



# My Story

## Eva Szirmai



*My Story*  
Eva Szirmai



These are Eva's words. This is her story.

'My Story' is an initiative of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR).

[www.ajrmystory.org.uk](http://www.ajrmystory.org.uk) [www.ajr.org.uk](http://www.ajr.org.uk)

Eva Szirmai spoke to AJR volunteer Ruth Levey to share her story. Special thanks to Eva's daughters Agnes Isaacs and Sylvia Line for their invaluable help in the writing of this book along with Jacky Line. Thanks also to AJR volunteers Muireann Grealy and Alix Lee.

©The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) December 2022

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licencing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR).

First published December 2022

Designed by Berenice Smith, MA

Produced by Naomi Kaye

Printed in Great Britain by BookPrintingUK

The authors, editor and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce any copyright material in this book. Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher apologises for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

# My Story

## Eva Szirmai

"We sat down and tasted our first bread in freedom. It was black and bitter, but we agreed that we hadn't had a tastier meal in a very long time."

---



## Contents

06	Happy childhood memories, but dark clouds gather	24	My education starts again
10	The Nazis are welcomed in Hungary	25	My husband's story
11	Life under Nazi terror	30	The price we paid for liberation
13	We lose our home	31	The Hungarian Uprising of 1956
14	My father's fate	33	A new life presents itself
17	My mother tries to save us	34	We plan our escape
19	Ghetto living	36	The first day of the rest of our lives
21	The Ghetto is liberated	39	The sorrows and joys of later life
22	My first bread	41	I meet the Queen
23	Rebuilding our lives	42	Sharing my story
		44	Postscript

## Happy childhood memories, but dark clouds gather

I WAS BORN on 3 July 1929 in Budapest, the beautiful capital city of Hungary. Like any other girl my age, I enjoyed ice skating, swimming, and hiking in the mountains in the summer. I have fond memories of holidays at Lake Balaton and trips to Margaret Island with my mother, Iren (née Fried), my father, Simon Friedmann, and my brother, George. The Jewish community in Hungary numbered over 800,000 at that time, and we happily engaged in Jewish communal life.

I remember my father commenting, on his return from Synagogue one day, that he saw a young man with a beautiful voice leading the service. He predicted a great career ahead of him. Little did I know what the future held and that one day this young man would be my husband!

My brother and I enjoyed a carefree life growing up in Budapest – although dark clouds had been gathering for some time. It was 1943. Rumours too terrible to believe had been circulating and were hard to ignore. Jews living in smaller villages were already being herded into ghettos in larger towns. They were then transported in cattle wagons to somewhere called Auschwitz in Poland – a place no one had ever heard of at that time. ■

“ Little did I know what the future held and that one day this young man would be my husband! ”



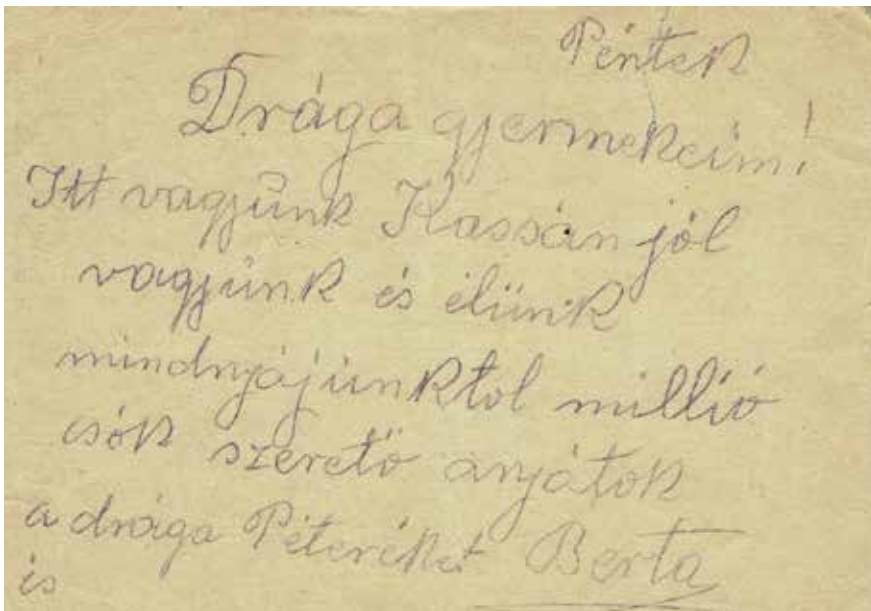


My mother, me, my brother George and my father, Budapest, 1931





My father, me, my mother, Grandma Berta and my brother, George, Budapest in the 1930s



My grandmother, Berta Fried lived in Budapest in the winter and in the summer she lived with one of her sons, Peter, on a farm called Széki Puszta, in the Zemplén district of Hungary. Berta wrote to my mother on 28 April 1944 from Kassa, after having been rounded up and sent to the nearest large town. Generally people wrote postcards as a signal things were bad. Due to censorship, she couldn't tell the truth and on receiving this my mother and father knew that the opposite of what she wrote would be true. As a signal that things were bad she wrote: 'My dear children. We are in Kassa (Košice). We are all well and living. From all of us a million kisses. Your loving mother and your darling Peter too.'

