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# This is All I Remember
# PART II

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## 1. BEFORE THE GHETTO
## What do I remember from the last days?

Once or twice we, Jewish youths in Kolozsvár, were ordered to the railway station. We had to help the Wehrmacht unload weapons from cars. The soldiers watched us work without any interest. They didn't even rush us. "These German soldiers are ordinary simple folk", we thought.

The rumors about being put into a ghetto grew more and more insistent. The local Jewish leaders calmed people down: we'll only be taken to Transdanubia, to work. My family didn't try to do anything to escape. Once my brother Joki and I walked out on the Torda road. We probably dimly thought that we'll look around to see how one could get across the border to Romania.[1] It is amazing how naive, to say the least, one had to be for this. We couldn't have nursed any serious plans of escape since otherwise we would have looked more thoroughly into the possibilities of illegal crossing that I now know existed by then.

Much later, I found out from my cousin Miri[2] that when Margit Ganz, the Hebonim's Israeli envoy, offered to include Miri in a group bound for Budapest, Miri immediately suggested to my parents that Baba [Rozál], my younger sister, should go as well. At first, Miri says, my parents were against it. Later, they changed their minds but by that time it was too late; the quota was full.[3]

My father had the reputation of a very clever, well-informed man. Throughout the years a great many people sought his advice. This is why it is almost impossible for me to understand his passivity in general, and in particular, the fact that he hesitated to send my sister Baba to Budapest. I will now give the only possible explanation I can imagine.

According to the chronicler of the Hungarian Holocaust, Randolph L. Braham, it is likely that the Kastner group (whose1685 members were taken to Switzerland, through Bergen-Belsen, for $1000 each) was formed sometime in March.[4] Braham mentions somewhere that of this group, 388 members were from Kolozsvár. They were selected by the local Jewish leaders and the Zionist envoys, specifically Jozsef Fischer, Hillel Danzig, Dr. Lajos Márton, Dr. Jenö Kertész and Dr. Sándor Weisz. Most of the people selected paidd the ransom money themselves. But there were exceptions too, as for instance Árpád Bihari

[1] After the Vienna Agreement, the Hungarian/Romanian border ran between Kolozsvár and Torda.
[2] Mirian Trattner, nee Stern, on of the three children of Sára Stern, nee Weisz (Aunt Sári), David's mother's sister.
[3] Miri reached Israel safely. She lives there now with her husband, two children and six grandchildren.
[4] R.l.Braham is the author of A magyar holocaust: A népirtás politikája [The Hungarian Holocaust: The politics of Genocide], Gondolat, Budapest, 1988.

and his family as well as the city's Orthodox chief Rabbi, Akiba Glasner, and his family. Now my father was close to Glasner and I suppose Glasner must have reassured him that our family would be included in the group as well. This must have been why he didn't want to let Baba go. He must have changed his mind when he found out that we were not included after all. Of course, this is mere supposition but this is the only plausible explanation I can find for my father's behavior.

All we did was take one suitcase to our tailor and one to my father's straw man, leave a few things with our Gentile friends, the Doborvs, and place a lace curtain and some china with a neighbor. Obviously we had neither gold nor jewelry since otherwise I would know about it. Upon my return, I got back all of this, except for what was with the Dobrovs, who fled the Russians in great panic, leaving everything behind. After the war, my cousin Özsi , Miri's brother, found some family pictures in the attic of Dobrovs' house. The lace curtain, after 43 years, was hanging in Elsa's room when Esther and I fled Romania in 1987.[5]

Over the years I often heard the following question, phrased in various ways: "Why did you let yourselves be driven like cattle to the slaughterhouse?" I first heard it immediately after our arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, when a French speaking Polish prisoner shouted at us: "Why did you come here?" And later, when on my way home I stopped in Prague, a Russian officer confronted me with it: "Why did you let yourselves be dragged away?" We ourselves wondered about this a lot and now I have to ask the first and most important question in this connection: Why didn't we resist being herded into the ghetto?

What could we have done? 1. Organize armed resistance 2. Hide 3. Flee to Romania.

1. Armed resistance? I heard in those days that there was a Jewish man in Kolozsvár who had been a colonel in World War I and who belonged to a rightwing Zionist organization, the revisionists led by Jabotinsky. It was rumored that he considered giving Jewish youths military training in the beginning of the forties. But in 1944 most Jewish young men were in labor camps, and besides, there was no way of procuring arms. But even if there had been a few brave people and even if they had managed to find arms, it would have been suicidal to use them against the Hungarian and German armies in a country in which there were no partisans and whose population was generally wildly anti-Semitic.

