


# "From the Depths I Called to You, O Lord"

by Holocaust Survivors, Peppi and George Weisz

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# Introduction

לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דּוֹר אַחֲרוֹן בָּנִים יִוָּלֵדוּ יָקֻמוּ וִיסַפְּרוּ לִבְנֵיהֶם.

תהילים ע"ח:ו

So that the generation to come will know, children yet to be born will arise and tell their own children.

Psalm (78:6)

As the grandson of Holocaust survivors growing up in the 1980's and '90's, the Shoah seemed almost 'normal' for me. At school, lots of kids in my class had a grandparent in "The War." Anti-semitism was never something that touched us personally, and we took it for granted that we were fifty years from the greatest tragedy in Jewish history. The Holocaust was something we all simply lived with and were used to. As kids, we badgered Mama Peppi and Papa George to tell us their story. Somehow, their tales of ghettos, cattle cars and concentration camps didn't seem so outrageous, as if everyone's grandparents had come from a different planet with experiences all together different from our own reality.

Then we moved to Israel and it finally hit me. We moved to a lovely community of young families but far from our own families, parents and grandparents. For the first time in my life, we were living in a community without a single Holocaust survivor. I could no longer take the Holocaust for granted, and I began to realize, even more so, how lucky we are to have Mama Peppi and Papa George with us, as our link to the past and our guides towards the future. I wanted to find out everything I could about their lives before the war, and try to understand what they went through in the concentration camps to greater appreciate the lives they built for themselves afterwards.

Abby and I have spent the last several months pouring over Mama Peppi and Papa George's Spielberg interview transcripts. We have gone to Yad Vashem to access their archives and discovered original documents that recorded some of their steps along the way. And best of all, when we had a question and needed something clarified, we picked up the phone and asked them to fill in the gaps. We have gained so much throughout this process and we are proud to be able to pass along what we have learned.

After all this research, we helped my grandparents prepare their story, their tale of survival. We hope that by sharing their story, more people will understand the Holocaust, and internalized its lessons of hope, faith and trust in God.

*Rabbi Tuly & Abby Weisz*

# Peppi Weisz's Story

~ Chapter 1 ~

שְׁמַע בְּנִי מוּסַר אָבִיךָ וְאַל תִּטֹּשׁ תּוֹרַת אִמֶּךָ׃

משלי א:ח

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake the Torah of your mother.

Proverbs 1:8

I was a very lucky girl when I was young. I had a wonderful family that was always together. My parents were Meyer, born in 1901 and Leah, born in 1907. My parents were a very handsome young couple - really. I wish I had a picture of them to show you; but unfortunately, I have no photographs of my parents; just my own memories to share with you.

My big sister, Rochel, (Ruchie) was born in 1925. Then came my brother Joe in 1927. His Jewish name was Yosef Isaac, but Ruchie gave him the nickname Azi which turned into the name we used most: Fazi. Then me, Peppi. I was born on November 13, 1929. Next came my younger brothers Chaim in 1932 and Moishe in 1934. Last was my sister Vitzu. Vitzu was born in 1936.

We grew up very close to one another. I was always a bit of what you would call a "tomboy." We were a '*leibedik*' bunch, running around our big house and our big yard, but, we were never 'bad' kids. Opu (what we called my father) would never allow that. Whatever our parents said, we did. It was much easier to discipline children in Europe than it is in America nowadays. There was no asking 'Why?" You did something because you were told to do it. When Opu would come into the house, everything stopped. Even if we were all making noise when he walked in, it got really quiet. It was like he was the king. He had our respect.



Young Ruchie and Peppi Moskowitz

As a young man, my father supplied hay and straw to the Czech army. That was a lucrative business back then, and he was considered very well to do. We had a big house in Chust, Czechoslovakia. I still remember our address, Iza Utza 78, named that because the next town over from ours was called 'Iza' and our house was on the 'Road to Iza' or 'Iza Utza' in Czech.

In the summer we used to play in our yard. We would also go on vacation to a place near Chust that had cottages to rent on the Borcut River. Besides our family, all my mother's sisters and their families would get together there as well. Mother had six sisters, the Mechlovitz girls, and we had a great time with all of our cousins. Onyu (Mother) also had three brothers. In fact, one of her brothers, Uncle Sam Mechlovitz, was the one who brought me over from Europe and we ended up in Cleveland with him; but we'll talk about that later.

At the cottages, the water was very healthy, and Onyu took mud baths to help her arthritis. She took me into the mud baths with her. I remember how the mud felt really nice and we looked so funny with mud all over our faces. Being one of six kids, I cherished the time alone with mother, just the two of us. Onyu stayed with us during the week but Opu had to work; so, he came out to stay with us only for Shabbos.

We also had lots of visits from my father's family. Opu had four brothers and one sister who lived in Szekernica, which was a village that was so close to Chust that we could walk to their house. My father's parents didn't come to visit us that often, because, *ken'ayn ayin horah,* they had many children and lots of grandchildren. So, we would go frequently to their house for Shabbos. I looked like my father, and they liked when I would come to visit, especially after he was taken away. After Opu was gone, my grandfather had a very hard time with it and said he could never come into our house again.

My parents loved us and tried to protect us from the difficult things that were starting to happen in Europe in the late 1930's and early 1940's. Looking back, I feel that it was wrong that they never explained to the children that these were hard times or that scary things were happening. But back then, children were seen but not heard. And children didn't ask, "Why?" We could only imagine what was going on from the bits of information we did overhear.

Our house was always full of people. By us, *hachnasas orchim* was a very important mitzvah, and we loved it. My uncles lived outside the town, but their

business was in Chust, so, they often came over to eat with us. There was also a famous yeshiva in Chust and we fed the *bocherim* who learned there. It was not like now, where the boys get meals at their yeshiva. The students would eat with a different family every day and we had a different *bochur* every day of the week. I don't ever remember having a dinner where it was just our family. And then, when things got bad in Poland and Jews started to run away, some of them stayed with us for a while before they moved on.

Onyu was a real '*balabusta*,' always cooking and baking for our family and the many visitors. Mmmm, I can still smell the challas baking in the oven for *Shabbos* and *Yontif*. Everything was made from scratch. You didn't just go out and buy your challahs, and there was none of this instant, frozen, microwave stuff! *Shabbos* and *Yom Tovim* were special. We would look forward from one *yontif* to the next. We would all get new clothes, and Onyu would make all of her special recipes. *Oy, es shmeckt zeiyer git!* (Oy, it smelled so good!) I know how the kids now wait for my *Poilishe cholent*, it and my brownies on Pesach. I try to make the things I remember from home.

With, *ken'ayn ayin horah*, six children and many guests, my mother was lucky that we could afford to have help in the house. When the Hungarians took over Chust, they made a law that Jewish people were not allowed to have house help. Somehow, our helper stayed on with us for a while; but, eventually, Onyu had to let her go.

My Onyu was a deeply spiritual person and was always committed to learning Torah. She used to read to us from the holy book called "*Tzena U'rena*" which was stories on the parsha written in Yiddish for women.

From *Tzena U'rena* Onyu taught us about the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. *Baruch Hashem* I was so privileged to be able to visit the Kotel for the first time for my son Michael's Bar Mitzvah in 1970. Oy, that was unbelievable. I was very, very touched. I kept thinking, "If only my mother knew that I brought her grandson for his Bar Mitzvah to Yerushalayim." I just couldn't stop crying.