This was the last correspondence received from her.

## The Nazis are welcomed in Hungary

MIKLOS HORTHY, WHO was Regent of Hungary from March 1920 to October 1944, was antisemitic and anti-Jewish laws were introduced as early as 1920. Hungary entered into an alliance with Nazi Germany in the late 1930s; at that time, Horthy introduced further anti-Jewish legislation. Some historians consider that Horthy's reluctance to hand over a large proportion of Hungary's Jewish population to the Nazis, and efforts he made to secure a deal with the Allies, led to the Nazi invasion of Hungary in March 1944. The invasion was met without any resistance from the Hungarian people.



Shoes on the Danube Bank

On the day of the invasion, high-ranking Nazi Adolph Eichmann came to Budapest to organise the deportation of Jews to Auschwitz, which commenced in mid-May of that year. Horthy did everything he could to stop Budapest being destroyed, and this directly or indirectly saved a large proportion of the 200,000 Jews living there.

Finally, Horthy was forced to resign, and the Nazis installed Ferenc Szálasi as the new Hungarian leader. Under his leadership, his Arrow Cross Party commenced their murderous activities against the Jews. The Arrow Cross was in control of Hungary from 15 October 1944 to 28 March 1945. They poured a reign of terror on the Jews of Budapest. The Arrow Cross removed as many as 20,000 people during their time in power and shot them into the River Danube. In Budapest today, a memorial of metal shoes on the side of the river, called 'Shoes on the Danube Bank', commemorates this atrocity. ■

## Life under Nazi terror

OUR PARENTS DID their best to shield us, but the day came when there was no more they could do. Our father sat us down and, to our amazement, told us we no longer needed to attend school. I was to start as an apprentice at a photo salon that very week, and George at a printers.

But why, we asked, could we no longer go to school? My father said that only a few Jewish children were allowed to study now. It was all very strange. Why would it matter if we were Jewish – or any other religion for that matter? We always had Jewish friends, but we also played with the children in the courtyard. I never asked what religion they were, but now I could not play with them. Being Jewish had somehow made me bad.

We endeavoured to carry on with our lives as best as we could, but this was just the start. New anti-Jewish laws were introduced daily. We were no longer allowed to go to swimming pools, cinemas and parks.

On 5 April 1944, it was decreed that every Jew had to wear a yellow star.

My mother obediently sewed yellow stars onto our coat lapels and told us it was very important we never left the house without them. If we did, we could pay for it with our lives. Jews were no longer allowed to travel on public transport. As a result, my apprenticeship came to an end. My boss at the photo salon, whose wife was Jewish, was a good person. His windows were constantly defaced with swastikas, which each day he tried to remove. He was happy to keep me on, but I could not risk going out without my yellow star, and I couldn't travel with it.

Soon we were ordered to hand in all our valuables, bicycles and radios, and to surrender our bank accounts. Jews could no longer own a business. My father Simon managed a family business – a paper factory – which was signed over to a trusted employee for a nominal sum. He was to give the business back when the time was right, in return for a partnership. ■



My mother, me and my father wearing the yellow star



## We lose our home

ON 17 JUNE 1944, it was decreed that Jews had to leave their homes and move to a designated Yellow Star House in the Jewish area. When the Nazis invaded, they assigned around 2,000 buildings around the city to house mostly women, children and the elderly – the men were sent away for forced labour. Non-Jewish families had to move elsewhere and hung signs on their doors to say: ‘No Jews live here,’ while the Yellow Star Houses had to display a yellow star on their doors.

We were ordered to pack a bag with a change of clothes and to put everything else in suitcases and throw them out of the window – they would be delivered to our new address. We lived on the third floor of the building. Needless to say, we never saw our belongings again. Luckily, we had put on as many layers of clothes as we could, and tied our eiderdowns and pillows on our backs. It was with heavy hearts that we closed the door of our apartment. Would we ever be allowed back again? ■

“We were ordered to pack a bag with a change of clothes and to put everything else in suitcases and throw them out of the window – they would be delivered to our new address.”



## My father's fate

MY FATHER HAD fought on the side of the Germans in World War One and was a decorated soldier. He had been shot in the knee and suffered gas attacks, which left him with bad health and caused him to be sent to Italy to recover. At the start of World War Two, he was immediately called up to the army but now, as a Jew, he could no longer be trusted, and his identity book was marked with a big red Z for *Zsidó* (Jew). As an alternative to military service he was conscripted as a slave labourer.

My father and my brother were ordered to report each day for *Munkaszolgalat* (slave labour), to clear the rubble left at the Ferihegy Airport in Budapest after the night-time bombings. This was very dangerous work. Initially, they were permitted to return home each evening, but it wasn't long before they were both taken away for longer periods of time.