2. Hide? There were kind people, to be sure, who might have helped but there were very few who accepted the deadly danger that hiding someone entailed.

[5] Eugene Stern (Özsi), Miri's brother was taken to forced labor. He survived and later emigrated to Montreal, Canada. Elsa Brunner, nee Goro, was David's mother-in-law. She lived with the family in Temesvár from 1950 until her death, in 1981. Esther and David defected to Germany from Romania in 1987.

And let me add that one cannot blame them for it. What's more, morally, a Jew could hardly accept to put a friend in such danger.

3. We are left then with fleeing across the border. This was a real possibility. It so happens that Esther's home, in Torda, right across the Romanian border, housed a group led by Ari Hirsch (and of which Esther was an active member) who organized the escape of more than a hundred Jews. The fugitives arrived in Bucharest and either stayed on in Romania or tried to get to Palestine. Would it have been possible to save thousands this way or through similar means? Perhaps. But such an action should have been organized by the leaders of the Jewish community who should have persuaded the people to take the risk by telling them that they were faced with a choice between life and death. The leaders of the community did exactly the opposite. They misled people and calmed them with the false story of the Transdanubian labor camp. The Reform chief Rabbi Moses Weinberger was urging his flock to stay even a few hours before he himself, together with his wife, fled over the border with the help of the Torda group. We cannot discard the possibility that the Jewish leaders lied consciously because in the interest of a smooth and quick deportation, the Gestapo had demanded no mass resistance in exchange for saving the Kasztner group. It is beyond doubt that the Jewish leaders from Kolozsvár made a serious mistake or, if the above supposition is correct, they committed an unforgivable crime.

## 2. THE GHETTO

It sends shivers down my spine to think how smoothly we were herded into the ghetto. The brick factory was surrounded with barbed wire and guards were set up. No other measures of preparation were taken. The people, with their small luggage, were brought into the factory on carts and trucks by the Hungarian gendarmes. We slept on the bare floor, on our blankets. In the area of the ghetto, where the 12000 or so Jews of Kolozsvár were crowded there was no more than a single wooden outhouse! It was frightening to see how difficult it was to gather ten people to dig a ditch and somehow put together a common latrine. The brick drying area, where we slept, was covered. But we were not cold anyway in the pleasant May weather. Thinking now back, I am surprised at how complaint, problem and quarrel free was the way in which this huge mass of people got used to these degrading, inhuman circumstances. Perhaps this was the result of millenary inheritance, or perhaps it was due to the fact that we were being deprived, quickly and relentlessly, of our human rights and dignity.

I don't remember what I thought about, what I felt. The only thing I remember clearly is that I was keenly considering the idea of breaking out of the ghetto. I didn't want to escape; that seemed hopeless. I only wanted revenge over the guards: I wanted to kill one of them. I knew that it would amount to

suicide, and, indirectly, if I thought of the reprisal, a crime as well, but there was in me a definite desire not to let ourselves be butchered without any resistance. This was a wild fantasy, devoid of any practical side, but I know that I was serious about it because I went to young man named Kupferstein, who was my elder by a few years, and who I thought was a communist, and I asked him what his own and the party's opinion was about such an action. What blessed naivety! To think the party was there! My recollection is that Kupferstein answered that he had no instructions, but I am sure he put it more evasively.

We must have spent a week in the ghetto. Our neighbors were the Bihari's. We slept huddled against one another. We didn't get any food; we ate from the provisions we had brought along. There were rumors richer Jews were cruelly being tortured to find out where they had hidden their valuables. The Hungarian authorities were trying to get at the Jewish riches before the Germans did. The rumor that we were to go to Transdanubia to work persisted. Some even knew we would work in a lumberyard. Strangely, this complete existential uncertainty did not cause any panic in me. Nor was there any mass panic. Somehow everybody kept his anxiety, his fear, locked within himself. Within the family we did not talk about what lay in store. It was reassuring that we were together and we hoped to stay together.

Nothing reached us from the outside world. Later I heard from my cousin Miri that Árpád Dobrov was brave enough to bribe a guard and so got some food to us. I don't remember this and later, when in the seventies, I spent a lot of time with Árpád and his wife, Tilda, in Temesvár and Kolozsvár, where they came from Venezuela, they never mentioned it.

I came into contact with the outside world only on May 23rd when we were led across town to the railway station in one of the first groups. Besides my own luggage I also carried the bundles of an elderly couple, who were friends of ours. Despite my heavy load, I looked about me to observe the crowd who had gathered to stare at us form the sidewalk. I don't remember seeing any malicious smiles but what stayed with me, sharply, is that I saw no sign of compassion either.

