



SURVIVING THE ANGEL OF DEATH

THE TRUE STORY OF A MENGELE TWIN IN AUSCHWITZ

EVA MOZES KOR AND
LISA ROJANY BUCCIERI



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Jaffa Mozes, my father Alexander Mozes, my sisters Edit and Aliz, and my twin sister, Miriam Mozes Zeiger. I also dedicate this book to the children who survived the camp, and to all the children in the world who have survived neglect and abuse, for I wish to honor their struggle in overcoming the trauma of losing their childhoods, their families, and the feeling that they belong to a family. Last, but not least, this book is dedicated in honor of my son, Alex Kor, and my daughter, Rina Kor, who are my joy, pride, and challenge.

—EM

To Olivia, Chloe, and Genevieve: the reasons for everything. And to my sister, Amanda, for saving my life.

—LF

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PROLOGUE

The doors of the train car were thrown all the way open for the first time in many days, the light day shining upon us like a blessing. Dozens of Jewish people had been crammed into that tiny cattle car as it rattled through the countryside, taking us farther and farther away from our home in Romania. Desperate, people pushed their way out.

I held tightly to my twin sister's hand as we were shoved onto the platform, not sure whether to be glad for our release or afraid of what was coming. The early morning air was chilly, a cold wind nipping at our bare legs through the thin fabric of our matching burgundy dresses.

I could tell at once that it was very early morning, the sun barely making its way above the horizon. Everywhere I looked there were tall, sharp, barbed-wire fences. High guard towers with SS patrols, *Schutzstaffel* in German, leaned out, aiming their guns at us. Guard dogs held by other SS soldiers pulled against leashes, barking and growling like a rabid dog I had once seen on the farm, their lips foaming, their teeth flashing white and pointy. I could feel my heart pounding. My sister's palm clenched sweaty and warm onto my own. My mother and father and our two older sisters, Ecca and Aliz, were standing right next to us when I heard my mother's loud whisper to my father.

"Auschwitz? It's Auschwitz? What is this place? It's not Hungary?"

"We are in Germany," came the reply.

We had crossed over the border into German territory. In actuality, we were in Poland, but the Germans had taken over Poland. Germany's Poland was where all the concentration camps were. We had not been taken to a Hungarian labor camp to work but to a Nazi concentration camp to die. Before we had time to digest this news, I felt my shoulder being pushed to one side of the platform.

"*Schnell! Schnell!*" Quick! Quick! SS guards ordered the remaining prisoners from the cattle car out onto the large platform.

Miriam pulled herself closer to me as we were jostled about. The weak daylight was blocked and unblocked as taller people were first jammed up next to us, then pulled away by the guards to one side or the other. It looked like they were choosing some of us prisoners for one thing and some for another. But for what?

That's when the sounds around us began escalating. The Nazi guards grabbed more people, pulling them to the right or to the left on the selection platform. Dogs were snarling and barking. The people from the cattle car started crying, yelling, screaming all at once; everyone was looking for family members as they were torn away from one another. Men were separated from women, children from parents. The morning erupted into pure pandemonium. Everything started moving faster and faster around us. It was bedlam.

"*Zwillinge! Zwillinge!*" Twins! Twins! Within seconds, a guard who had been hurrying by stopped short in front of us. He stared at Miriam and me in our matching clothes.

"Are they twins?" he asked Mama.

She hesitated. "Is that good?"

"Yes," said the guard.

"They are twins," replied Mama.

Without a word, he grabbed Miriam and me and tore us away from Mama.

"No!"

"Mama! Mama! No!"

Miriam and I screamed and cried, reaching out for our mother, who, in turn, was struggling ~~to follow us with her arms outstretched, a guard holding her back. He threw her roughly to the other side~~ of the platform.

We shrieked. We cried. We pleaded, our voices lost among the chaos and noise and despair. But no matter how much we cried or how loud we screamed, it did not matter. Because of those matching burgundy dresses, because we were identical twins so easily spotted in the crowd of grimy, exhausted Jewish prisoners, Miriam and I had been chosen. Soon we would come face to face with Josef Mengele, the Nazi doctor known as the Angel of Death. It was he who selected those on the platform who were to live and those who would die. But we did not know that yet. All we knew was that we were abruptly alone. We were only ten years old.

And we never saw Papa, Mama, Edit, or Aliz again.

CHAPTER ONE

Miriam and I were identical twins, the youngest of four sisters. To hear my older sister grudgingly tell the story of our birth, you would have known immediately that we two were the darlings of the family. What is sweeter or cuter than identical twin girls?

We were born on January 31, 1934, in the village of Portz in Transylvania, Romania, which is in Eastern Europe near the border of Hungary. From the time we were babies, our mother loved to dress us in the same clothes, putting huge bows in our hair so people would know right away that we little people were twins. She even seated us on the windowsill of our home; passersby thought we were precious dolls, not even real people.

We looked so much alike that she had to put tags on us to tell us apart. Aunts, uncles, and cousins visiting our farm liked to play guessing games with us, trying to divine who was who. “Which one is Miriam? Which one is Eva?” a puzzled uncle would muse with a twinkle in his eye. My mother would smile proudly at her perfect little dolls, and my two older sisters would probably groan. Regardless, most people guessed wrong. When we were older and in school, we would use our identical twinship to trick people, which for us could be so much fun. And we took advantage of how precious and unique we were whenever we could.

Although Papa was strict and admonished us and our mother about the perils of excessive vanity, emphasizing that even the Bible warned against it, Mama particularly cared about our appearance. She had our clothes custom made just for us, like rich people do today with fashion designers. She would order material from the city, and when it arrived, she would take Miriam and me and our two older sisters, Edit and Aliz, to a seamstress in the nearby village of Szeplak. At her house, we girls were permitted to hungrily peruse magazines featuring models wearing the latest styles. But our mother made the final decision on the cut and color of our dresses, for in those days girls always wore dresses, never pants or overalls like boys. And always our mother chose burgundy, powder blue, and pink for Miriam and me. After we were measured, we would set a date for a fitting and when we returned, the seamstress had the dresses ready for us to try on. The styles and colors of the dresses were always identical, two pieces made into one perfect, matching pair.

