

Johanna Ehrlich

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born November 14, 1927 in Berlin, Germany. My mother's name was Elvira Klein. My father died of phenomena when I was around four years old so I do not remember so much about him. My mother had six sisters and they were all born in Hungary. My grandparents immigrated to Germany in 1912 with six girls - my mother and my five aunts. They had their seventh child in Germany.

When my father died my mother had a tough time supporting us, so she moved in with three of my aunts in a large flat and between them they took care of me. When I was old enough, around five or five and a half, they sent me to a Jewish boarding school where I lived and went home over the weekends; it was very regimental. There was a synagogue on the premises and we kept all the holidays, Hebrew, Kosher, and everything else connected with our religion. The building was "U" shaped; one section was for girls and the other section for the boys; another section was for the faculty. I went there until 1938 when the trouble started.

My mother and grandparents knew what was happening and went back to Hungary where my mother found a job and an apartment. I went to public school until I was 14; then I went to work for a dental lab where I wanted to learn and eventually make it my profession. I had a pretty good childhood. My mother worked and I worked so we were all right until the Germans came into Hungary in the beginning of 1944. First, my mother was let go from her job and I had to also leave my job. So, we did not know what to do and my mother eventually found something as an elderly Jewish couple needed some household help. My mother took the job and we moved in with them. We had a small room and they provided us with food; they were very good to us. Then the Germans imposed a curfew on July 1, 1944, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.; this went on for a few months until finally in November 1944, very early in the morning, the Germans rounded everybody up and we were told to take a suitcase, put some things in it and we are going to work somewhere.

But the reality was they rounded everybody from all the houses and assembled us on a large field overnight. The next day they separated us. One of my aunts was with us and she went one way and we never saw her again. Luckily my mother and I were able to stay together. After that we started marching for days towards the Austrian border. Anybody who couldn't keep up was shot. We slept in the open air and each day marched again. We had to dig ditches along the way, and I did not know why we had to do this. I don't remember exactly how many days it took to get to the border, but once we arrived we were loaded into cattle cars and were taken to a concentration camp called Lichtenwoerth where we were for the next six months doing nothing but delousing ourselves as we were infested with lice. We slept on wet straw on a cement floor, which was an old, broken up factory. People were dying one after the other. We got some watery soup and some bread maybe every third day. I was lucky. The whole time I was together with my mother, but we both got very sick. She with stomach typhoid and I with spotted typhoid.

In April of 1945 the Russians liberated the camp; anybody who could walk walked out the gate. I still today don't know how we made it. I weighed 58 pounds; my mother was less. The Russians threw all kinds of food from their trucks plus cigarettes and money. As we were walking along my mother and I and a man, a Russian officer, stopped us and offered us a horse and a cart so we would not have to walk. Most importantly, he wrote a note in Russian to other Russian soldiers that the cart and horse belongs to us for as long as we needed it. We rode to the train station with it. On and off we stopped at farmhouses where people fed us and let us sleep in the barn.

My mother got very sick from the rich food. She ate so fast and too much that by the time we reached the train station she was delirious. I believe the train master wired to the hospital in Hungary that there were two very sick people on the train. The hospital waited for us with stretchers and when we got there my mother was already dead; they did not tell me she had died for three weeks therefore I could not even cry. They disinfected me and cured me. I was four weeks in the hospital and upon my release I went to the Jewish Organization, and they fixed me up with a set of clothing and some other things. After a while they sent me to Lake Balatan for recuperation for three weeks.

After that I had to start my life again. I was 17 and I went back to the couple my mother and I were living with before we were taken, and I stayed with them until 1946 at which time I went to England where my three aunts lived. It was difficult getting out of Hungary because of the Russians, but my aunts managed to arrange everything, so I left in 1946. I stayed with them, learned English and worked for a dental mechanic until 1947. That's when I met Max Ehrlich my husband to be. He was born December 9, 1924, in East Prussia (Elbing), Germany. He was in the Kindertransport but was very unlucky. He was with a very bad family on a farm and had a very tough time there. We got married in England in November 1947. In March of 1953 we left London to come to the United States; first to New York and eventually to San Francisco.

We both worked very hard for many years to provide a decent living for our family. Eventually we opened our own restaurant on Post Street in the financial district in San Francisco. We owned the restaurant for 13 years and in 1977 we had to sell it because my husband had a stroke and later in 1981 open-heart surgery, but he always landed on his feet. He was active until his last few weeks. He loved tennis and played five days a week. He could not get enough of it. He had to stop about six weeks before he died on September 7, 2001.

Unfortunately, I lost my husband after 53 years of marriage in 2001. I miss him very much, but one thing keeps me going. We have two lovely, good, and wonderful girls. Elvira, she was born in England in 1949. My other daughter, Dianne was born in San Francisco in 1955. We are very proud of them, and they take good care of me, so I have to be strong for them. We also have a granddaughter, Alisha. She also is a good and lovely girl; she was the apple of my husband's eye.

As a final note, the names of all my relatives, aunts and my mother are in the Hall of Names at Yad Vashem.