Michael Weisz' Bar Mitzvah at the Kotel, 1970

When I was young, my parents sent me to a Beis Yaakov school. It wasn't an all day Jewish school like it is now. Every day I went to public school, where we studied in Hungarian, and then I went to the all girls Beis Yaakov school for two hours. We learned brachos, how to daven, and everything we needed to know about Yiddishkeit. For the boys it was more intense. Their day had to start early, and it was hard on Mother. She was up at 5 in the morning getting the boys ready for Cheder. They would come home for breakfast and then go to public school. We would all come home for a hot lunch, which was the main meal of the day. After lunch, the boys would go back to Cheder for the rest of the afternoon until after Maariv.




Holy Book *Tzena U'rena*

Because Czechoslovakia changed hands a number of times when I was growing up, I had to keep changing schools. For the lower grades, I started learning in a Czech public school. When the Germans took over the country in 1938, they said that only 10% of Jewish children could attend public school, so we had to change to the Hebrew school

in town. In Chust, about a third of the total population was Jewish and more than 90% of the Jews were *Shomer Shabbos*, whether they were more modern or more *Chasidishe*. We weren't exactly *Chasidishe*, but my parents were very religious and they weren't happy with the new school's more 'modern' curriculum. I remember they taught Hebrew differently from how we had learned it in Beis Yaakov; they taught it with a *Sepharadit* pronunciation. My parents wanted us to attend a more religious school, but we did not have any choice. The school did become more religious, because they had to take children from the more religious homes too. As the school got more crowded, they had to put a few classes together to fit everybody in. When they did not have room in their building for all of the new students, I went to classes in a *tallis* factory and then in a broom factory. Even though things were getting more tense, the community still tried to protect us kids and had all kinds of programs to keep us busy. I joined a sports club where we played ping pong and had social activities.

Until 1938, Czechoslovakia was a good place for Jews to live. People even used to call it "Little America," as it afforded the Jews so many freedoms and opportunities. When the Germans and Hungarians took over, it got harder and more dangerous for the Jews. Even as children, we felt the changes in the neighborhood. We were afraid of threatening gangs on the street because Jews were frequently beaten up. Our gentile neighbors used to be very friendly, but suddenly, they began to keep their distance from us. It was as if we had a contagious disease or something. Often times, people would yell at us and call us names. They would say "*Judah to Palestina*," which meant that the Jews should all go to Palestine. They were telling us that we did not belong in what they said was their

country, even though we were born there as well. It was a very, very strange feeling. You were a child and you just didn't understand what was happening.

The Hungarians had taken over Czechoslovakia, and sent many men to fight the Russians in the East. Before sending the soldiers off to the front, they allowed the soldiers to do whatever they wanted to the Jews. These soldiers broke into Jewish homes, raped the women, beat up the men and shaved off their beards. *Baruch Hashem*, these terrible things never happened to us, but it was a very scary time. One time, in 1941, before my father was taken away, soldiers came to our house. They killed cattle, took their hides and left the carcasses lying in the yard. It looked and smelled horrible. There was a lot of meat left from the dead cattle and so all the dogs in the neighborhood came to our property to have a feast. It was scary and disgusting, but it turned out to be a *bracha*! That night, the Hungarian soldiers came back and tried to break through the locked gates and get into our house, but the dogs were barking so loudly that they gave up and went away.

Because my father was an important man, he couldn't escape the growing troubles, and was targeted first. In 1941, the Hungarian army came to my father and said they needed straw and hay for their horses. Father told them it was no problem, but asked them to sign a contract. The Hungarians said that the Czech army had already paid him for the hay and accused him of being a liar and a cheat who was trying to get paid twice. Somehow, they left him alone for a while, but they must have been keeping their eye on him, and wanted his hay, because he in got in trouble a short while later again.

My father was a good man. When things started getting bad for the Jews, he tried helping people avoid the army's Forced Labor by hiring my uncles and others. Unfortunately, someone reported him to the authorities. They came and accused him of harming the war effort by assisting people in avoiding the draft. For his 'crime' of protecting my uncles, my father himself was sent to forced labor and shipped off to the Russian front.

Before Opu left us, his brother Shloimeh came over to shave his beard because men were not allowed to have beards in the labor camps. Losing his beard was so devastating to Opu that he fainted when Shloimeh cut it off. After Opu left, it was very, very sad. We couldn't believe this was happening. Being religious people, we tried to have hope. You always figure something will work out. Onyu never lost her *emunah* and her optimism. After Opu was taken away, she not only *davened* for him to return, but she also fasted twice a week, for his protection, until we were taken to the concentration camps. I was only 12 years old and I never saw my father again. It was only after the war that I learned about my father's death. He had contracted typhus, and died near Kiev on the day after *Shavuos,* 1942.

After Opu was taken away, we carried on with our lives in a relatively normal way for a few years. I was still a tomboy and played with my siblings and friends. It was very bad after they took my father away, but somehow we still continued going to school, and living as we used to do. I guess it was the only choice we had. Onyu tried to be strong for us. She was only 34 years old and now had the responsibility of looking after six children on her own. She did everything for us,

and continued to make Shabbos and Yontiff. Right before we were taken away, my mother still made a Pesach Seder. My father was not there, and my brother Fazi was too young to lead it; so, my cousin Yumi, who was learning in the Chust Yeshiva (and whose family had already been taken), led the Seder.

I remember that holiday, our last *Pesach* together, like it was yesterday. At that time, they had blackout periods when you had to keep your house dark so the Russian planes wouldn't see where people lived. No house lights could be seen from outside the house and we could not see much outside because it was so dark. Towards the end of the *Seder*, when we opened the door for *Eliyahu HaNavi*, two German soldiers with guns came into our house! They were clearly drunk and stumbled in asking what was going on. Onyu could speak a little German, and she told them we were having a holiday. By then, my mother was 37 years old and my sister Ruchie was 17. The Nazis could have done terrible things to them. Onyu was a quick thinker and grabbed the wine bottle from the *Seder* table and offered it to the soldiers who took the wine and then turned around and walked back out of our house. We felt that they had "Passed Over" our home, a real *Pesach* miracle!

# To the Ghetto and the Camps

~ Chapter 2 ~

בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ; וְהַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, מַצִּילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם.

הגדה של פסח

In every generation they rise against us to destroy us; and the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand.

Passover Haggadah

After Pesach of 1944, the Jews of Chust were forced to move to a ghetto. There was a man who had a grocery store where I had gone many times. He did not want to be taken out of his house and, one night, he hung himself with his *tefillin*. When this happened, the adults still wanted to protect their children and didn't explain things to us. People said the grocer must have been sick to do something like that. Nothing was discussed. There was just a deep sadness. But, as a little girl, that incident really hit me hard. That's when I real-

ized that the situation was very, very bad. I have thought about that many times through the years, even until now. Something serious was going on.

The ghetto was comprised of a few streets that were closed off just a few blocks from where we lived, in an area that was already mostly Jewish. All of the Jews from Chust and the surrounding villages had to stay inside this very small area. This meant that each family could only have one small room.

We did not move to the ghetto right away. My father had a very good friend whose brother-in-law was the mayor of Chust. He got us papers saying that my mother was sick and could not be moved. So we were able to stay at home for a little while longer.