Other people may have been baffled by our identical twinship, but our father could tell Miriam and me apart by our personalities. By the way I carried my body, a gesture I would make, or the second I opened my mouth to speak, it was clear to him who was who. Although my sister had been born first, she was the leader. I was also outspoken. Any time we needed to ask Papa for something, my oldest sister Edit would encourage me to be the one to approach him.

My father, a religious Jew, had always wanted a boy, because at that time only a son could participate in public worship and say *Kaddish*, the Jewish mourner’s prayer, upon someone’s death. But Papa had no son, only my sisters and me. Since I was the younger of the twins and his last child, he often looked at me and said, “You should have been a boy.” I think he meant to say that I was his last chance at getting a boy. My personality just cemented it: I was strong and brave and more outspoken—just like he must have imagined a son of his might have been.

This stronger personality of mine, while setting me apart, also had its downside. It seemed to me that my father believed that everything about me was wrong; nothing I did seemed to please him. Many a time we would argue and debate, me not willing to give in. It was not enough of an answer for me that my father was right just because he was a man and my father and the head of the household.

So we always seemed to be disagreeing, Papa and I.

I definitely got more attention from him than Miriam or my other sisters, but it was not always the kind of attention I wanted. I never learned to skirt the edge of the truth with little white lies, so I was always in trouble. I can recall tiptoeing around the house to avoid my father sometimes, as I am sure he often tired of me and my big mouth.

Looking back, however, I realize that my battles with Papa toughened me up, made me even stronger. I learned to outsmart authority. These battles with my father unwittingly prepared me for what was to come.

My mother was very different from my father. She was quite educated for a woman of those times because not all women got to go to school. Especially among religious Jews in those days, girls and women were mostly expected to take care of the home and the family, while the education and studying was reserved for the boys. And while my mother made sure that we learned to read, write, and do math, and study history and languages, she also taught us to care for others in our community.

We were the only Jewish family in Portz, our village, and were friendly with everyone. My mother heard all the town news and often assisted our neighbors, especially young pregnant mothers in times of need. She would take them noodles or cake, help them with the household if they were sick, give them advice on raising children, and read them instructions or letters from other family members. She taught me and my sisters to follow in her lead, serving those less fortunate, especially since we were better off than many other people in our small farming village.

Yet almost from the time we were born, anti-Semitism pervaded our country of Romania. This means that most of the people around us did not like Jewish people just because they were Jewish. We children were never aware of the anti-Semitism until 1940, when the Hungarian army came.

My father once told us of an anti-Semitic incident that happened to him in 1935 when Miriam and I were just one year old. In that year, the Iron Guard—a violent anti-Semitic political party that controlled the village offices, the police, and the newspapers—stirred up hatred against Jews by making up false stories about how evil Jewish people were, and how Jews wanted to cheat everyone else and take over the world. My father and his brother Aaron were thrown into jail by the Romanian Iron Guard on fake charges of not paying taxes. But it was all a lie; they had always paid their taxes. They were singled out and arrested just because they were Jewish.

Papa told us that when he and Uncle Aaron got out of jail, they decided to go to Palestine to see if they could make a living there. Palestine, at the time, was an area of land in the Middle East where the Jewish people lived before their exile during the time of the Roman Empire; especially during periods of persecution, it was always thought of as a homeland by many Jews. A part of Palestine had been set aside for Jewish immigration early in the twentieth century, and it eventually became the independent state of Israel in 1948.

My father and Uncle Aaron stayed in Palestine a few months and then came back to Romania. Upon their return, Uncle Aaron and his wife sold all their land and possessions and planned to emigrate, or move.

Papa urged Mama to leave and settle in Palestine, too. “It’s good there,” he said. “The country is warm. There are plenty of jobs.”

“No,” she protested. “I can’t move with four small children.”

“We need to leave now, before it gets worse here for us,” urged my father, who was worried about the news he was hearing of increasing persecution of the Jews all over the country and Europe.

“What would I do there? How would we manage? I have no desire to live in the desert,” said my mother. And like mothers sometimes do, she put her foot down and refused to go. I often wondered what our lives would have been like had she relented.

In our little village in Romania, we lived in a nice house on a vast farm. We had thousands of acres

of crops—wheat, corn, beans, and potatoes. We had cows and sheep, from which we produced cheese and milk. We had a large vineyard and produced wine. We had acres of orchards, giving us apple plums, peaches, and juicy cherries in three colors: red, black, and white. In the summer, those cherries became our beautiful earrings when we pretended we were fancy, dressed-up ladies. Mama also loved her flower garden in front of the house and her vegetable garden in back, and her cows, chickens, and geese.

But what concerned her most was leaving behind her own mother. We children loved to visit Grandma and Grandpa Hersh. And my mother, as an only daughter, felt responsible for taking care of Grandma Hersh, who was not in the best of health and often needed Mama to look after her.

“Besides, we are safe here,” said my mother. She really believed that the rumors of Jews being persecuted by the Germans and their new head of state, Adolf Hitler, were just that: rumors. She saw no need to flee to Palestine or America, places of safety for Jewish people like us. So we stayed in Portz.

Portz, a largely Christian village of one hundred families, had a minister. The minister’s daughter, Luci, was our best friend; both Miriam and I loved playing with her. In the summer we climbed trees in the orchard, read stories, and put on plays in a little theater we made by stringing up a sheet between two trees. In the winter we even helped Luci decorate her Christmas tree—we did not tell our father because he would not have approved.

Though rumors of Jews being deported to labor camps began to spread here and there, Mama did not believe we were in danger. Even when we heard of the new ghettos—restricted areas of European towns where Jews were forced to live so they could be controlled in squalor and poverty—we did not believe we were really in any danger. Even when Jews were stripped of all possessions, all freedoms sent away to labor camps and driven to work for no pay like slaves, we did not think it could happen to us. We never thought they would come to our tiny village.

One of my early memories is of the men of a Jewish labor camp from Budapest who came through our village. The Hungarian government would bring these slave laborers out of the camp to work on the railroads; when the work was completed, the laborers were taken back to the labor camp. While working on the railroad, they had nowhere to stay at night, so my father let them all sleep in our barn. Sometimes their wives would come to visit and stay in our house. In return, the women brought us lots of toys and, more importantly, lots of books from the city. We children spent hours lost in the world of those books. I could finish a book in a day. Because of them, I developed a love of reading at a young age.

