

Susy Raful

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born, Klara Zsuzsanna Taubner, in Budapest, Hungary on July 30, 1925. I have a fraternal twin sister, Edit, who is ten minutes older than I am. I have another sister, Mary, who is two years older. She and I were deported from Budapest on the same transport.

My Father, Andor and Mother, Nettka, were both born in Hungary. Our family tree has been traced back at least two hundred years in Hungary. I knew my Taubner grandparents. The Weisz grandparents died quite young, leaving my mother to bring up the family. My Taubner grandmother was very observant. But my grandfather Taubner, who smoked big cigars, was not. He smiled and teased a lot. The whole Taubner family was in the retail business, mostly yard goods, sewing materials and related items.

When we were young, we were poor, but did not realize it because the whole family worked together to provide food and clothing. To my parents, education was the most important goal. As children, we studied German and English, in addition to our regular school. Our life improved in 1935, when we moved from Pest to Buda, to take over a store from an uncle, who left for America.

The first Jewish Laws came out in 1939, which started to limit our movement and where we could go to school. However, before things got too bad, we were able to enroll in a special arts high school, where we studied and produced folk art, dress design and dressmaking.

On March 15, 1944, the Germans occupied Hungary. At that time, we lived in the nice neighborhood in Buda, where my parents had acquired the small department store from my uncle. On April 1, 1944, the Germans announced that Jews could no longer live in Buda. We had to move to a "yellow star" house in Pest. Shortly thereafter, they took the Buda store too.

Then they came and took all the men in the building, including my father, to work camps. Mother remained there until later when she was forced to move to the Pest ghetto

To save the girls lives, our parents gave someone a lot of money and a sewing machine so we could move into another "yellow star" house where the Germans made us sew shirts for German soldiers. This house was supposed to be under the protection of the Swiss Red Cross, marked by the Red Cross flag over the door.

On December 1, 1944, the Germans came into the Red Cross building and herded all of us into the central courtyard. From there we were forced to march a long way to a brick factory on the outskirts of Buda. The next day, they marched us back to the railroad station in Pest. On the way, we decided that one of the three sisters would have to escape and tell Mother. Since my twin was the smallest, we took off her yellow star, took her small backpack and shoved her out

of the line of march. She was able to telephone Gyuszi Torok, a non-Jewish close family friend, who arranged for her to hide.

So on December 2, 1944, the Germans took us, crowded into train cattle cars, to the concentration camp in Germany, known as Ravensbruck. They took everything away from us, all our money and clothes. It was winter, but they just gave us some old summer clothes. Because there were thousands of people, there was only room for us in a big tent, where we didn't have a place to sleep, and for days we just had enough room to stand.

We were forced to do very heavy work every day—carrying coal and potatoes just like horses. Every morning, before dawn, during that bitter cold winter, we had to line up outside, so they could count everyone and see who had survived another night. One thing that helped us survive was my training in sewing. My sister, Mary, told an SS-woman that I was an excellent seamstress. So we were often given garments to alter, which they had taken from other Jewish girls. I had to do this work, by hand, long into the night after a day's labor. Our "compensation" was a few extra pieces of bread. This we shared with our first cousin, Zsuzsi, who had been with us from the beginning.

In January 1945, about 150 of the younger-looking girls were put into a cattle car and taken to Freiburg, Upper Silesia, Germany. We worked there in a factory, which was producing some kind of metal parts. As the Russians were getting closer, they had to evacuate the camp, on February 13, 1945. Because there were no trains, we marched for weeks, many days without any food or even a piece of bread. We got to Zwodau, in March, where typhus broke out. We were in quarantine for several weeks. Again they had to evacuate the camp. This time the American forces were coming. They told us that we were going to Dachau—and we began marching again. The hunger and the sickness were horrible. Some of us didn't even have shoes or socks. About 1500 girls started the march from Zwodau; and with our knowledge, about 150 survived.

My sister, Mary, and I escaped from the convoy when American airplanes strafed the column (about May 5, 1945) and we all scattered to the roadside. I was wounded in my upper right leg. We hid in the forest for some days; and then met some Russian soldiers, who also had been hiding. They told us that the war is over and we are free to move around. My sister decided to try to walk back to the nearby town, Volary, which is now in Czechoslovakia. I was very sick and could not walk any longer. An American Army Red Cross jeep picked us up on the way, since they had heard that some girls were hiding in the forest. They took us to the hospital immediately and put me to bed. I was very weak, 78 pounds, with a high fever. After they examined me, with x-ray, they said I had TB. I also had dysentery. I got blood transfusions and all kinds of vitamin shots to build up my strength.

In the beginning of June, I was starting to feel better, gained a little weight and the doctors encouraged me to go outside for walks. As June ended, the Army began to ask about transportation to our homes. Some girls chose to go to DP camps, with the hope of getting to Palestine (Israel). We chose to return to Budapest in order to see if our family had survived.

About a week before we were scheduled to get on a train to Budapest, we had a chance for a Saturday evening excursion. The date was July 7, 1945; and about 40 girls were taken to a dance in a nearby small town which had American Army troops.

That was the night I met Bob Rafal, a soldier from California, who was in the orchestra, although he was not playing that evening. He talked and danced with both my sister, Mary and me. But it quickly became apparent that Bob and I were meant for each other. We talked and talked. Later that night, upon returning to the hospital, I told Mary, who was popular with the boys, "Leave this one alone. I am going to marry him" I found out later that he wrote home the next day, hinting at the same result. Although I only saw Bob two or three times in the next week, we corresponded for two years.

On July 16, 1945, I was strong enough to travel. The American Army Command gave us documents so that we could return to Budapest by train. After returning home, I spent over a year in a local TB sanitarium. Fortunately, I found my immediate family--my parents and twin sister had survived and were waiting for us.

I came to the United States as Bob's fiancée on June 16, 1947, and we were married on the 20th, in New York City. Since then, my concentration camp suffering has affected my health from time to time. I had ulcers and two stomach operations. My lungs are still very weak and I have chronic bronchial problems which have caused me to see doctors, specialized hospitals (National Jewish Institute for Respiratory Medicine) and two surgical operations.

Our first son, Philip Bruce, was born the same week that the State of Israel was reborn, in 1948. He is named for my cousin, Philip, a doctor who did not survive the camps. When I met Bob, I was struck by how closely he resembled Philip. Larry, our other son, was born five years to the day, July 7, 1950, that I first met Bob. Our boys and their children, 3 girls and 2 boys, all had excellent Jewish education, both at home and at the synagogue. The two oldest grandchildren, Sarah and Anna, have returned to the death camps of Europe on the "March of the Living." And both have had summer experiences in Israel

On June 20, 1997, Bob and I celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary in the company of our children, grandchildren, other family and friends.