Although we were glad that we did not have to go to the ghetto, being at home was not easy either. We were then the only Jews on the whole street and we were on our own. Every time we'd see police on Iza Utza, we thought they were coming for us. My mother would run to her bed because she thought they were coming to see if she really was sick. We lived under constant fear. It was also hard for us to be in the house, because we had nothing to do. We could not go to school, and all our friends were already in the ghetto. We just sat and waited to see what would happen next. It was a horrible time.

When they finally did come and take us to the ghetto, it was almost a relief. I remember my mother saying that she would be better off there, among our own people. At least she would have somebody to talk to and she would not feel so

alone. Somehow misery likes company. Onyu felt more secure in the despicable ghetto than in a big house surrounded by goyim.

The ghetto was only two streets away from us. As we walked to the ghetto, carrying a few bags of food and clothing, all the neighbors came out to watch us. I remember our next door neighbor saying, "The Jews always waited for the Messiah, and now the Messiah came for them." That I remember clearly. It was not only the Germans and the Hungarians who were anti-Semitic. Before the war, the people of Chust got along fine with the Jews. Almost overnight they became cruel and mean and would report the Jews to the authorities. We didn't have gentiles that saved Jewish people in my home town. There was no such thing.



Chust Monument at Yad Vashem

The Hungarians and Germans made a committee of Jews be in charge of the other Jews in the ghetto. It was as if the Hungarians didn't want to "dirty their hands" with us. The committee arranged for food to be distributed. We were lucky that we still had some food that we had brought from home. After Opu had already been taken, my mother wanted to be sure that someone in our family would be safe, so, she sent Fazi to live with family in Hungary. But by the time he arrived in Hungary, the family there had already been evacuated. When Fazi returned to Chust, he was immediately taken off the train and sent to the Chust ghetto. At least the family was back together.

Our whole family, mother and the six children, lived together in one small room in the ghetto.

Physically, we managed to have enough food and a roof over our heads. Although the family was all together, and was with other Jews, it was still a very hard and frightening time. We were not allowed to leave the ghetto. We did not know what was happening in the outside world, or what would happen to us next. Secretly, people would listen to the radio at night, while others kept watch to see if the Hungarian soldiers were coming. We felt like animals in a cage, in our own town. We were 'home' but we were not at home.

As it turned out, we were only in the ghetto for about three weeks before we were sent to Auschwitz. The liquidation of Hungary's Jews moved very quickly as by that time, the Germans had the process down to a science. We had heard rumors about what would happen to us. Some said that the soldiers would take us away to be killed. Others said that they would take us to a labor camp to work. Then, the transports began. Fazi was supposed to be taken in the first transport, but our goyish friend, (whose brother-in-law was the mayor) arranged to have someone else go in his place. The Nazis didn't care which Jews were sent; they only cared about how many were sent. So, Fazi was able to stay with us a little longer. After the first transport left, we hoped that they would leave the rest of us alone; but, sadly, that was a fantasy. Two days later, they took all of us on the second transport and in two days the entire city of Chust was *Judenrein*, empty of all its Jews.

We had to walk from Chust to the train station which was about an hour away from town. We were each allowed to take a few belongings. We did not have suitcases on wheels in those days. We had to carry whatever we had as we walked. Even though it was warm outside, Onyu made sure that each of us children wore a warm coat and had a knapsack filled with underwear and some food,

As a teenager, I felt so humiliated to have to walk along the streets of the city. We used to be prominent people in Chust and now we looked like beggars. The townspeople came out to laugh at us as they watched us go. Bitter, bitter memories. When we arrived at the train station, the soldiers counted us. Then they packed us like herring into the cattle cars. For some reason, it took almost all day to leave the station; but they had closed the doors right away and we were trapped inside the car. Onyu had given us bread in our knapsacks, but we were afraid to take the knapsacks off of our backs because we didn't know when the doors of the car would open and they would tell us to get out. We were afraid we would not have time to put the knapsacks back on.

I still have nightmares about that journey to Auschwitz in the cattle cars. In my dream, my own children, Linda and Michael are with me too, but instead of them being my children, they are my mother's. We are all in the cattle car together. In the morning when I wake up, my back hurts, as if I had still been carrying my knapsack. I can even feel the lines on my shoulders from the weight of the bag.

After three or four days in the cattle cars, we arrived in Auschwitz at night. The camp was brightly lit with floodlights. In the cattle cars, the people standing next to the little windows said they could see a sign that said '*Arbeit Macht Frei,*' 'Work Makes You Free'. We were hoping that this was a labor camp. I remember someone saying that he could see children and there were families together with children. Of course, I realized later that that could not have been true. I guess you see what you want to see. The people in the camp looked so small that he thought they were children.



Sign above Auschwitz reads:
'Work Makes You Free'

Finally they opened the doors of the cattle cars, and there was total chaos. My mother tried to get all of us to hold hands. A short man in striped clothing asked Onyu in Yiddish, "Are those little ones yours?" He was referring to my little brothers, Chaim and Moishe, and my little sister, Vitzo. The man tried to warn Onyu not to hold on to the little ones which only made her hold on to them even more tightly. We all marched along holding hands. We didn't know where we were going, but we just followed whereever they made us go.

All of a sudden, my brother Fazi was grabbed out of the group. When we noticed that he was no longer with us, my mother started screaming, "Where is Fazi? Where is Fazi!?" As we were frantically looking for Fazi, I suddenly felt somebody grab me by my coat. They put me and my sister Ruchie on one side of the group. Although I was only fourteen, I was already as tall as Ruchie who



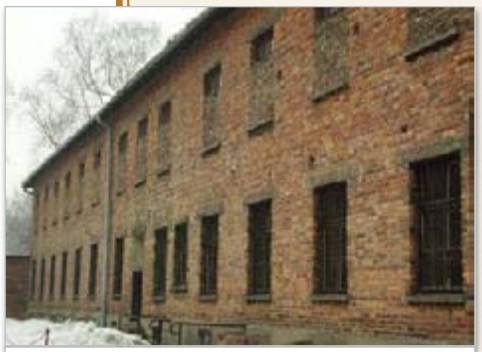
Selections at Auschwitz



was eighteen. After they pulled Ruchie and I away, we never saw Onyu, Chaim, Moishe or Vitzo ever again.

That night, everything happened so fast that we didn't even know what was going on. There were so many women, and so many lines to stand in. They made everybody undress, but they let us keep our shoes. Then they shaved our hair off. It's a very naked, horrible feeling when they shave your hair. I remember it being very cold, actually. We did not have mirrors or anything to see how we looked, but we could see how the other women looked and it was scary. I could hardly recognize even my own sister without her hair. In fact, the first morning we were in the barracks, my brother Fazi was one of the people who came to bring us coffee. Someone told us that it was Fazi. With his big striped clothes and no hair, we did not recognize him and he did not recognize us, his bald sisters.

After cutting off our hair, they put us through some kind of showers that were supposed to disinfect us. After the showers, they gave us dresses to wear. Even this was done in a dehumanizing way. They gave short, little dresses to the tall women and long, big dresses to the small women so everyone looked ridiculous. This was just another way to further humiliate us. After putting on the dresses, we had to go back outside. The dresses were not enough to protect us from the cold. Even though it was already Shavuos time, the weather was still very cold because Auschwitz is very high up in the mountains.