The last time I saw my father was in the courtyard of the Yellow Star House. He beckoned me to his side and pressed a small piece of paper into my hand, authorising my mother to act on his behalf for all our affairs. He also insisted on leaving his wedding ring, saying it would be of more use to us than to him. Unknown to my mother and me, this was when my father and George were taken to concentration camps. ■

1.	Család ne- vezetése:		Község neve:	
2.	Értesítési szám:		Községi adó- szám:	
3.	Helyi lakó- szám:			
4.	Községi adó- szám:		Községi adó- szám:	
5.	Születési hely:		Község:	
6.	Helyi lakó- szám:			
7.	Községi adó- szám:		Községi adó- szám:	
8.	Községi adó- szám:			
9.	Községi adó- szám:			
10.	Községi adó- szám:			
11.	Községi adó- szám:			
12.	Községi adó- szám:			
13.	Községi adó- szám:			
14.	Községi adó- szám:			
15.	Községi adó- szám:			
16.	Községi adó- szám:			

17. Helyi lakó-  
szám:

18. Községi adó-  
szám:

19. Községi adó-  
szám:

20. Községi adó-  
szám:

21. Községi adó-  
szám:

22. Községi adó-  
szám:

23. Községi adó-  
szám:

24. Községi adó-  
szám:

25. Községi adó-  
szám:

26. Községi adó-  
szám:

27. Községi adó-  
szám:

28. Községi adó-  
szám:

29. Községi adó-  
szám:

30. Községi adó-  
szám:

31. Községi adó-  
szám:

32. Községi adó-  
szám:

33. Községi adó-  
szám:

34. Községi adó-  
szám:

35. Községi adó-  
szám:

36. Községi adó-  
szám:

37. Községi adó-  
szám:

38. Községi adó-  
szám:

39. Községi adó-  
szám:

40. Községi adó-  
szám:

41. Községi adó-  
szám:

42. Községi adó-  
szám:

43. Községi adó-  
szám:

44. Községi adó-  
szám:

45. Községi adó-  
szám:

46. Községi adó-  
szám:

47. Községi adó-  
szám:

48. Községi adó-  
szám:

49. Községi adó-  
szám:

50. Községi adó-  
szám:

51. Községi adó-  
szám:

52. Községi adó-  
szám:

53. Községi adó-  
szám:

54. Községi adó-  
szám:

55. Községi adó-  
szám:

56. Községi adó-  
szám:

57. Községi adó-  
szám:

58. Községi adó-  
szám:

59. Községi adó-  
szám:

60. Községi adó-  
szám:

61. Községi adó-  
szám:

62. Községi adó-  
szám:

63. Községi adó-  
szám:

64. Községi adó-  
szám:

65. Községi adó-  
szám:

66. Községi adó-  
szám:

67. Községi adó-  
szám:

68. Községi adó-  
szám:

69. Községi adó-  
szám:

70. Községi adó-  
szám:

71. Községi adó-  
szám:

72. Községi adó-  
szám:

73. Községi adó-  
szám:

74. Községi adó-  
szám:

75. Községi adó-  
szám:

76. Községi adó-  
szám:

77. Községi adó-  
szám:

78. Községi adó-  
szám:

79. Községi adó-  
szám:

80. Községi adó-  
szám:

81. Községi adó-  
szám:

82. Községi adó-  
szám:

83. Községi adó-  
szám:

84. Községi adó-  
szám:

85. Községi adó-  
szám:

86. Községi adó-  
szám:

87. Községi adó-  
szám:

88. Községi adó-  
szám:

89. Községi adó-  
szám:

90. Községi adó-  
szám:

91. Községi adó-  
szám:

92. Községi adó-  
szám:

93. Községi adó-  
szám:

94. Községi adó-  
szám:

95. Községi adó-  
szám:

96. Községi adó-  
szám:

97. Községi adó-  
szám:

98. Községi adó-  
szám:

99. Községi adó-  
szám:

100. Községi adó-  
szám:

My father's identity book





Photo of me, returned from Buchenwald Concentration Camp by the Red Cross

## My mother tries to save us

MY MOTHER AND I coped as best as we could. She began to notice that people would disappear from the Yellow Star Houses without explanation, and she started making discreet enquires. To my surprise, early one morning, she dressed in her best clothes and hat and told me she was going out. I was to stay inside and wait for her. She left without wearing her yellow star. There was nothing I could say to dissuade her.

My mother had heard that those who disappeared managed to get a *Schutzpass* (letter of safe passage). If you had one of these passes, it would entitle you to be taken to a place of safety. My mother had decided she had to do something to keep us safe, and was determined to procure one of these passes. She boarded a packed tram to the appointed address, paid the last of the little money she had, and obtained that most prized possession – a *Schutzpass*. We found out later that *Schutzpasses* were actually handed out for free, so someone was making money on the side.

To her horror, her tram was stopped abruptly on her return journey and she was arrested, along with a number of other people. She was then taken back to the address she had just left. She bribed a cleaning woman there with the only item of value she had – her wedding ring. The woman sent word to the Yellow Star House manager, who in turn contacted my maternal great-uncle who was a doctor living in Budapest at the time. He arranged for me to be collected very early in the morning and took me without my yellow star to be with the rest of my maternal family who were hiding in Budapest.



