteriorating because of the lack of water. Nearly everybody suffered from dysentery, and we couldn't help relieving ourselves, standing at attention in rows of five, during the tormenting *Zählappells* (roll calls), which lasted for several hours on end. For me dysen-

tery came as a lifesaver, as I had been constipated, because of inhibitions, since the ghetto and throughout the journey in the cattle cars—a period of at least ten days (which I remember as two full weeks, if that is possible).

At night we were not allowed to go to the latrine, and we used the brown bowls from which we sipped our meager soup—five women from the same bowl, counting each *schluck*. Anikó "washed" the bowl and my underpants in the sewage ditch, because I had no strength left.

The overall filth was aggravated by the last menstrual period that all the women had. We knew that it was to be the last, and we were "grateful" for the bromide added to our so-called coffee, which allegedly was intended not only to tranquilize our nerves but also to stop our biological function.*

On July 8 (I found the date in the *Kalendarium*, the chronicles of Auschwitz), exactly four weeks after our arrival, we were ordered to file past an SS officer, and lift our dresses above the knees. No real selection took place, just a knee examination. Anikó and I, and most of the girls from our group of about one thousand, were found fit for "extermination through work." Then we were taken to the Sauna again, where we were branded like cattle. The tattooing on our arms was performed in a large hall, by a desk, where our personal data were registered and our numbers were given to us on a small slip of white linen with a yellow triangle. I was A-9618, and Anikó was A-9617.

The symbolism of our new identity as a mere number, a nonentity, a non-person, is the uttermost memento of Auschwitz and of all the other death and concentration camps. After our registration and the tattooing, we took our first shower since the day of our arrival. We received disinfected underpants and dresses, and we set out in the direction of the *Rampe* (the unloading point at Birkenau) where we had arrived. Our destination was the women's work camp known as A Lager (or B I a), across the railway line. Sometimes we happened to see truckloads of different "commodities" being transported somewhere. The most painful sight was a multitude of baby carriages. Where had all the babies gone?

*There is no evidence that bromide was added to any food or liquid in the camps.