As I understood only later from my reading, Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany as the head of the Nazi party in 1933. Hitler hated Jews as much as the Romanian Iron Guard did, and leaders of the anti-Semitic and racist parties became allies, joining together in their hatred and their designs to rule all of Europe. Then in September 1939, World War II began when German Nazi troops invaded Poland. The Hungarians, under the leadership of Miklos Horthy, also trusted Hitler and became allies. All this began to happen around us, but still far enough away from us that only Papa fretted about our safety.

But in the summer of 1940, when Miriam and I were six years old, things changed. Hitler gave the northern part of Transylvania to Hungary. At that time the population in Transylvania, the larger area surrounding our village, was half-Hungarian, half-Romanian. But everyone in our village was Romanian. Rumors spread that the Hungarian army would kill Jews and Romanians and set our village on fire. Even as a six-year-old child, I knew we were in danger.

Miriam, the quieter of the two of us, felt my anxiety, must have seen it on my face and in my body language. But she never complained; it was not her nature.

One day Hungarian soldiers marched into our village, the commanding officer leading the troops

in a long, shiny black car. It was impressive, as it was intended to be. We villagers were to take note. The armies were now in power, so we were to welcome them! We heard the soldiers singing, "We are Horthy's soldiers, the best-looking soldiers in the world."

That night, my mother and father allowed the soldiers to camp in our yard; the commanding officer slept in our guest room. Mama treated the officers like company: She baked her best torte and invited the officers to dine with our family. I remember that there was much conversation about good food, and Miriam and I were excited to sit at the table with these important men in uniform. It was a pleasant evening, and the officers praised Mama's cooking and baking. Before they went to sleep, they kissed her hand as they thanked her, a courtly habit of many European and Hungarian men of the time. Early the next morning they left, and our parents seemed to be reassured.

"See?" said Mama. "There is no truth to the talk that they are killing the Jews. They are real gentlemen."

"Why would people tell such stories?" Papa asked, not expecting an answer, much less disagreement from my mother or anyone else in the family. "You're right. Nazis will never come to a small village like ours," he concluded. That is what we were to take as fact. Papa had said it.

Yet late at night, behind closed doors, our parents listened to a battery-operated radio. They spoke to each other in Yiddish, a language none of us girls understood, as they discussed the news. What was it they were hearing that could be so secret? That could make them try to hide it from us girls?

I pressed my ear against the door and eavesdropped, trying to hear what was happening. "Who is Hitler?" I asked when they came out.

Mama brushed off our questions with blithe reassurances: "You don't need to worry about anything. Everything will be fine." But we had overheard some of the radio broadcasts with Hitler yelling about killing all the Jews. As if we were bugs! We *felt* there was trouble, no matter how much our parents tried to reassure us otherwise. And because of their secretive behavior, even Miriam became anxious. We were always worried, even as young children. There was a disquiet about things unspoken, the undiscussed.

That autumn, in 1940, Miriam and I started school. Unlike elementary schools today, our schoolhouse had children from first grade to the fourth grade in one room. Miriam and I were the only Jews. We were also the only twins. Every day we wore matching outfits to school and the same colored ribbons tied at the ends of our long braids. Like our family had before them, our new classmates enjoyed figuring out which twin was which.

We also discovered we had two new Hungarian teachers at school who had been brought in from the city by the Nazis. To my surprise, they brought with them books containing slurs against Jews. The books also showed cartoon caricatures depicting Jews as clowns with big noses and bulging bellies. And marvel of marvels, for the first time, we saw "jumping pictures" projected on the wall—which we called early motion pictures because we did not know what a film was. I clearly remember watching the short film called "How to Catch and Kill a Jew." These propaganda films, something like today's commercials but filled with hatred, were shown before feature films in the theaters in cities. Imagine watching instructions on how to kill Jews right before a Pixar movie!

Watching the hate movie and reading these racist books inflamed the other students. Our friends or other children who had been friends, started calling Miriam and me names like "dirty, smelly Jews." Their name-calling really made me angry. Who were they to call us dirty? I knew I was as clean if not cleaner than any of them! Kids began to spit at us and beat us up at every opportunity. One day, our math book contained this problem: "If you had five Jews, and you killed three Jews, how many Jews would be left?"

Upset and frightened, Miriam and I ran home crying. Our clothes were filthy from being pushed into the dirt once again, and our dusty faces were streaked with tears. "Children, I'm so sorry," Mama

said, hugging and kissing us, “but there is nothing we can do. Don’t worry! Just be good girls. Say your prayers, do your chores around the farm, and study your reading.”

One day at school in 1941 some boys played a trick on the teacher when her back was turned. They placed birds’ eggs on her chair. The entire class knew they were there, but no one said a word. We all held our breath as she turned around and sat down. Of course, the second her behind hit the chair, the eggs broke, spattering on her new dress.

“The dirty Jews did it!” stated one of the boys in our class matter-of-factly.

“Did you?” asked the teacher, looking at Miriam and me.

“No, Madame Teacher, no!” We were horrified. We had never misbehaved like that or played a trick on a teacher. We would never have heard the end of it from our parents had we dared! And we loved school and loved learning.

And then it happened. “Yes, they did!” screamed the other children. “They did it! We saw them!” It was as if they had all made a secret pact behind our backs beforehand, and this was the result.

Miriam and I protested, but to no avail. We were Jews, and we were guilty.

Without asking more questions, the teacher called us up to the front of the class for our punishment. She threw dry corn kernels onto the floor. “Kneel!” she demanded, pointing to us. For an hour, she made us kneel on those corn kernels in front of the class. The hard kernels dug into the flesh of our bare knees. But that was not what really wounded us the most. What hurt most were our classmates taunting us, leering at us, making ugly, smirking faces at us. Miriam and I were as shocked as we were hurt.

When we came home and told our mother, crying and hugging us, she said, “Children, I am sorry. We are Jews, and we just have to take it. There is nothing we can do.” Her words made me angrier than the teacher’s punishment. I wanted to hit someone myself, pound something hard like those kernels into dry corn dust. How could Mama’s words be true?