Our *Schutzpass*

My mother was taken to a brick factory near the edge of town. She was held there overnight, to be marched on foot to Austria the following day. Thousands were arrested that day. Luckily, those aged over 40 were released and she was allowed to return to our Yellow Star House.

It was not until 40 years later that we found out my mother's *Schutzpass* had come via Carl Lutz, a Swiss diplomat. He was officially permitted to issue 8,000 *Schutzpasses*, but he allowed these to be duplicated over and over again. Lutz's actions helped to save the lives of up to 65,000 Jewish people in Budapest, but this huge achievement was initially frowned upon by his country. It took a long time for Switzerland to recognise him as a hero, but his deeds are well recognised in Hungary. ■

“To my surprise, early one morning, she dressed in her best clothes and hat and told me she was going out. I was to stay inside and wait for her. She left without wearing her yellow star. There was nothing I could say to dissuade her.”

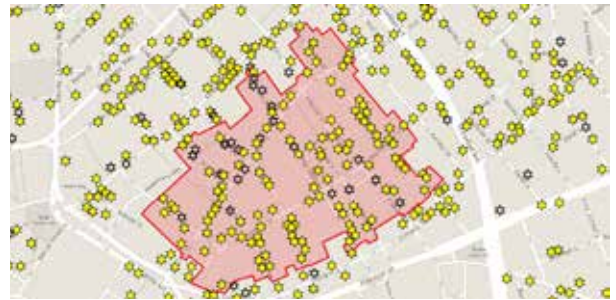
## Ghetto living

MY MOTHER AND I vowed to never be separated again. We could not take any chances by trying to escape via a Swiss safe house in Budapest, as others we knew had done. So, we weathered the rest of the war in the Budapest Ghetto. We lived in a room within the *Godzsu Udvar* (courtyard), which consisted of seven buildings running the one kilometre from Király Utca to Dob Utca. We were allocated a single bed in a small room, which we shared with a couple and their elderly father, who all slept in a double bed together. Luckily, this couple were very kind and shared all their food with us, until they had nothing left.

This was just the beginning. As the bombing got worse, other people whose homes were bombed and needed to find a place to stay took refuge in our small room. Some nights, as many as 14 people would be squashed in with us.

The Ghetto held many dangers. The bombing had shattered all the windows, so our room was freezing cold, often as low as minus -17 degrees. There was no wood to light a fire and there was very little food. The Ghetto committee set up a central kitchen and distributed a thin root soup and a crust of bread on some days. We would help in the kitchen and with the distribution of the soup, receiving a little extra in return. But, one day the food cart was hit by a bomb, and we had to stop - we could no longer risk such danger.

There was a baby in the next room to us. His mother had a small bag of flour. She had no milk to feed him, so she fed him a paste of water and a little flour. I don't know how we all survived. We were starving. We would barter what we could, for example a handkerchief or a pillowcase, for a little food.



Map of Budapest's Ghetto and the locations of Yellow Star Houses. *Source: USC Shoah Foundation*



Most nights we spent standing in the building's cellar during the bombing raids. Some of the bricks separating the courtyard's cellars had been removed, so we could escape to other parts of the huge complex through small openings. We regularly practised climbing through just in case we needed to escape if the Ghetto was raided.

At the beginning of 1945, more people moved into the Ghetto. They had already been liberated from other areas, but they felt safer in the Ghetto. They told us some of the terrible things that had happened to them.

Many died in the Ghetto, but burial was not possible. To avoid an outbreak of cholera, the dead bodies were thrown over the wall into the garden of the Dohany Synagogue at the edge of the Ghetto. Over 3,000 unnamed Jewish people are buried in the small garden of that synagogue alone.

It was hard to trust anyone. There were spies in the Ghetto. Anyone could tell on you, in return for a loaf of bread. Every so often, soldiers would come into the Ghetto and drag people away or gun them down for no reason at all.

I had a very narrow escape one day. The warden, who wasn't Jewish, had informed on me hoping for a reward. Two Nazi officers, dressed in black leather from top to toe, came looking for me. They had been told there was a beautiful young woman hiding in the Ghetto, but luckily we were warned by a man who looked out for me. My mother quickly put my hair in bunches to make me look younger, put me to bed, and told me to say I was very ill with heart problems. I was so frightened that my heart was beating very fast. Thankfully, this worked and they left me alone. ■

## The Ghetto is liberated

BY JANUARY 1945, the Germans were retreating as the advancing Allies were getting nearer. It was rumoured that the Germans had put down dynamite to blow up the Ghetto. Everyone in the Ghetto held their breath as the battle of battles took place. There was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Our fate would be sealed that night.

Early in the morning of 18 January 1945, at around 2am, the guns fell silent. A Russian soldier entered the Ghetto, tore the yellow star from my lapel, threw it on the ground and stamped on it. He only spoke in Russian, but we understood what he meant. We were finally free.