Cell Block/Barracks at Auschwitz

By dawn, we were sent to the barracks where we would sleep. They put me in Block 8, a children's block, but of course, I always went to be with Ruchie in Block 32. You were able to walk around the camp during the day. Nobody cared, except when it was time for roll call, to count the prisoners. Then, they were very strict and you had to be in a specific place. Ruchie and I often scrambled between Block 8 and Block 32 for different *saidlapelles*, roll calls.

The Germans did not care who was where. They just cared about the numbers. And that's all we were to them, just numbers. From the first day in Auschwitz, we had *saidlapelles*. The Nazis lined everyone up, five in a row, to count us. Over and over they would count us to be sure every single person was in the camp. There was no way anyone could have escaped; but if they made a mistake in the count by even one person, they would count the whole camp over again, sometimes 15 or 20 times, until they had the right number. We had to stand in the cold for hours and hours while they counted. They would wake us up at four or five o'clock in the morning, and we had to stand there until after nine o'clock. Often, it was so cold that we would try to warm ourselves with each other's bodies. We had the counting twice a day: in the early morning and in the evening and if there was an alarm sounded, they sometimes did the *saidlapelles* a third time during the day too.

The barracks where we slept were huge. There was a chimney in the middle of the barracks, which they never lit, even when it was cold. On both sides of

the room there were three tiers of shelves like bunk beds. Each bunk held about 14 people, seven sleeping on one side and seven on the other side. There were so many people on each bunk that if one person turned over, everybody else had to turn over as well.

There were Jewish girls called *shtumdis* who cleaned the barracks, divided the food, and helped out with whatever needed to be done. There were also *kapos*, Jews, even Jewish women, who co-operated with the Nazis, *yimach shemam*, and beat and even killed prisoners. It was bad enough that the Nazis and other *goyim* did those things, but I could never understand how could a Jew do this to another Jew? It was life or death to them, I suppose. I guess to keep a position like that, they had to be very "un-human."

I especially remember two of the *kapos*; Rosiko Pollack from Slovakia and Ellen from Berlin. Ellen was a very vicious person, if you can even call her a 'person.' One day, while we were being counted, Ellen beat a woman with a wooden board. The woman kept saying that she has five sons, and when her sons come home, somebody will tell them what was happening. The more the woman talked, the more Ellen beat her. There was no stopping Ellen who was in a mad rage. *Nebech*, she beat the poor woman until she completely passed out. I don't know what happened to her after that.

Another time, the *kapos* hurt us by reporting us to the German soldiers. It was *Yom Kippur*, and despite the starvation rations they gave us in the camp, many of the religious girls insisted on fasting on this holy day. A large majority

of the girls fasted, not just a few. Lunch was the 'big' meal of the day, if you could call it 'big.' When they gave us our small portions of soup, we hid it in our beds to eat after the fast was over. The *kapos* told the Germans that some of the girls were fasting. The Germans made everyone leave the barracks while they took all the food we had saved, and poured it out in front of our eyes. Here we were trying to fast on Yom Kippur and we had to watch our meal for after the fast be poured out in front of us. Although this was yet another unbelievable challenge, we tried to keep our *emunah* strong, and stay close to *Hashem*. There are just no words to explain how we did these things. It says a lot about our up-bringing. Thanks to our parents, we were very strong; Jewish education and tradition were very strong in those days.

Unbelievable and inhuman things happened in the camps. The Germans even took blood from some of the girls to send to their soldiers at the front. The girls were already weak and pale from hunger, and then the Nazis, *yimach shemam,* took their blood! They *davka*, took the blood on *Yom Kippur*. One of the women in the barracks who was a *rebbetzin* told the girls from whom the blood was taken, that they must eat, even on *Yom Kippur.*

Life was so hard in the camp. There was no heat, little food, and the constant threat of death. There was nothing to do all day, but sit around like hungry animals waiting for a scrap of food. We were so demoralized. Some people could not take it anymore. At night, when I had to go to the toilet, I saw people running to the electric fence. I suppose in the morning the Germans turned off the electricity and took their bodies away.

Although Auschwitz was a death camp, and not a labor camp, there were times when they would come and 'select' people who were still strong enough to work. Ruchie was very shrewd and figured out that we didn't always have to be in our barrack at the time of the 'selection.' We were in Block 32 of about 50 blocks; so we'd disappear for a while and go to another block. 'Selection' was very scary, because the girls who were not fit enough to work were sent right to the crematoria.

Around *Sukkos* time, October 1944, Ruchie and I were in the barrack when a selection was being made. They needed 350 girls to go to a camp in Heinichen in the Sudetenland. I was tall, but undeveloped. I was a very skinny child and having been in Auschwitz for almost six months, with so little food, I must have looked even worse than when I had first arrived. Ruchie saw that the *shtumdis* were lining the girls up near the chimney in the barrack. Somehow, Ruchie managed to push me through to the workers' side of the lineup and saved my life.

We did not go on to the labor camp right away. First, we had to go to get disinfected again. Then, before they gave us clothing, we had to undergo another 'selection,' this time by the infamous Dr. Mengele. We had to walk past him in the nude holding our right arm up. We tried to stay together with the six or seven other girls who had also come from Chust. Most of them were my sister's friends. We had to be careful about how we lined up. We had heard that Mengele could tell who was family, especially sisters, and that he would deliberately separate them, so, we had some of the other girls walk between Ruchie and me. He stopped Ruchie, asked how old she was, and then after what seemed like an eternity, let her go through.

I was standing right behind another girl from Chust, Suri Kestenbaum. Suri was a red head, and Mengele sort of 'lost his eyes on her.' While he was distracted, I quickly went through. Poor Suri, *nebach*, she got taken out. My miracle was her sorrow.

Ruchie and I had passed those hurdles, but there was one more thing to worry about. They needed 350 girls, no less and no more; so when they had counted off 350, the next person would be sent to another camp. *Baruch Hashem*, we made it to Heinichen together.

The night they took us from Auschwitz was a very scary night. After they put us through the 'cleaning' showers, they gave us different clothing to go to the labor camp. These clothes were better than the dresses we had had before, and so we looked a little more human. They even gave us coats. If you didn't have shoes, they gave you Dutch style wooden shoes. The problem with those shoes was that sometimes they would fall off and get lost in the deep snow, and many of the girls ended up barefoot. Luckily, Ruchie and I still had the shoes we had when we first went to the camps.

In Heinichen we did not sleep in blocks or in barracks. We stayed in a school building that was converted to a place to live. We were put on the second floor of the three story building. We each got a bunk bed to ourselves, and everybody even got a blanket! These may sound like simple things to you who live in a country where children have their own bedrooms. But, to us, coming from Auschwitz, it was a huge improvement.

Some of the girls worked in the kitchen, but we worked in an old car factory that the Germans had converted into an ammunition factory. We worked twelve hour shifts, sometimes from 6 am to 6 pm, and sometimes from 6 pm to 6 am. We had to march every day from the school building to the factory. German women with German Shepherds made us march as they barked, '*ein, tzvei, drai; ein, tzvei, drai*.' Even in deep snow, we had to march quickly. We were grateful that at least the factory was heated, not for us but, because there were Germans working there too.