When Papa came in from farming at the end of the day and heard what had happened to us, his attitude was like Mama’s. “For two thousand years the Jews have believed that if they tried to get along, they would survive,” he said. “We must obey tradition. Just try to get along.” Papa reasoned that since we lived so far out in the middle of nowhere, the Nazis would not bother to come take us away.

In the afternoon and evenings, the disturbances continued. Teenage boys who belonged to the Hungarian Nazi Party, but who were not yet eighteen years old—the age at which they could begin to serve in the military—often surrounded our house and shouted obscenities at us for hours. “Dirty Jews!” they yelled. “Crazy pigs!” They threw tomatoes or rocks that smashed right through our windows. Other villagers joined in. Sometimes this would go on for three entire days with us unable to leave the house.

“Papa,” I called, “please go out and make them stop!” I wanted him to *do* something!

“Eva, there is nothing we can do about it. So just learn to take it.”

I could not have known it at the time, but Mama and Papa must have felt that if they tried to stop these juvenile delinquents or fight back, they would be arrested and taken away from us. At least we were all still together as a family.

Miriam and I huddled together in our bed, frightened. Our sisters stayed away from the windows to know they were scared as well. Conditions grew increasingly worse. In June 1941, Hungary entered World War II as an ally, or partner in war, of Jew-hating Adolf Hitler and Germany, his country. Jews in other places in Europe were forced to wear a yellow star of David—the Jewish star—on the outside of their clothing or on their jackets to let everyone know that they were Jewish. We did not have to wear the yellow star, but everyone knew that we were Jewish. We were increasingly isolated in our village.

Unlike many Jewish children in Europe, Miriam and I were still allowed to attend school with other non-Jewish children, although it was progressively more difficult for us there, as the teasing and taunting did not stop. Our lucky older sisters, Edit and Aliz, were tutored in German, art, music, drawing, math, and history—all the subjects required in high school—by a Jewish teacher who lived with us at home.

As the light of autumn darkened into early winter, the days became shorter and our lives became more constricted. We did not venture to play outside or go into the village as much as we used to. Our parents never let on what they were feeling, but Miriam and I grew more and more afraid.

Then one night in late September 1943, Mama and Papa shook us awake. “Eva! Miriam!” they hissed urgently. “Get dressed! Put on your warm clothes, as many as you can get on, with your jacket and your boots. Do *not* light that candle! It has to stay dark. And be very, very quiet.”

“Wha-what are we doing?” I asked sleepily.

“Just do as you’re told!” murmured Papa.

We piled on our warm clothing and went into the kitchen. By the light of the glowing embers in the fireplace, we saw our older sisters standing there. They were bundled up as well, their faces like stones in the shadows.

Papa gathered the four of us girls together and whispered, “Children, the time has come when we must leave. We are going to try to get over the border to the non-Hungarian side of Romania where we will be safe. Follow us and remember: no noise.”

Single file, with Papa in the lead and Mama at the rear, we slipped out of the house into the darkness. Outside it was cold and windy. But at the time I had only one thought: We were in trouble, big trouble. And we were running away.

Silently we walked, one behind the other, to the back gate of our property at the edge of the orchard. Just beyond the gate lay the railroad tracks. No trains passed at night. It was silent except for the sounds of the crickets and the occasional call of a night bird. If we were to walk along the tracks for an hour or so, we knew we would arrive at the safe part of Romania. When Papa reached the gate at the edge of our property, he leaned over to unlatch it and pushed it open.

“Stop!” shouted a voice. “If you take another step, I’ll shoot!”

A Hungarian Nazi youth pointed a gun at us. A group of teenage boys wearing Hungarian Nazi armbands with swastikas and khaki caps had been guarding our farm, stationed there to make sure we did not get away. How long they had been there was anyone’s guess.

We were only six Jews. How could we be so important? I clutched Miriam’s hand, not daring to look directly at them, but sneaking sideways glimpses at the soldiers. Papa closed the gate, and the boys marched us right back to our house.

Our only chance of escape had just vanished.

CHAPTER TWO

On January 31, 1944, Miriam and I would turn ten years old. On family birthdays, Mama had always baked a cake and made the day a fun and festive occasion. But Miriam and I never got to celebrate our tenth birthday. Mama was too sick. Since October, just after the teenage Nazis had prevented our escape, she had been ill with typhoid fever and had stayed in bed all winter. In those days there were no simple medicines to ease the pains of fever and illness like there are today in every pharmacy. We worried about her and whether she would get better. Our mother had always been so strong and healthy.

A Jewish lady from a nearby village came to live with us to take care of our mother and run the house. Edit, Aliz, Miriam, and I helped by doing more than our usual share of chores on the farm. The Nazis and the Hungarian authorities were watching us, but we were never under house arrest or forbidden from leaving our home. For the moment, we seemed safe. We even continued to attend school, except on the rare days the Nazis did not allow us to go. On those days we were tutored at home like our older sisters.

Our relative freedom came to an abrupt end one morning in March, that year we turned ten. Two Hungarian *gendarmes*, or policemen, arrived in our front yard. Soon they were pounding on the door.

“Get your belongings! Gather them up. You are going to be moved to a transportation center.” This was not a request; it was a command. “You have two hours to pack.”

Mama barely had the strength to get out of bed. Papa and our older sisters bundled up food and bedding, clothing—all the necessities they could think of. Miriam and I wore matching dresses and took two other sets of identical clothes.

As the policemen marched us out of our home, everyone in Portz watched us leave on the one road that ran through the village. Neighbors came out of their farmhouses and lined the road. Our classmates from school just stared. No one tried to stop the *gendarmes* from taking us away. No one said a word.

I was not surprised. Once word got around that we had tried to leave in the middle of the night, conditions had continued to get worse; the harassment from the villagers and their children had grown uglier and more frequent.

Even Luci, Miriam’s and my best friend, stood very still, her eyes not meeting ours as we approached her house. She did not say she was sorry nor give us anything to remember her by to take on our journey. Just before we passed her house, I glanced at her. She looked down. In silence we left the home we had always known.