Days later, we finally dared to emerge into the outside world. There was total devastation everywhere. Bodies were piled high, frozen into the wall of snow. People were eating dead horses to survive. We tried to return to our old home, but someone else was living there now. We had no choice but to go back to the Yellow Star House.

The Jewish population of the provinces had been almost entirely wiped out. Just over 100,000 of Budapest's Jews survived. People started to come into the city from the country, hoping to barter the fresh produce they had grown in exchange for things they desperately needed, such as shoes, clothes and household goods. The shops had all been looted. ■

“ A Russian soldier entered the Ghetto, tore the yellow star from my lapel, threw it on the ground and stamped on it. ”

## My first bread

ONE MORNING AFTER we were liberated, we went to search for food. We had a small tablecloth, which we hoped to exchange for something to eat. We saw that there was a large crowd surrounding a big army truck full of Russian soldiers. They were throwing loaves of bread to the people. Sadly, we were unable to get any because there were too many other people in front of us.

On the way home, we saw a Russian female soldier in a sorry state. Her uniform was very torn and dirty. Under one arm, she had a large loaf of black bread and a huge rifle under the other arm. We were mesmerised when we saw this loaf. We stopped walking and just stared and stared at the loaf of bread, but still keeping a wary eye on the rifle.

The soldier then approached us and started to speak to us in Russian, which we couldn't understand. She kept pointing to her hair and holding out the bread to us. Finally, I realised that she wanted us to take her home and help to wash her hair. We hoped she might share some of her bread with us.

We took her to our home, but we had no hot water or any shampoo, so we helped her wash her hair with a little soap and cold water. Her hair was full of lice. I put a few rollers in for her. She was very pleased with the result and she then gave us the whole loaf of bread as a thank you. I offered her a slice to eat, but she refused to take it.

We sat down and tasted our first bread in freedom. It was black and bitter, but we agreed that we hadn't had a tastier meal in a very long time. ■

“ We were mesmerised when we saw this loaf. We stopped walking and just stared and stared at the loaf of bread, but still keeping a wary eye on the rifle. ”

## Rebuilding our lives

OUR DAILY VISITS to the town square, where they published the names of people who had survived, revealed nothing about my father and brother. We had to try and manage somehow. We found a lovely empty apartment on the same floor we were living on. The owners had left. We moved into the smallest room, which must have been a maid's room. Luckily, it still had glass in the windows – the windows in all the other rooms were shattered. We reclaimed some of our furniture, which had been hidden by friends of my father in their cellar. Unfortunately, most of it was damaged as the building had suffered a direct hit during an airstrike, but still we had something. We did our best to make ends meet.

One day, my mother was walking down the street when she heard a man calling, '*Anyu*' (Mother). She didn't look around at first, as she no longer expected to ever see her husband or son again. She eventually turned to see who kept calling. It was my brother, George! He had survived Mauthausen concentration camp. Sadly, my father never returned from Buchenwald. We were told by a rabbi with whom he shared a bunk that my father was killed in the camp. My maternal grandmother, Berta Fried, died in Auschwitz. Two of her three sons, my mother's brothers Bela and Peter, and their families were also murdered in the Holocaust.

My uncle Sandor, my mother's only brother to survive, came back from Auschwitz three months later. His wife, daughter, in-laws, his brothers and all of their families had perished in the Holocaust. The Russians had taken Sandor to Russia and put him to work after his liberation from Auschwitz. He took us to a country town called Fony, where he had lived before the War. There were some good neighbours who had looked after his property. He went from house to house reclaiming his possessions, window frames, land and animals. We needed good, nourishing food, and there was plenty of that in the country. Slowly, we regained our strength.

We eventually returned to Budapest. For a while, I went back to the photo salon and this time worked in front of house. The little wages I received were used up each day due to raging post-war inflation. ■

## My education starts again

ONE DAY, I heard about an institute called Ildiko Szenes, named after Hannah Szenes, the heroine who parachuted into her native Hungary to help during the Holocaust. She had been betrayed, interrogated and shot. The institute, financed by what was known as The Joint (the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee), took in orphaned girls who had lost their families. I applied to attend and luckily they accepted me, even though my mother had survived. I was taught all about textiles and learnt to make garments. In return, students had to help in the kitchen and keep the place clean. I was one of the few who was able to go home to see my mother every so often. I took some of the other girls on these visits with me.

The Joint gave us clothes and set up a workshop for graduates. I went to work there. My mother also went to work for the first time in her life, in a stationery shop. ■

## My husband's story

DURING THIS TIME, in 1949, I attended an open-air concert. A young singer, who enchanted everyone with his beautiful voice and huge repertoire of Yiddish songs, sat down beside me on the only seat available. He walked with a stick, but all I saw was a very handsome young man who sang like a bird.