Ruchie's job was to paint cannons. The paint had an awful, awful smell. When she died of lung cancer in 1977, I always suspected that it was because of the paint. Another girl from Chust, who survived the war and later lived in Philadelphia, also died of lung cancer. In the factory, I had a few different jobs. My first job was to lift a piece of steel, put in on a machine and then punch holes in the steel. It was very hard work. One day, some white liquid sprayed into my eye. At first my eye swelled up, and I thought I wouldn't be able to see any longer. If I lost my eyesight, I would be lost. But, thank G-d, it got better.

In November, our supervisor put me with two Wermacht soldiers who were making and testing cannons to send to the front. It was snowing at the time, and the soldiers asked me why I wasn't wearing warmer clothes. I told them that I did bring warm clothes from home, but that everything was taken away from me. They then asked me, " Why? Was your father a political prisoner, or a spy?" I explained that it was because I am Jewish. But that didn't make sense to them. Of course it didn't make sense to them; it didn't make sense to me either. It was

incredible to me that they did not know what was going on with the Jews. The soldiers then asked how old I was. When I told them that it was my fifteenth birthday, one of the soldiers gave me a pear for a gift! I didn't eat the pear myself, but I took it back to the camp and shared it with the other girls from my hometown. None of us had seen a pear like that, let alone eaten one, for such a long time so it was a great treat.

There were other people working in the factory besides the Jews and the Wermacht soldiers. There were some German women, about 150 Polish women, and some French people too. We were not supposed to communicate with them, but the French would occasionally send little notes to us to tell us to hang on a little longer, that the war was almost over.

The conditions at the labor camp were better than they had been in Auschwitz, but, there were still some terrible incidents there too. One day at lunchtime, the sirens started to wail and everybody had to go down to the basement. A Jewish girl from our camp saw that a German soldier ran into the bunker, leaving his lunch uncovered on the table. The girl was so hungry that she grabbed a piece of bread from his plate. Somebody saw her take the bread and reported her. When we returned to the camp that evening, the "*obershafiren*" lined us up. We usually had to stand five in a row when they counted us. This time she lined us up two in a row, around in a circle. The *obershafiren* took the girl and began beating her with heavy chains, saying, "Shouldn't I kill her? She stole a German meal!" It was as if the poor girl had committed some horrible crime by taking a piece of bread. The *obershafiren* beat her over the head with the chain until her

skull cracked open. It was awful. They made us stand there and watch the beating. When one of the girls standing in the circle cried out, the *obershafiren* took her out and gave her a big beating too. We realized that we could not do or say anything. After she had beaten the girl to death, the *obershafiren* finally left and some of the girls picked her up and buried her.

In the spring of 1945, we were on the move again. The *obershafiren* did not tell us where we were going. They just said to roll up our blankets, and that we were going away. After marching for two hours, they put us into cattle cars again. There was hardly any food on the journey, but every couple of days they would let us out to get some fresh air and stretch our legs a bit. One time they let us out beside a lake. We ran over to drink the water and wash our faces and someone started eating the grass. By the time they herded us back onto the cattle cars, there was not a blade of grass left. It's as if we had become animals, being herded onto cattle cars and eating grass; but when you are truly starving, you will eat whatever there is.

It took three weeks to get to our destination, Theresienstadt. It really is not that far from Heinechin, but the train tracks were often being used by the army, so we had to wait for the tracks to clear. By the time we arrived, many people had died. It was horrible. When they let us out of the cattle cars, we had to march to the camp. We had been sitting, cramped up for so long, without food or water that I didn't have the strength to walk. The *obershafiren* told us that if somebody couldn't walk, they could just sit down. A truck would come by later to pick them up. Of course, knowing how they operated, we knew where that truck

would take us. Even so, I just could not go on. I told my sister and another girl from Chust, Pessi Adler, that I needed to sit down. They should go ahead without me. But, there was no way that Ruchie would leave me behind. She and Pessi got me up on my legs. They dragged me for a while. Then my strength started coming back, and we made it to Theresienstadt.

By the time we came to Theresienstadt, it was under the control of the Red Cross. The Germans had left the camp on May 1, 1945. It felt more like a ghetto than a concentration camp and there were families there with children. Most of the Jews had come from Germany. We were able to get food; even warm soup! Again, we had to be 'disinfected.' I guess they were afraid we might bring in diseases. On my way to the cleansing bath, I found my cousin, Yosef Isaac Mechlovitz. He had just arrived, and he did not yet know in which barrack he would be staying. I told him where I was, but for some reason, he never came to see me. Even after the war, we could not find him. No one ever heard from him again. He must have been taken to the crematoria at Theresienstadt.



Theresienstadt Concentration Camp

At Theresienstadt, typhus was rampant up till the end of the war, and people were put under quarantine. There were so many sick people, that the hospital could not handle all of the victims.

# Liberation

~ Chapter 3 ~

אֶתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי יְ-הוָה בְּאַרְצוֹת הַחַיִּים. הֶאֱמַנְתִּי, כִּי אֲדַבֵּר; אֲנִי, עָנִיתִי מְאֹד.

תהלים (קטז: יא)

I shall walk before Hashem in the lands of the living. I have kept the faith although I say, 'I have suffered greatly.'

PSALM (116:11)

On May 8, 1945, Soviet troops came to Theresienstadt. A Russian soldier stood in the courtyard and gave everybody cigarettes, and said that the war was over. The next day, we heard sirens to declare that the war was over; but the tragedies were not.

After liberation, the first thing everybody wanted to do was to eat regular food. Food, which is so essential to life, ironically caused many people to die from

eating too much, too soon. The Red Cross warned us to wait until they gave us the right kinds of food; food that our emaciated bodies could handle after such a long time without proper nutrition. But, when you are hungry, you don't listen. A lot of people found food and sat down on the big, wide steps of the barracks to eat. While they were eating they just died right there, just like that. They hadn't eaten regular food for such a long time that their bodies couldn't handle it. All I really wanted to eat was bread. I saw everybody was going to a bakery, so I stood in line and brought out a whole bread. It was still warm, it was the first meal we really had in months.

Ruchie and I were lucky that we did not have to stay in the camp for long. Our cousin, Lazar Mechlovitz (Yosef Isaac's brother) was in the Czech army at the time. When he was looking for his brother, he discovered that we were alive. He got a hold of an army truck, left his base, and took us to Prague, just 30 miles away. He did not have permission to leave his base, so when he got back, the army put him in jail for five days. I am sorry he went to jail, but I am sure he saved our lives by getting us away from the typhus in Theresienstadt..

In Prague we searched frantically for our father, hoping he was still alive. We made our way to Budapest which was closer to Chust, and where the Red Cross was housing refugees from the war. That's where somebody told us that my brother Fazi was alive. When we found Fazi, we felt that our father must be alive somewhere too. How could he not be? He was young and strong when he was taken. So, Ruchie, Fazi and I returned to Chust. We ran to the train station

several times a day, to see who was coming off the trains and read the lists posted daily of refugees/returnees.

Every day we would look for him or go to the train station to wait for him. At a certain point, an old acquaintance told us that he couldn't bear to watch us go to the train station any more. He told us that on the day after Shavuot, 1942, our father had died of typhus, in this man's lap. It happened near Kiev. Even after he told us, we couldn't believe him. My father had been so young when he was taken away; he was only 41 years old.