But one cannot draw any generalization from this. Who could those people be, who came to gawk at us and why did they come? Clearly these were not the people who where shocked by the criminal decision of the Hungarian government, or who were outraged by the sadism of the Hungarian gendarmes, or who were saddened by the anti-Semitism of the Hungarian masses.

The Bulgarian people, the Bulgarian political parties, and the Bulgarian clergy were able to prevent the deportation of the Jews by organizing mass movements and protests. There is therefore historical proof that this was possible. I didn't see any citizen of Kolozsvár who would watch with sympathy, or, God forbid,

outrage, this miserably winding row of people, who represented the most shameful abasement of the Hungarian people and its history.

## 3. ON THE WAY TO AUSCHWITZ
## 6 horses, 40 people, 80 Jews[6]

Amid wild shouts and blows, the Hungarian gendarmes crowded us into cattle cars, 80 people and their respective bundles per car. By the time we came to our senses we found ourselves in a state that was more miserable than that of animals. There is something worse than the ghetto! The struggle for `life space' began right away. People were not exactly fighting but they were not considerate either. Everybody thought only of themselves. I don't know how it happened but I was asked to make order. This was a task that was meant for me: to make order in a well-defined space with minimal means. (This characterization fits the research problems that I chose to work on later, in electrotechnics.) And I did indeed solve it. Kindly and quickly. Somehow everybody had room to sit eventually. The thought occurred to me for the first time, a crazy thought, that I found ridiculous myself, that here are eighty people in almost identical circumstances thus creating, for a short time, the caricature of a socialist system. This was flawed in principle, if only because everybody disposed of what they had brought along, and that was quite uneven. But I left it to chance to decide who will occupy what socio-geographic place in the car. The only thing I found important was that everybody get to sit down as quickly as possible. And then the Citrom's asked me to move away their shabbily dressed neighbors, whom they thought dirty. "I was glad to help carry your luggage", I said, "but I can't help you with this." "Now you're rubbing it in that you did something for us", they answered, insulted and insultingly. I felt they were wrong. But this experience touched me profoundly and since then, whenever I helped somebody I tried to keep silent about it. Today it also hurts me because my position wasn't completely right either. I was rigidly adhering to the principle of equality although perhaps I could have found a way of fulfilling their request without hurting others.

During the first two days of the journey we were on Hungarian soil and we were guarded by Hungarian policemen. Inhumanely. We didn't get any water. We had to do our needs in the car and they barely gave us a chance to clean it up. The treatment improved considerably when we were taken over by the SS for the last two days of the trip. They didn't shout at us. They didn't hit us. Once or twice a day we were allowed to get out and drink water and do our needs.

[6] During World War I cattle cars bore signs that read: '6 horses, 40 people'

Fränkel Hermann, father of Joki, David and Baba. Died in 1945 in Buchenwald.

**Fränkel Gizela, née Weiss, mother of the three children. Died in 1944 in Auschwitz**

Everybody sank deep into their own thoughts. We didn't talk much about what was in store for us. But my father, though, must have known a lot. When, still on Hungarian soil, the train turned towards Kassa, Father turned pale as a sheet. It must have been more than just a guess as to what was to follow. But he didn't talk about it with us, 'children'.

I remember vividly that I suggested to Joki, my older brother, that we should do something. Even if all we achieved was the killing of a single guard, we would nevertheless die a different death. Perhaps I myself did not take this thought too seriously since there were very few young people in the car and therefore we had no chance of success, while at the same time we knew that a single such attempt would have unforeseeable consequences for our companions. Joki discarded my suggestion immediately and decisively. I mention this, as well as the similar idea I had in the ghetto, only because it shows that I, like probably many others, did think about letting ourselves be dragged to our deaths without resistance.

Somehow, after four days, it was in the air that the end of our journey was near. We were dejectedly stuffing ourselves with the leftover food. We probably felt that we wouldn't be allowed to take it any further.

It is a bitter memory that, starting from the last afternoon of the last day, Mother and Father didn't talk to one another anymore. They had quarreled. And I am sure I know what the cause of their argument was, although I never asked Father about it later. Aunt Sári, Mother's sister, had caught a cold and her temperature went up. My parents must have disagreed because Father must have suggested to Mother, who, at 46, was a healthy and resourceful woman, not to go with Aunt Sári and the sick in case there is a choice, but rather, to go with her fifteen year old daughter, Baba. Mother did not want this. I cannot grasp how and why, since she could hardly help Aunt Sári whereas had she gone with Baba, perhaps both would have survived. This hurts me dreadfully to this day.