He was Zoltan Schnurmacher – or Solly Szirmai, as he later became known – a *Cantor* (lead singer) and fellow survivor. He had been born in Győr in Hungary, on 24 November 1922. He lost his own father, Beno Schnurmacher, when he was just six weeks old. At the age of two, his mother, Olga Schnurmacher née Schischa, took him and his sister Aliz to Mattersburg in Burgenland, Austria, one of the *Sheva Kehillos* (the Seven Communities set-up after the expulsion of Jews from Leopoldstadt in the 17th Century), to live with her parents, Mali (Amalia) and Joseph Schischa. Their life revolved around the *Shul* (synagogue) on the *Judengasse* (Jewish street). At the age of three, Solly was already saying *Kaddish* (the Jewish memorial prayer) for his father. There are no Jewish people in Mattersburg now, but the street has kept its name. A small memorial marks the location of the synagogue near a supermarket car park. The synagogue was badly damaged on *Kristallnacht* and later destroyed.



The synagogue in Mattersburg, Burgenland





Solly, with his mother Olga and sister Aliz, Mattersburg, Burgen, Austria, 1930s

In 1938, Solly, Aliz and Olga were expelled from Austria during the Anschluss, when Germany invaded and annexed Austria, leaving Solly's grandparents behind. His grandfather Josef was taken to Treblinka extermination camp, from where he never returned. His grandmother Mali died in the Vienna Ghetto. Solly, Aliz and his mother returned to Hungary to start again. Solly attended a *Yeshiva* (religious Jewish school) and started singing in local synagogues.

In 1944, he had to report for work as a slave labourer and was forced into various slave labour camps. These included the remote Pilipec, high up in the snow-covered mountains near the Russian border. He was put to work chopping down huge trees, which he had to carry down the mountain to float down the river. He got frostbite in his fingers and toes. He eventually caught typhoid and became very ill. He managed to hide from the Germans, who shot those who could not move and keep up. Luckily, he was found by a Russian soldier and the next thing he knew, he woke up in hospital. It took him a long time to be able to walk again. He never lost his faith and was always singing, trying to keep his fellow labourers' spirits up. His sister Aliz survived Ravensbrück concentration camp, and his mother survived in the Budapest Ghetto.

Solly and I were soon inseparable and, after a year of courting, we married in 1949. I was 20 and Solly was 27. By then, Solly was a Cantor at the Bethlen Ter Synagogue.

He eventually joined the Hungarian State Opera, but was still much in demand as a Cantor, as a guest singer at concerts and on the radio. After a few years, our first daughter Agnes was born. ■



Me and Solly on our wedding day



Solly as a young Cantor



Solly, Agnes and me

## The price we paid for liberation

THE RUSSIANS LIBERATED us, and we both owe the Russians our life, but that came at a cost. They never went home: Russia occupied Hungary, which became a Communist country. Luckily, Hungary was one of the more liberal Soviet countries. Everything was nationalised, including Budapest's *shuls*, but at least they were allowed to stay open and kosher food was available. Antisemitism was still rife, but there were good ordinary Hungarians, who had risked their lives saving Jews. It was only recently, when I read a book about Jewish Saviours in Hungary, I came across a name of someone who lived in an apartment in our building in Budapest. His name was Laszlo Michnai, he was an Adventist priest, and I remember he was always very friendly. He saved a number of Jews in the Holocaust, but he never spoke to us about this.

The Hungarian leader Rakosi was put in power by Stalin. When Stalin died in 1953, the populations of Eastern Europe hoped that they might then be freed from Russian rule. But things got worse when Khrushchev came to power in 1956. A poor harvest, fuel shortages and cold weather added to the volatile situation. ■

“ Everything was nationalised, including Budapest's *Shuls*, but at least they were allowed to stay open and kosher food was available. Antisemitism was still rife, but there were good ordinary Hungarians, who had risked their lives saving Jews. ”

## The Hungarian Uprising of 1956

IN OCTOBER 1956, students and workers took to the streets of Budapest and issued a 16-point ultimatum, which included demands for personal freedom, more food, the removal of the secret police and the end of Russian control.

We were all caught up in the Hungarian Revolution. On the evening of 23 October 1956, my husband was singing at the Opera when the Musical Director stopped the performance and told everyone to go home. The revolution had started.

On 1 November 1956, Imre Nagy, the leader of the Revolution, announced the introduction of free elections and Hungary's intention to leave the Warsaw Pact. The Russians would not allow this: such an action would destroy the unity of the Soviet Bloc and weaken the defences of the USSR. On 4 November 1956, Russian tanks rolled into Budapest to crush the Revolution.

Fierce fighting took place outside our house on the Lenin *Körút* (Boulevard). We contemplated leaving, but as Solly and I had two widowed mothers, this was not an option. My brother George, though, left Hungary in 1956 with his wife Vera, mother in-law and two-year-old son Peter. They paid a lorry driver a lot of money to take them to the Austrian border. It was very dangerous: they could be shot if they were seen. They hid their little boy in a rucksack and gave him a sleeping pill to keep him quiet. The lorry driver had told them how to avoid landmines when crossing the no-man's land beyond the border, and they crawled carefully through the long grass to safety. They eventually made their way to the USA. ■





Me and Solly on Margaret Island, Budapest, 1961



## A new life presents itself

IN 1964, A school friend of Solly's, Samu Sobelman from Mattersburg, who now lived in London, visited us. He encouraged us to move to the UK, where we could live a freer Jewish life. We said if the opportunity arose, we would welcome it. Shortly after his return to London, Samu sent us a small newspaper cutting – Queen's Park Synagogue in Glasgow were looking for a Cantor.

