

Steven Ross

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born in Cluj, Romania on July 16, 1920. My father, Isak Roth came from a very poor family and was the second of nine children. At age thirteen he was sent to study at a Yeshiva where he remained until he was seventeen. He had no further formal education, but after leaving the Yeshiva he learned watch making and became a jeweler. By the age of twenty he had opened a watch making/repair store in Cluj and he became wealthy. A first marriage at seventeen ended in divorce but produced my older brother, Martin. Dad married my mother, Amelia Simon, when he was twenty. I am the eldest of their three children. My younger brother Victor and his twin sister Victoria were born in 1927. Although neither of my parents had much formal education, they wanted their children to be educated and, as result, all of us went on to higher education.

I grew up in Cluj -- a university town somewhat like Berkeley with a population of about 100,000 including those who spoke Romanian, Hungarian and German. By the age of ten I was fluent in all three languages. I was a good student and my dream was to become a professor of Medicine. In 1939 I began my medical studies at the University in Cluj. I continued my studies there until 1944.

In 1940 Germany allowed Hungary to take northern Transylvania (and Cluj) from Romania. On March 19, 1944, the German army occupied Hungary and compelled the Hungarian government to deport the Jewish population to German concentration camps. Forced to wear the Yellow Star, we were told that on a certain date all the Jews in Cluj would be taken to the brick factory and from there would be sent to work camps in other parts of Hungary. When my family was ordered to the brick factory we were allowed to take only what we could carry with us. We were told to pack as if going on a long trip. We took clothes only and I remember that I took three raincoats. We expected to be able to come back home. My father, mother and younger brother and sister and I spent one week at the brick factory. My older brother, Martin, had been forced to go to work for the Hungarian army and so did not go the brick factory with us.

While at the brick factory wealthy Jews were "interrogated" by the Hungarian police to learn where they had hidden their money. My father was one of those who was "interrogated" and was severely beaten in the process. Because of this he (and we) were among the first to be sent to the railroad station for deportation in June of 1944. The five of us were put in a freight car along with about 80 others and began a three-day journey to Auschwitz. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, we were met by Dr. Mengele who pointed each person in one of two directions -- to the "good side" or to the gas chambers. My family and I were all directed to the "good side" but then the family was separated because at Auschwitz males and females were separated. I was 24 years old. I never saw my mother or sister again.

I remained at Auschwitz for six weeks before being sent to a work camp in Brieg. In the meantime my father and my brother Victor were sent to work camps in France. I was at Brieg for six or eight weeks and worked building an aircraft runway before being sent to the Gross Rosen concentration camp. After one or two weeks there I was sent to another work camp, and then in February of 1945 I was sent to Dachau.

The journey to Dachau was the worst experience of my life. 450 of us were put into three open topped freight cars for the five-day journey . We had no food and by the time we arrived only 140 were still alive. I had helped to pile the bodies at one end of the car and when I fell asleep on top of the pile it was assumed that I was dead as well. We arrived at Dachau in the evening. By the next morning 40 more were dead.

At Dachau I was reunited with my father who had been sent there from the work camp in France. I couldn't believe it when one of my friends told me, "Steve, your father is here." While at Dachau I contracted Typhus fever and was sent to the "hospital". I was thrown out of the hospital while still very ill and would have died if the Allies had not liberated us the following day. It was April 29, 1945. I learned later that my father had died at Dachau three days before the liberation. I also was told that my brother Victor had been at Dachau and had been shot by the Germans. I did not believe it and was proved correct when Victor showed up at Dachau two or three weeks after liberation. The two of us stayed together at Dachau until the end of August when we returned home to Cluj. My older brother Martin had also survived the war and showed up in Cluj a few weeks later. My mother and sister did not return home, and I can only assume that they did not survive. In all, 43 members of my family, whom I knew by name, did not come back.

From a population of 20,000 Jews in Cluj before the war, only 600 came home. After returning home to Cluj I continued my medical studies at the University but it was difficult for me to be there when so many of my family had not returned. I learned that the Germans were allowing former concentration camp inmates to register at German universities. I knew that German medical education was very good and I decided to think of Germany in terms of Mozart and Beethoven and to consider that Hitler had been a horrible aberration. With a childhood friend and fellow medical student, Livia Geiger, I set out for Munich on November 11, 1946. We had no passports or visas and we did not arrive in Munich until May of 1947. In Munich we were allowed to register at the University, and I received my Doctor of Medicine degree after passing an oral examination in the Fall. After graduation I applied for a visa to travel to America and came to the United States in the spring of 1948.

In the U.S. I pursued an academic career as a professor of radiology with positions at both Stanford University and the University of California Medical School in San Francisco.