We were bundled into a horse-drawn, covered wagon. The policemen took us to a town called Simleul Silvaniei, about a five-hour ride away. Once there, we were forced to stay in a ghetto with more than seven thousand other Jews from our Romanian area of Transylvania. Miriam and I had never seen so many people. To us, one hundred people—the number of neighbors in our village—was a crowd. Seven thousand people—all of them Jews!—were more than we had ever seen at one time in our entire lives.

We later learned that Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Third Reich security main Office, Adolf Hitler’s main office, had issued an official order: All Jews in Nazi-occupied areas were to be moved to special places set aside for them; these special places were called ghettos. We had not heard about these ghettos before. Ghettos were areas enclosed by fences, walls, or barbed wire and were set up

the most run-down sections of cities or the poorest parts of the countryside. Jews were forbidden to leave without a special permit, upon penalty of death.

Our ghetto was located in a field enclosed by a barbed-wire fence that looked as though it had been quickly built. The Berettyo River ran through the middle of the field. The only building was an abandoned brick factory, which the commandant, or main security officer, occupied as his headquarters. There were no tents or cabins or other structures in which Jews could take shelter or sleep. The commandant said that we would soon be taken to work in labor camps in Hungary and would remain there until the end of the war. "No harm will come to you," he promised.

Miriam and I helped Papa and our older sisters build a tent on the damp ground out of the sheets and blankets we had brought. We struggled and huffed while the ghetto commandant strode back and forth with his hands on his hips shouting, "Isn't it nice that I get to see the children of Israel living in tents like in the days of Moses?" He laughed uproariously as if he had told himself the funniest joke on earth.

Our entire family stayed in the same tent. Every time the sky darkened and it began to rain, the commandant barked through a loudspeaker, "Take down the tents! I want them to be built now on the *other* side." There was no reason for this except simple cruelty. By the time we took down our tent and crossed the bridge, and set up our shelter again in the mud, we were soaked.

Mama was still very weak from her illness, and living outdoors in the rain and cold just made her worse. At night Miriam and I slept close together, our small bodies giving each other warmth and comfort.

During our stay, the head of each family was taken to the headquarters for interrogation. One day German guards came for Papa and took him away for questioning. They believed my parents were hiding gold and silver or had concealed valuables at our farm; they wanted to know exactly where. But Papa was a farmer and his only riches were his land and the crops he produced. He told the guards he had no silver except our Shabbat, or Sabbath, candlesticks. Four or five hours later they carried him back to our tent on a stretcher. He was covered with whip marks, oozing blood. They had burned his fingernails and toenails with the flame of candles. It took him many days to recover.

Miriam and I felt helpless. We were still children and expected our parents to take care of us. But there was nothing they could do to make it better for us. And there was nothing we could do for Papa.

Our older sister Edit took charge of the cooking. We had been told to bring two weeks' worth of food when we came, but Mama had us girls bring everything we could carry—beans, bread, and noodles. As the weeks went by, we rationed our food and ate beans once a day. Sometimes non-Jewish people came to the edge of the ghetto and threw in food and other supplies, but I do not remember we ever got any of that to eat.

Finally, Mama had realized just how bad things really were for our family. Miriam and I complained about sleeping on the wet ground and about that gnawing ache in our tummies all the time, but Mama could not help us as she used to do. She sat on the ground, shaking her head over and over again. "It's all my fault," she said. "We should have gone to Palestine." Her eyes, sunken by her illness and with dark circles under them from lack of proper sleep, showed that she was haunted by her decision not to flee to Palestine with Uncle Aaron when they had the chance. Now, trapped in the squalor and deprivation of the ghetto, she grew increasingly withdrawn and depressed.

On a morning in May, 1944, German guards told us we were going to a labor camp, which they said was in Hungary. "This is for your own protection. If you work you will live," they said. "Your families will stay together." We had heard rumors circulating among the grownups in the ghettos that Jews sent to Germany would be killed. So we thought that if we stayed in Hungary, we would be all right, we would be safe.

The guards told us to leave our belongings, that everything we would need would be at the lab

camp. Nevertheless, Mama and our older sisters took a few valuables from our tent. Papa carried his prayer book. Miriam and I put on our matching burgundy dresses.

The guards marched us to the train tracks and herded us into cattle cars, pushing and shoving until one car was packed with eighty or one hundred people. The guards made Papa responsible for our care. Papa was told that if anyone escaped, he would be shot. The doors were slammed shut and sealed with a metal bar that slid into two handles. Barbed wire covered four small windows up high, two on each side. How could anyone escape?

Miriam and I pressed close together. There was no room to sit or lie down, not even for young children like us. Even though I was just a little girl, I could sense that something awful was about to happen. Just seeing our parents so powerless, parents that I had always seen as our protectors no longer able to protect our family, had turned any sense of safety I had completely upside-down.

For days, our train rushed along the tracks, the endless sound of the clacking interrupted only by an occasional hoot of the train's horn. Not only did we have no place to sit or lie down, we had no food or water, and no bathrooms. I remember being very thirsty, my mouth pasty and dry.

When the train stopped for refueling on the first day, Papa asked the guard for water. The guard demanded five gold watches in exchange. The grownups gathered the watches and handed them over. Then the guard tossed a bucketful of water toward the barbed-wired window. Water splashed in uselessly. I don't remember anyone getting any. I may have had a drop or two, but that did not begin to quench my thirst. The second day, the train stopped again, and the same thing happened with the water.

At the end of the third day, the cattle car stopped, and Papa, speaking Hungarian, asked a guard for water. Someone answered in German, "*Vass? Vass?*" What? What? He had not understood Papa.

Then it hit us: We were not in Hungary anymore. We had crossed the border into Poland, now German territory.

A feeling of horror took hold of us. Up until then, there was hope. Everybody, including me, had understood that as long as we stayed in Hungary, there was some chance that we would go to a labor camp to work. Everyone knew by now that Germans and Germany meant death to Jews. Many people started praying. The cattle car filled with the sound of adults barely stifling their crying, children feeding off their exposed despair. Here and there someone attempted to chant the *Sh'ma*, the Hebrew prayer to God to hear us, to save us.