We decided Solly should apply for the job. We did not speak English, so we composed a letter in Yiddish to the Synagogue, applying for the position. A reply arrived in Yiddish. A member of the *shul* would visit us in the summer, whilst on a European tour.

One day, we returned home with armfuls of lilac, after a day hiking in the mountains, and found a note: Isaac Rosin from the Glasgow *shul* would be arriving later that day with his brother to meet with us. They wanted to hear a taster of what Solly could offer. They got a lot more than they bargained for! Solly sang them the *Kol Nidre* (prayers at the beginning of the Day of Atonement) and *Unetaneh Tokef* (High Holy Day) prayers, *Mi Adir* (usually sung at weddings), the *Hineni* (a spiritual prayer), *My Yiddishe Momme*, Italian songs, and arias from various operas. An invitation for Solly to come to Scotland for a trial duly arrived.

Queen's Park Synagogue was packed to capacity in the summer of 1964, to hear Solly sing. He was offered a contract there and then, but we had to return to Hungary, as our daughter Agnes was still in Budapest. ■

## We plan our escape

WE HAD TO consider how best to plan our departure. If our request to emigrate was turned down, we might never get the chance to try again. Solly was still of conscription age. We decided to apply for a holiday visa to Vienna the following summer. We planned to apply for the visas that would allow us to enter the UK from the British Embassy in Vienna, when we arrived there.

Everything was put in place on the understanding that our widowed mothers would come and live with us as soon as we were settled in Glasgow. We took English lessons in secret. We knew our mothers would be questioned, so we told them very little.

In June 1965, we arrived at the railway station in Budapest to board a train to Vienna. No one was supposed to know we were leaving but somehow our closest friends found out and arrived to wish us well before we set off. As we were leaving on a holiday passport, we tried to not do anything to arouse suspicion. Had our two suitcases been opened by the Hungarian authorities, they would have only found our summer clothes packed. We left all our other possessions in our apartment. Hungarian money had no value and could not be exchanged for foreign currency, apart from a very small amount for those travelling abroad. We all breathed a huge sigh of relief as the train crossed the border at Hegyeshalom.

We spent anxious weeks in Vienna waiting for the visas and plane tickets that would allow us to complete our journey. We were given a daily allowance by The Joint, and Solly was offered a position as *Chazan* in Vienna. The Budapest Opera was closed over the summer, so if all else failed and we were unable to get to the UK, we also had the option of returning home with nobody in authority any the wiser about our plans. Thankfully, after about four weeks, our visas arrived, and we were able to travel to the UK. ■



Me and Solly in our new home in Glasgow, 1973

## The first day of the rest of our lives

WE ARRIVED IN Glasgow on 13 July 1965 – this was the beginning of the rest of our lives.

Glasgow and Queen's Park Synagogue became our home. We had to request an immigration passport from the Hungarian Embassy in London, who told us we would need to go back home to request it. Luckily, Max Berkley, the Chairman of the *shul*, and his brother Fred, worked with the ecclesiastical authorities to enable us to stay. Soon we were busy learning English and picking up local customs and etiquettes, such as drinking tea with milk and sleeping under blankets instead of eiderdowns.

In 1968, my mother Iren came to live with us. She stayed with us until the end of her days. It was 17 years before we were able to visit Budapest again. Sadly, Solly and his mother Olga were never reunited, as she passed away before we were able to make the journey.

There was great excitement when our second daughter, Sylvia, arrived in 1971 – a true, native-born Scot! We settled into our new life, raised our children, and tended to our congregants. We were fortunate enough to be reunited a number of times with my brother George and his family in Boston, and with Solly's sister Aliz and her family in Hungary. My mother was also able to visit her surviving brother Sandor, who settled in Israel. We did not talk about the Holocaust, apart from telling our children that their grandfather never came back from Buchenwald. My mother never talked about the loss of her mother and brothers. Indeed, it was not until many years later that we and other survivors felt able to talk about our terrible experiences.

We took great delight in seeing our girls grow up, marry and settle down, happily both in Glasgow. Our small family became a large one, with the arrival of five grandsons. ■

“There was great excitement when our second daughter, Sylvia, arrived in 1971 – a true, native-born Scot!”



Left to right: My daughters Agnes and Sylvia, Solly and me, Glasgow, 1973





Sylvia's family, 2019

## The sorrows and joys of later life

WHEN OUR BEAUTIFUL Queen's Park *Shul* closed in September 2002, we retired to live in Giffnock in East Renfrewshire, to remain close to our children. Sadly, Solly passed away soon after, in 2003. His last day was spent attending the Mincha service in the Giffnock *shul*, singing all the traditional *Yom Kippur* tunes with Rabbi Rubin. That evening, he was greeted by many congregants from our own *shul* as he made his way to his seat for the Kol Nidre service. That is when he collapsed and died.