While we were back living in Chust, Ruchie got engaged to our second cousin on my father's side, Max Moskowitz. Ruchie and Max got married in Liverat in Sudetenland and lived there until they went to America in 1948. Fazi and I stayed in Chust with three of my father's brothers, Uncles Yoel, Chaim and Shloimeh, because we had property there and we had nowhere else to go. We planned to join Max and Ruchie, but after the war, when Chust became part of Russia they closed the borders and we couldn't get out of Chust. Chust, had been one third Jewish before the war. Now, it was deserted, as very few Jews returned from the war.

In 1947, the Czechs wanted to get Czech citizens out of Russia. That meant 'real' Czechs who were born in Czechoslovakia. As Jews, we were not eligible, but for $1,000 Russian smugglers could get papers to get you across the border. We only had enough money for two of us to get out. Uncle Shloimeh and I left and Fazi stayed behind. Fazi was going to sell our property in order to make an-

other $1,000 so he could come on the next transport; unfortunately, there were no more transports after that, so Fazi was stuck in Chust.

In the meantime, Uncle Shloimeh and I got out of Chust. It was only once we were on the train to Czechoslovakia that the Russian smuggler told us that the papers would get us out of Russia, but did not permit legal entry into Czechoslovakia! The only choice we had was to get off the train before we got to Kosice on the border. My uncle rented a horse and buggy to travel the rest of the way to the town. In Kosice, Uncle Shloimeh found a shul and asked if there was a Jew there who could help us. A Jewish official managed to stamp our passport so that we could stay in Czechoslovakia. From Kosice, we went on to Liverat to join Ruchie and Max.

Ruchie and Max had applied to go the United States. America had a quota system, so you had to wait until they 'called your number' to be able to immigrate. In 1948, their number came up, and they left to make their way to the *'goldine medina.'* I stayed in Liverat with my cousins for another year. My cousins, three boys and a girl, had also applied to immigrate to the U.S. As they waited to be called up, they made every effort to get me out of Europe with them, I arrived in the United States in May, 1949.

In 1952, I went to Chicago to visit my cousins. They took me to the Jewish theater which was very exciting since I had never seen a Jewish play before. They did not have that in Chust! It was during the intermission of the show that I met George. He and my cousins had a mutual friend. After they introduced us, we

walked away from the group so we could chat. I had no teenage years. I had to grow up fast, and everything in my life was tachlis. I never dated for fun. We had to survive so the family could go on. Although I was not so religious at the time, I met George, I knew that my parents would have approved of him because he was a good man, a true *mentsch*, hardworking and, most important, George was religious. That's the main reason why I liked him; I knew my parents would be proud. We fell in love and made a life together, a wonderful life, *Baruch Hashem*.

The children always went to Jewish day school, and, *Baruch Hashem*, continue to follow in our footsteps, and even do better! We know that we are truly blessed, and we could not be more proud. I have no complaints to *Hashem*. Because of what we went through, we know that every day is a blessing, and each member of our beautiful family is a true *bracha*.



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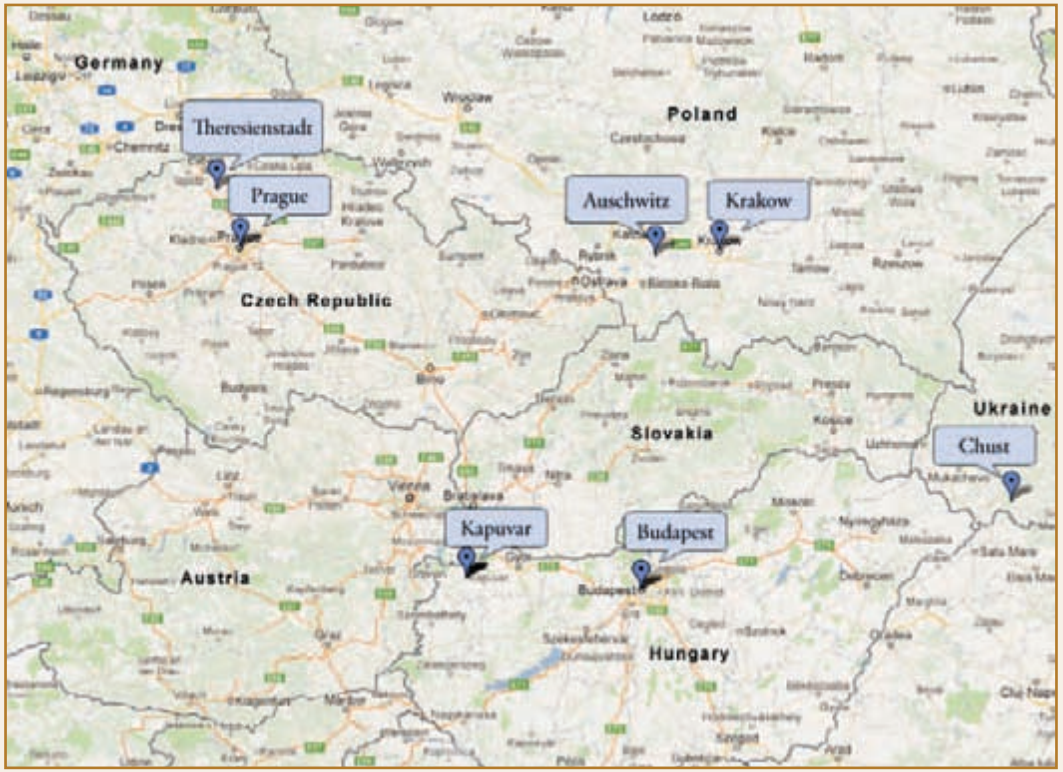
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4.45 KZ Theresienstadt
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BA.f.Wg. Trier
f. J. Kollenscher, Bln.

Sch.

Peppi Weisz's Record Upon Liberation

# Map of Eastern Europe



# George Weisz's Story

~ Chapter 4 ~

זְכֹר יְמוֹת עוֹלָם בִּינוּ שְׁנוֹת דֹּר וָדֹר שְׁאַל אָבִיךָ
וְיַגֶּדְךָ זְקֵנֶיךָ וְיֹאמְרוּ לָךְ׃

דברים לב:ז

Remember the days of old, understand the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will relate it to you, your elders, and they will tell you.

Devarim (32:7)

I was born in Kapuvar, Hungary, on erev Rosh Hashana 5683, September 10, 1923. Kapuvar, near the Austrian border, is where my mother's family lived. My father moved there from Czechoslovakia to start a new life after fighting in World War One. Whenever I would ask my father about stories from World War One, he would say, "To you they are just stories. Unless you were

there, you really cannot understand." I feel the same way about my experiences during the Second World War; yet, I will do my best to share the stories with you, my children and grandchildren.

My parents, Meir (Mishka) and Elizabeth (Minka) got married in 1920, and in 1921 my brother Joe was born. Although we were a relatively small immediate family, I was blessed that I grew up very close with my grandparents and extended family. My mother's parents, Yitzckak (Ignatz) and Chana (Fani) Deutsch lived in our town, and we would visit them every single day. We valued strong family relationships, and were a very close family unit. There is nothing more important than family in this world. I learned that time and again throughout my life, and have the zechus to witness it as the kids continue to have kids and raise them in this way, *Baruch Hashem*. Behind their house was a river where we used to go swimming. My mother was one of eight daughters. Three of my aunts lived in Kapuvar itself and the others lived in the surrounding area. Everyone would come to visit my grandfather's house at some point either Erev Shabbos, or during Shabbos day, depending on how close or far they lived. It was a different life, in those days. That was part of daily life.