The train began moving again. Miriam and I were quiet as it gathered speed, going faster and faster. We had gone three days without food or water.

On the fourth day, the train stopped. Papa called out again to the guard for water. No one answered.

We realized we must have arrived at our destination. I stood on tiptoes to look through the window. The sky was dark. We heard lots of German voices yelling orders outside for an hour or two. The doors stayed closed.

Dawn finally came, time for Papa to say his morning prayers. He took out his prayer book and tried to figure out which direction was east, because Jewish people pray to the direction of Israel, which is in the Middle East. I wondered how he could pray at a time like this.

"Papa," I said, "we don't know where we are. They have lied to us. We are not at a work camp."

"Eva, we must pray to God for mercy," said Papa. "Come to me." He pulled our family into the corner of the cattle car. Miriam and I squeezed close to him, and our sisters and Mama followed. We listened quietly to our father as he spoke. "Promise me that if any of you survives this terrible war, you will go to Palestine where your uncle Aaron lives and where Jews can live in peace."

He had never spoken to us girls like this before, with respect, as though we were adults. Miriam and I and our older sisters solemnly agreed.

Papa began his morning prayers.

~~Outside I could hear German voices yelling orders. Dogs barked at us from every direction. The~~
doors of the cattle car screeched open. SS guards ordered everybody out.

“Schnell! Schnell!” Quick! Quick!

I saw tall barbed-wire fences, cement guard towers everywhere. Soldiers were hanging out of the trains with the barrels of their guns pointed at us. I have no idea how we got from the cattle car to the selection platform. Miriam and I may have jumped or stepped down a wooden ramp. But pretty soon we were standing on the platform in utter terror, two ten-year-olds in matching burgundy dresses.

CHAPTER THREE

Mama grabbed Miriam and me by our hands. We lined up, side by side, on the concrete platform. The smell hit me: a foul odor I had never ever smelled before. It reminded me of burned chicken feathers. At home on the farm, after plucking the chickens, we would singe off the last little feathers over a flame to clean it. But here the stink was overpowering. It was as if you walked through it and around in it. It was everywhere and inescapable. I did not find out right away what the smell really was.

This place was confusing and noisy. People were yelling.

There were screams.

Confusion.

Desperation.

Barking.

Orders.

Crying, crying, crying. The crying of children for parents. The crying of parents for their babies. The crying of people confused and bewildered. The crying of people who saw with certainty that their nightmares had come true. All together, the cries resounded with the ultimate and most unimaginable pain of human loss, emotional grief, and suffering.

I felt as though I was watching things happen to someone else. Here and there I glimpsed layers of barbed wire fences, bright klieg lights, and rows of buildings. The SS guards strode among the groups of people, as if searching for something.

Suddenly I felt like I had landed in my body again. I looked around, and I felt Miriam's quaking frame next to mine. But where was Papa? And where were my older sisters, Edit and Aliz? I searched desperately, holding tightly to my mother's and my twin's hands in a death grip. I could not find the rest of my family. After four days of such close proximity to my older sisters and Papa, in my bewilderment and confusion I had lost them.

I never saw them again.

I held tightly to Mama's hand. An SS guard rushed by. He was calling out in German, "*Zwillings Zwillinge!*" Twins! Twins! He barreled past us, then stopped short, whirled around, and came back. He stood in front of us. His eyes traveled back and forth from Miriam's face to mine, up and down our matching burgundy dresses.

"Are they twins?" he asked Mama.

She hesitated. "Is that good?"

"Yes," said the guard.

"They are twins," replied Mama.

Without one word, he grabbed Miriam and me, tearing us away from Mama.

We screamed and cried as we were dragged away. We begged him to let us stay with her. The German guard paid no attention to our pleas. He pulled us across the railroad tracks, away from the selection platform. I turned my head and saw my mother, desperate, her arms outstretched toward us, wailing. A soldier grabbed her and threw her in another direction. My mama disappeared into the crowd.

After that everything happened quickly, so quickly. Guards separated people on the selection platform into groups. One group had young men and women. In another, children and older people

Miriam and I held on to each other as we were brought to join a group of thirteen sets of twins who had come from our train transport: ~~twenty-six children, all frightened and confused.~~

A guard brought a mother and her twins to stand with our group. I recognized her! It was Mrs. Csengeri, wife of the storekeeper in Simlel Silvaniei, the town near our village. Her twin daughters were eight years old, and when we shopped at her store, she and Mama liked to talk about the problems of raising twins. She and her girls stayed with our group. Why had the guards let the mother come with them and not ours with us? I did not have time to ponder the question much before things started happening again.

After half an hour, an SS guard led us to a big building near the barbed wire fence. As soon as we entered the building, we were ordered to undress. I felt numb again, not part of my own body. This was all a nightmare, right? It would end the second I opened my eyes, and Mama would be there to comfort me, right? But I was not dreaming.

All of us were given short haircuts. The barber explained that twins received privileged treatment. We were allowed to keep some hair. Luckily, I had learned some German, so I could understand what was being said on a basic level. As I watched our long braids fall to the floor, I did not feel so very privileged.

Next we took showers. Our clothes had been fumigated with some sort of anti-lice chemical and were returned to us. Wearing our own clothes was another "privilege" we twins got that other prisoners did not. Miriam and I put on our dresses, but now each had a big red cross painted on the back. I instantly hated that red cross on my dress. Wearing the dress did not feel like a privilege. I knew that like the yellow star they forced Jews to wear in the ghettos, the Nazis were using that red cross to mark us so that we could not escape.

Right then and there I decided not to do anything the guards asked me to do. I would give them as much trouble as possible. In the processing center, prisoners' arms were being tattooed. We watched as the prisoners went up one after another, were told to hold out their arms, and had their arms pinned down while the instrument seared numbers into their flesh with acute pain.

Not me. I was not going to be a sheep anymore. When my turn came, I struggled and kicked. The SS guard grabbed my arm. The feel of his grip twisting my skin dissolved my resolve. "I want my mama!" I screamed.

"Hold still!" ordered the guard.

I bit his arm. "Bring back my mama!"

"We will let you see her tomorrow."