My life changed, of course, but I have taken great delight in being surrounded by a loving family. I have been fortunate enough to see my five grandsons grow up, two of the older ones marry, and the arrival of five great-grandchildren.

I became an active member of the AJR, a wonderful organisation through which I have met many people with whom I share a common bond. In fact, it was thanks to a chance viewing at an AJR event of *The Forgotten Hero*, a film about Carl Lutz's life, that I discovered the role he had played in the issuing of *Schutzpasses*. His stepdaughter Agnes Hirschi was subsequently invited to come as a guest speaker to an AJR Regional Gathering in Edinburgh in 2015. ■





Agnes's family, 2021

## I meet the Queen

IN 2001, THE Government established 27 January as National Holocaust Remembrance Day. In 2005, the national memorial event took place in London, and I was invited to go and to meet the Queen. The journey was a very emotional undertaking, and I met many people and heard many stories. It was a day I will never forget.

The reception was held in the picture gallery at St James's Palace. The security was very tight when we got off the coach. The palace was so beautiful and the building so remarkable, I didn't know what to look at first: the furniture; the flower arrangements; the statues; or the wonderful portraits on the walls. I was feeling a little bit lonely until I saw a familiar face. It was my late husband's cousin, Ilsa, who had also been invited!

We were put into groups and the organisers asked us our names, our countries of origin and where we had been during the Holocaust. We were told to address Her Majesty as 'Mam' – but only if she spoke to us first! – and that we didn't need to curtsy. Eventually the Queen approached our group. She looked very nice, but she also looked very tired. I was not surprised, as she had already met so many people. We shook hands and her escort told her my name and details of how I had survived the Budapest Ghetto. She had already started to move away, when I suddenly said to her: 'Can I say something?' and she looked at me and said: 'Yes, do.' I told her that my oldest grandson was attending St Andrew's University, where Prince William was also a student. She smiled and said, 'What a coincidence,' and then she moved on to the next person.

We were then taken to the Palace of Westminster, a magnificent building with beautifully carved wooden walls hung with enormous portraits. The Queen and Prince Philip were both there. The Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks made a very moving address. Prime Minister Tony Blair also spoke, as did the actor Stephen Fry, whose speech revealed his life and his background, which was very interesting and beautifully told.

A woman then came on stage and played a piece on the cello that had been especially composed for this occasion. It was very moving. After that, the Auschwitz survivors lit candles while the names of those who perished in the Holocaust were projected onto large screens at either side of the stage. ■

## Sharing my story

THE SURVIVORS WHO were at that Holocaust Remembrance event were mostly in their 80s and 90s. Many were in wheelchairs or had walking sticks and they looked very frail. Very few Holocaust survivors are still alive, but we are all very anxious to share our experiences with future generations while we still can.

When the opportunity arose, I myself have visited schools to share my story. It is so important that every individual experience of the Holocaust is remembered, to ensure it never happens again. Six hundred thousand Hungarian Jews were murdered in the Holocaust; just over a 100,000 Budapest Jews survived. Many of those are now scattered around the world.

The Holocaust very nearly destroyed our family tree, but with the survival of Solly and me, our lineage is ensured. Our family continues to grow new branches. ■

## Postscript

Sadly, Eva Szirmai (may her dear soul rest in peace) passed away on 24 June 2021. This book is a fitting tribute to a wonderful wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother who will never be forgotten.

In November 2021, a tree was planted in memory of Eva and Solly in Rouken Glen Park, Glasgow. This is one of the 80 trees planted across the UK to mark both the AJR's 80th anniversary and the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. Eva and Solly enjoyed many a walk there and their family continue to visit the tree every week at the park. ■



Plaque unveiled at the tree planting ceremony in memory of Eva and Solly





AJR'S tree planting ceremony, 2021




## About the AJR

Founded in 1941 by Jewish refugees from Central Europe, The Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) is the national charity representing and supporting Holocaust refugees and survivors living in Great Britain. Primarily delivering social, welfare and care services, the AJR has a nationwide network of regional groups offering members a unique opportunity to socialise in their local area. Members receive support from volunteers and can obtain advice and assistance on welfare rights as well as on Holocaust reparations.

The AJR is committed to the education of future generations about the Holocaust and is now the UK's largest benefactor of education and memorialisation programmes and projects which promote teaching and learning about the Holocaust.

About 70,000 refugees, including approximately 10,000 children on the *Kindertransport*, arrived in Great Britain from Nazi-occupied Europe in the 1930s. The AJR extends membership to anyone who fled a Nazi-occupied country as a Jewish refugee or who arrived in Great Britain as a Holocaust survivor. We also welcome the descendants and spouses of the refugees as members.



“We sat down and  
tasted our first bread  
in freedom. It was  
black and bitter,  
but we agreed that  
we hadn’t had a  
tastier meal in a  
very long time.”

 **AJR** The Association  
of Jewish Refugees

[www.ajr.org.uk](http://www.ajr.org.uk)