Until my grandfather was 82 years old, he used to come to wake us up every morning to go to synagogue. He would bug the children, "Get up! We have to be the first ones in *shul*!" My brother Joe and I would always ask Grandfather if we could have five more minutes of sleep but he wouldn't leave our house until we got up and went to *shul* with him. We were always the first ones there. If services started at 6 am, we were there by 5:50.

I had a simple childhood growing up in Kapuvar. The family was close, and we were happy with the simple things in life. Our sages tell us: 'איזהו עשיר? השמח בחלקו' 'Who is rich? He who is happy with what he has.' Even though we didn't have a lot of the things kids have today, we felt happy. When my grandmother gave my brother Joe and I an apple, it was wonderful! We had one ball to play with and a bicycle to share. I can't help but think that it's sad that even with so many more things, American children don't seem happy, they just always want more.

My father was very strict with us regarding proper respect to adults, halacha and our general behavior. If we would wake him up from his Shabbos nap, we were in big trouble. My uncle had a radio, but my father did not allow one in our house. Joe and I never went to the movies in Kapuvar because my father said that a Jewish boy shouldn't go to movies; but, my uncle would take us on the 200 kilometer trip to Budapest two or three times a year, and take us to the theatre there. Aside from that, in our little town, the 'outside world' did not influence us very much, so we didn't feel like we were missing anything.



Meyer (Mishka) Weisz



Minka (Elizabeth) Weisz

Even though my father was tough, he could sometimes be flexible, and would often listen to the advice of my mother. In March, 1944, I asked my father for a monogram ring with my initials GW engraved on it. My father refused to buy it, saying that a good Jewish man doesn't wear a ring.

My mother told him that many Jewish men wear rings and that I would still be a good Jew, even with the ring. My father gave in and brought me home the ring that I wanted. Later, I took that ring with me for extra financial security, when I left home for Budapest to avoid being called up to the army. It served me well.

I became a bar mitzvah on the day before Rosh HaShanah. At the *shul* in Kapuvar, Adas Yeshurun, people didn't make big Bar Mitzvah parties like they do in America. Only close family came, and they served some herring and babka and a few other things. That was it.

I went to the Jewish school, a *cheder* called the Jido and I graduated high school. My brother Joe went to the same *cheder* and later he went to the town of Puppa for Yeshiva. In *cheder* I learned Yiddish, but at home we spoke Hungarian. We also learned to speak German, because my father's mother only spoke German and Slovak. When I was nine years old, she came to live with us after my grandfather died. It is good that German and Yiddish are similar, so it was easier to learn.



Deutsch Family Wedding, early 1930s

My mother Elizabeth, who everyone called by her Jewish name, Minka, was a frum woman who wore a sheitel. She was a traditional balabusta, who was in charge of the household and worked very hard washing, cleaning and cooking three meals

a day. In America, you have washing machines and dryers to do the laundry but my mother had to do everything by hand. Sometimes she had some people to help her. It would take two days to wash and two days to dry, especially in cold weather. Then the linens had to go through the mangler (presser). She also helped out at my father's butcher shop a few days a week. Even though she didn't really like to work there, she did what she had to do; she was a very committed and hardworking woman.

In Kapuvar after WWI, my father became a butcher selling beef, veal and lamb and he did very well. The meat was all kosher, except for the hind quarters that Jews don't eat because of the Torah prohibition against eating the *Gid Hanashe*. He formed a mutually beneficial partnership with Lord Baron Esterhazy, a wealthy gentile. Father would sell the non-kosher hind quarters to him. They had a good relationship and would occasionally make a *l'chaim* together to celebrate a business deal.

Besides regular sales from his butcher shop and the contract with the Lord Baron, my father also had a contract to deliver meat to the local hospital. He was able to continue delivering meat to the hospital until 1943 when Jews were no longer allowed to do business. My father was very knowledgeable about business in general and about the meat business in particular. He was very shrewd, and made significant connections with various people in positions of power in Hungary.

It turned out to be very important for us that my father had such good connections. In 1941, the police demanded that he show them Hungarian citizenship papers or else they would arrest him. But, as I said, he was born in Czechoslovakia and so did not have Hungarian papers. Fortunately, my father knew the governor of the region who arranged the papers for him within 48 hours. With the papers, he was also able to get a passport.

My father's meat business was, *Baruch Hashem*, very successful. We had one of the first telephones in Kapuvar. I still remember that the phone number was 47, and my father also had a checking account in the bank. He not only was able to provide for our family, but had money to invest as well. He bought a 14 suite apartment building in the capital city of Sopron. I guess I took after him by going into the apartment business as well. I remember that after we were liberated, a bomb fell on the apartment building in Sopron. The Government wanted us to pay to clean it up! I said, "You know what? Take the apartment building, we don't need it. We're leaving Hungary."

Kapuvar was a small town of only 14,000 people, including about 500 Jews. Although there were only about 100 Jewish families, Kapuvar was a very religious community with a Rabbi, a shochet and a melamed to teach the children. Although my father didn't have a beard, he was very frum especially when it came to business ethics. He always gave 10% of his income to tzedaka, If he earned 100 *Pengo*, he would carefully mark down 10 *Pengo* in a book in which he kept track of money for tzedaka. He wouldn't eat at anyone else's house, or even at a kosher restaurant, and the Pesach seder was always at our home.

We always had the *Pesach Seder* in our house. My Uncle Joe, who had no children, came with his wife the second night. The first night, they went to his in-laws, who were also my grandparents! My Uncle Joe had married my mother's sister.

My brother used to work in our father's butcher shop. He had to get up at four or five in the morning to go the stockyard. I never liked that kind of work. It was too much blood for me. When I finished my studies (around age 16) I did not go to work in the butcher shop. Instead, I opened a textile store in our building.



Kapuvar, Hungary

Although we knew that things were changing in Europe as early as 1938, the situation for Jews in Kapuvar did not really get bad until 1942. In March, 1938, the Germans took over Austria. My father wanted to bring his sister and brother-in-law from Czechoslovakia, but they did not want to leave their other family members behind. His sister accepted her fate and said that whatever happens to them will happen to her too. (This was not an uncommon approach of many Jews.)

Following the German Anschluss (annexation) of Austria, the conquest of Czechoslovakia became Hitler's next ambition. Hitler, *Yimach Shemo v'Zichro,* claimed that the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia was inhabited by many ethnic Germans who were being persecuted and that he wanted to assist them by taking control of the region. The major European powers of France, Italy and

the United Kingdom wanted to avoid war at all costs; so, they caved into Hitler's territorial demands and signed the Munich Agreement in September, 1938. This Agreement permitted Nazi Germany to annex Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland which was not only an area of immense strategic importance, but also housed a number of important banks. By appeasing Hitler, the European powers only encouraged him to increase his aggression and terror.