I knew he was lying. They had just torn us away from Mama, so why would they reunite us the next day? Four people had to hold me down while they heated the point of a pen-like gadget over an open flame and dipped it into blue ink. Then they held the hot pen to my flesh and began to burn my number into the outer part of my left arm: A-7063.

"Stop!" I yelled. "That hurts!"

I squirmed and wriggled so much that they could not hold me completely still. Because of my struggling, the numbers on my arm were blurred.

Next they tattooed Miriam. She did not struggle like I had. Her number was A-7064. All the writing on her arm was clear.

Our arms felt painful and swollen as we were marched across the camp to our barracks, where we would reside. Along the way I saw groups of skeleton-like people accompanied by SS guards with huge dogs. The prisoners were returning from work. What kind of work did they do that made them so thin? Were they sick? Did they not get food? Everything around me stank with that horrible, thick chicken-feather smell and looked dark, gray, and lifeless. Threatening. I do not remember any grass, trees, or flowers anywhere.

Finally we arrived at our barracks in Camp II B, the girls' camp in Birkenau, also referred to as ~~Auschwitz II~~. The building was a barn originally built for horses. It was filthy. The stink inside was worse than the stench outside. There were no windows on the lower part of the walls for light or ventilation, only across the top above our heads, which made it suffocating. A double row of brick bunks forming a bench ran down the middle of the barracks. At the end stood a three-hole latrine, another privilege for twins; we did not have to go outside in the big public latrine to go to the bathroom. There were a few hundred twins from ages two to sixteen. We spotted Mrs. Csengeri's daughters there, too, but we did not speak to them at that time.

That first night a pair of Hungarian twins who had been there a while showed us the triple-deck bunks. Miriam and I had a bunk on the bottom.

When the evening meal arrived, all the other children rushed to the doorway. Dinner consisted of a two-and-a-half-inch slice of dark bread and a brownish fluid that everyone called "fake coffee." Miriam and I looked at each other. "We can't eat this," I said to one of the Hungarian twins.

"It's all you will get until tomorrow," she said. "You had better eat it."

"It's not kosher," I said. At home on the farm, we only had kosher food—food that fulfilled the requirements of Jewish dietary law—that Papa blessed before every meal.

The twins laughed at us, but it was not a kind laugh, more like a boy-are-you-stupid laugh. And they greedily wolfed down the bread that Miriam and I offered them.

"We're glad to have the extra bread," they said, "but the two of you are going to have to learn to eat everything if you want to survive. You cannot be fussy, and you cannot worry about whether or not something is kosher."

After the meal the Hungarian twins and some of the others briefed us. "You are in Birkenau," they told us. "It is part of Auschwitz, but it's three kilometers from the main camp. Auschwitz has one gas chamber and one crematorium."

Miriam said, "I don't understand."

I asked, "What is a gas chamber? What is a crematorium?"

"Follow us, and we'll show you." The twins led us to the back of the barracks near the door where the barracks supervisor did not notice us. We looked up at the sky. Flames rose from chimneys that towered over Birkenau. Smoke covered the whole camp and fine ash filled the air, making it as dark as the sky after an explosion of a volcano—it was that thick. Again, we were hit by that terrible smell.

Even though I was afraid to ask, I heard myself saying, "What are they burning so late in the evening?"

"People," said a girl.

"You don't burn people!" I said. "Don't be ridiculous."

"The Nazis do. They want to burn all the Jews."

Somebody else said, "Did you see how the Nazis divided the people arriving on the trains into two groups this morning? They are probably burning one group right now. If the Nazis think you are young and strong enough to work, you are allowed to live. The rest are taken to the gas chambers and gassed to death."

I thought of Mama who was so weak after her long illness.

I thought of Papa, clutching his prayer book.

I thought of our two older sisters.

Deep down, I knew without being told that they had been pushed into the line that had gone to the gas chamber. Against that feeling, I allowed myself to hope that maybe they were still alive. After all, they were older and smarter than Miriam and me.

"We are children," I said. "We can't work, but we're still alive."

"For now," replied a twin. "And it's only because we're twins, and they use us in experiments."

conducted by Dr. Mengele. He'll be here tomorrow right after roll call."

In a quavering voice, I asked, "What experiments?"

Lea, a twelve-year-old twin, told us to stop worrying and go to bed.

The children slept in their clothes and shoes, so Miriam and I did, too. We lay in our wooden bunks on a straw mattress in our matching dresses. Although I was tired, I could not sleep. Tossing and turning, I noticed something moving on the floor. "There are mice in here!" The scream came out of me without my thinking about it.

"Quiet!" someone said. "Those are not mice, they are rats. They won't hurt you if you don't have any food in your bed. Now go to sleep." I had seen mice before on our farm, but they were not huge like these rats; these rodents were the size of small cats.

I needed to use the latrine and so did Miriam. In the dark, we put our feet down, slowly, carefully because of the rats. We kicked our shoes back and forth to scare them away. Then we hurried to the end of the barracks. The latrine was about twelve feet square, with dark wooden walls and a cement floor. Latrines are not like bathrooms today; they have floors with holes in them that you have to perch over. They were even worse than the rest of the barracks. Vomit and human feces that had missed the holes of the latrine were everywhere. The smell was hideous.

We stepped inside and I froze. There on the floor in the filth were the dead bodies of three naked children. I had never seen a dead person before. There they lay, on that hard, cold, stinking floor. They were dead. At precisely that moment, I realized that death could happen to Miriam and me. I silently vowed to do everything in my power to make sure that Miriam and I did not end up dead like those children. We were going to be stronger, smarter, *whatever it took* not to end up that way.

From that point forward, in my mind, we were always going to walk out of the camp alive. I never permitted fears or doubts to dominate my thoughts. As soon as they entered my mind, I pushed them out forcefully. From the moment I left the latrine, I concentrated all my being on one thing: how to survive one more day in this horrible place.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the morning a whistle shrieked. It was still dark. “Up! Up! Up!” shouted the barracks supervisor, a *pflegerin*, or nurse, who took care of us. She wore a white coat. “Get ready!” she screeched.

Miriam and I did not know the routine yet. Holding hands we watched the older girls helping little ones prepare for roll call. Outside we lined up in rows of five to be counted. Roll call took half an hour to an hour. Looking back, I do not remember a single child sitting down or crying. Not even the two-year-olds. I think we understood instinctively that our lives depended on cooperation.

After roll call, we went inside to straighten up the barracks. The three dead children Miriam and I had seen at the latrine the night before were no longer on the floor. We learned that when a child died the other children in the same bunk could not stand lying next to a dead body, so they removed the corpse to the latrine and kept her clothing for themselves.

As for the three dead bodies Miriam and I had seen, adults had put them back into their bunks to be counted. Every day, every child had to be counted, dead or alive. Dr. Mengele knew how many twins he had, and no corpse could be disposed of without following procedure.

That first morning an SS guard waited at the front of the barracks. “Doctor MENGELE COMING!” she yelled. The supervisors seemed nervous, twitchy with anticipation of the great man. Miriam and I stood at attention, not daring to move or breathe.

Dr. Josef Mengele entered the barracks. He was dressed elegantly in an SS uniform and tall, shiny black riding boots. He wore white gloves and carried a baton. My first thought was how handsome he was, like a movie star. He strode through the barracks, counting twins at every bunk, with an entourage of eight people accompanying him. We later found out that the group included a Dr. Koni, a girl who was the interpreter, and several SS guards and assistants. Mengele was never escorted by fewer than eight in his entourage at these barracks checks.

When Dr. Mengele stopped at the bunks containing the three dead bodies, he flew into a rage. “Why did you let these children die?” he screamed at the nurse and SS guards. “I cannot afford to lose even one child!”

Our nurse and the supervisors trembled.

He continued counting until he came to Miriam and me. He stopped and looked at us. I was petrified. Then he moved on. The other children told us that he had been on the selection platform the day before when we had arrived. He was the one who made the selections of the prisoners with a flick of his baton. To the right meant the gas chamber, to the left, the camp and forced labor.

After Mengele left the barracks, we received our morning food rations. Miriam and I drank the fake coffee, although it tasted awful. Most importantly, it was made from boiled water, and we soon learned that meant it was safe and would not give us dysentery—endless diarrhea.

In groups of five, we marched from Birkenau to the labs in Auschwitz. We entered a big two-story brick building. Miriam and I were forced to take off our dresses, underwear, and shoes. There were boys as well as girls: twenty or thirty sets of twins. In the beginning I was shocked at the sight.

I found out later that boy twins stayed in a separate barracks under better conditions than our girls. They were cared for by a young Jewish prisoner, formerly an officer, named Zvi Spiegel, whom Mengele had chosen to supervise them. Zvi intervened to help the little boy twins, convincing Mengele to give them better food and to improve their living conditions; Mengele must have figured

all this would make them better guinea pigs. So Zvi, also known as the “Twins’ Papa,” comforted the boys, gave them games to keep their minds active, and taught them bits of geography and math. During the day he would let them kick around a soccer ball made of a bundle of rags to keep them in better physical condition. He also had them memorize each other’s names to make them feel human.

We had no such person in our barracks to lead us and help us form friendships. I never went up to another girl and asked her name or told her mine. We were all alone, just twins with numbers, each of us trying to survive. The only person I had to think about was Miriam.

In that brick building, as I looked around, I noticed some fraternal twins but most were identical like Miriam and me. Later I learned that Dr. Mengele wanted to discover the secret of twinning. One goal of his experiments was to learn how to create blond-haired, blue-eyed babies in multiple numbers to increase the German population. Hitler called Aryans, the blond and blue-eyed, white-skinned Germans “the Master Race”—and we were his human guinea pigs. To study other natural “abnormalities” and to try to figure out how to prevent genetic mutation, Mengele’s research included giants, dwarfs, the handicapped, and gypsies. The dwarfs lived in barracks near ours, and we sometimes saw them walking through camp.

All of us sat completely naked on benches. Boys were there, too. It was very cold. We had no place to hide. It was embarrassing to be there without any clothes. Some girls crossed their legs and covered up with their hands. Others shook with fear while SS guards pointed at us and laughed. The nudity was one of the most dehumanizing things in the camp for me.

Dr. Mengele popped in and out to supervise. Other doctors and nurses in white coats who were inmates or prisoners like us observed us and took notes.

First they measured my head with an instrument called a caliper, made of two pieces of metal which they pressed against my skull and squeezed. The doctor called out the numbers to an assistant who wrote notes into a file.

They measured our earlobes; the bridges of our noses; the size of our lips; the width, shape, and color of our eyes. They compared the shade of blue of Miriam’s eyes to the blue of my eyes with a chart of eye colors. Over and over they measured. They spent three to four hours on one ear. Each time the doctors measured me, they measured Miriam to see how we were alike and how we were different. A photographer snapped pictures; an artist drew sketches. Technicians took X-rays, five or six at a time.

Next they asked us questions and gave commands. An inmate who spoke Hungarian and German acted as translator. If I did something, Miriam did the same. “Every time I follow you,” Miriam whispered, “they write something down. They want to see which of us is the leader.” Of course it was me, just as it had always been. After observing us the previous day in the processing center when I had resisted tattooing, they also knew I was a troublemaker.

We sat there for six to eight hours. I hated every second. Finally we were allowed to get dressed and were marched back to our barracks for the evening meal: a meager portion of very dark bread about two-and-one-half inches long.

In the afternoon our supervising nurse made us learn a song in German. It went, “I am a little German child. If not, phooey!” She put us in a circle and made one girl stand in the center. We had to walk around that girl and sing, “Phooey, phooey, phooey!”

“Dirty, filthy Jews!” the nurse shouted at us. “Swine!” She loved that song. It meant we children were disgusting.

We hated that nurse. We called her “Snake” behind her back. She had thick legs and long black hair that she wore in a braid. Snake kept taunting us. “Who do you think you are?” she asked.

We did not answer. She did not expect an answer, either.

“You think you are so smart because you are still alive?” asked Snake. “You’re going to be dead

before long. We're going to kill all of you."

~~For the first day or two, Miriam and I cried and cried. But we soon realized that crying would not help anything. We mostly felt numb.~~

Staying alive was the most important thing. We knew we were alive because of the experiment. Because of a fortunate accident of nature.

Because we were Mengele's twins.

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