10 Hungarian Pengo from 1936

By 1939, Hitler had broken his promise and taken over all of Czechoslovakia. Because of his connections, my father was able to arrange for his sister's family to receive gentile papers to escape Czechoslovakia, and move to Budapest in 1941. They brought one son with them. Unfortunately, two of their other children had already been taken to Auschwitz. The Auschwitz Concentration Camp was opened in 1940, but at that time we still didn't know what it was. We even received a postcard from my cousin, Eli's brother, who worked in the crematoria in Auschwitz. The inmates were forced to send cards to relatives to say that they were okay, that they were working and had food and that they even got paid! The crematoria workers were better fed and clothed, than others were, but were only kept in their positions for 30 days. Then, they were burned in the ovens as well, lest they lived to tell about their work.

Even though my father had money, a passport and connections, we didn't leave Kapuvar because my mother wanted to stay together with her family and because we didn't know, no one knew, what was really going on in Auschwitz.

Although his brother did not survive his work station in the crematoria, my cousin Eli did survive the war, *Baruch Hashem*, and now lives in Jilinor, Slovakia.

After Czechoslovakia, Hitler, *Yimach Shemo v'Zichro,* turned his eyes to Poland. In 1938 Poland had convinced Czechoslovakia to surrender the Sudentland to Germany, and then on September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland from three directions which was how World War II began. Almost immediately, many Polish Jews tried to flee and Polish refugees began arriving in Kapuvar. My father helped arrange housing for some Polish refugees and hired a young man, who was around twenty years old, who was very appreciative to have food and a place to stay.

Although initially hoping to avoid direct involvement in the war, in 1940, under pressure from Germany, Hungary joined the Axis powers. Hungary had already started passing anti -Jewish laws as early as 1938, which restricted Jews from business and from joining the regular army. Instead, beginning in 1939, Jews were taken to forced labor camps an alternative to regular military service. Forced Labor was basically a death sentence for Hungarian Jewish men. The badly fed and poorly clothed units were assigned to perform heavy construction work within Hungary. With Germany's attack on Russia, Hungarian officials sent most of these units to the Ukraine for additional forced labor. They were subjected to atrocities, such as marching into mine fields to clear the area so that the regular troops could advance.They selected 35,000-40,000 forced laborers, 80% of whom never returned.

After that, in 1940, Hungarian forces joined the Germans in the invasion of the Soviet Union. Hungary suffered badly in this war, losing over 100,000 troops in the Battle of Stalingrad. Hungarian Prime Minister Miklos Kallay opened secret negotiations with England and the United States. When Hitler, *Yimach Shemo v'Zichro,* got wind of Kallay's deceit, he ordered Nazi troops to occupy Hungary in March 1944. Most Jews in Hungary had been protected from deportation to German extermination camps for the first few years of the war. But, from the start of the German occupation in 1944, Jews began to be deported toto Auschwitz. By the end of the war, between 450,000 and 600,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered.

# Hell on Earth

~ Chapter 5 ~

וְעָבַדְתָּ אֶת אֹיְבֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר יְשַׁלְּחֶנּוּ יְ-הוָה בָּךְ בְּרָעָב
וּבְצָמָא וּבְעֵירֹם וּבְחֹסֶר כֹּל וְנָתַן עֹל בַּרְזֶל עַל
צַוָּארֶךָ עַד הִשְׁמִידוֹ אֹתָךְ.

דברים (כח:מח)

And you will serve your enemy whom Hashem will send against you in hunger, in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things.

Devarim (28:48)

By 1942, the non-Jews of Kapuvar were beginning to show their anti-Semitism. That was the first time I was beaten up. When visiting my grand-

father, I would have to cross a bridge where a gang of teenagers would attack me, I figured out how to stop the attacks; I gathered all my money and paid off their leader. Then they left me alone.

On a Friday afternoon in September 1943, the Hungarians took my uncle Phillip to an army labor camp. Strangely, the officer said that he had enough Jews, and they would come back on Monday. My father said to my aunt that it was a miracle that they did not take him too. He went with my brother Joe by motorcycle to a Rebbe, Rabbi Shimoni. I remember it as if it were yesterday. My father went in to the Rebbe who said, "You are Meir Weisz from Kapuvar. You will be free." When my father returned to Kapuvar, my aunt remembered that she knew someone who knew the officer's wife. She made arrangements and my father didn't have to go to labor camp. He was freed just like the Rebbe had said!

Six months later, Joe was called up to an army labor camp. My father returned to Rabbi Shimoni who gave him a *bracha* that Joe would not have to go. They also did their *hishtadlus* and went to Budapest where they found a doctor who gave Joe a medical release for the army. Joe stayed in Budapest until 1944.

Six weeks after Joe was called, in March 1944, I was called up for forced labor. Again we went to the Rebbe but this time he wouldn't see us. He asked to be left alone because the police were watching him. I knew that was a bad sign and my *mazel*, was running out. So, I thought that I might be able to take a train to Budapest and hide there since it was a big city of over a million people. My mother warned me not to go, because she was afraid I would be grabbed off the

train. My father thought otherwise, and felt that it was still safe to travel since Hitler had just invaded Hungary and it was still too early for them to take action. Even the rabbi from my hometown said I should go, and if I could make it, then maybe my parents would join me in Budapest. My mother was right. Even though I had gentile papers, they still took me off the train and arrested me.

I was taken to an office and asked why I was going to Budapest. I told them that I had to go to the hospital. Then the officer asked me how much money I had with me. I had 1,000 *Pengo*. I was twenty years old at the time and the officer asked how can a young man have so much money? I said that I have to pay some bills at the hospital. The officer replied angrily that 1,000 *Pengo* is the equivalent to ten weeks of his salary! He took all of my money and put me in a room with political prisoners, since I was such a big shot with 1,000 Pengo. In the evening, they took us by train to Kishtocho prison.

When Joe found out that I was in jail, he took off his yellow star, and came to try to get me out; but,the police grabbed him and threw him into jail too. Somehow, Joe paid somebody off and got out of prison the day before *Pesach*. He tried sending a telegram to our mother to tell her that he was out of prison but the telegram never arrived. My cousin Miki later told me that our mother was sitting at the table on *Pesach* in such pain over having both of her children in jail, that she almost lost her mind.

Joe remained in Budapest, but shortly afterwards he was arrested again. He had given gentile papers to someone with an incorrect address on them. The

address turned out to be that of the police station! The police asked the man where he got the papers and he led the police back to Joe. After Joe's arrest, he was taken in December to the Danube River with other Jewish prisoners. They were chained together, two by two. The Hungarians shot one prisoner from each pair, in order to conserve bullets, causing the other to drown. Joe and his assigned partner agreed to jump into the river together. Somehow they opened their chain as they jumped into the freezing Danube River. He climbed out of the ice cold water and made his way to a home where he begged for some dry clothing. He ended up working in a hospital to avoid forced labor and the army. His job was to take patients down from the top floor of the hospital to the basement bunker when the air raid siren was sounded.



Yellow Star

At the Kishtocho prison they took everything away from me, my clothing, my watch, and the gold ring with my initials that my father had bought me. Although things were quite bad, somehow we were able to get kosher food and even *matzah* on Pesach. When Pesach was over, we were told that we were going to be sent to do forced labor.

After German troops occupied Hungary in March, mass deportations of Hungarian Jews to German death camps in occupied Poland began. It turned out that we were not going to forced labor camp. In fact, we were on the first transport from Hungary to Auschwitz.

At the train station, there was a boy from Kapuvar who I had gone to *cheder* with. It was such a relief to see a familiar face. The door to the cattle car I was in was slammed shut, locked, and started making its way to Auschwitz.

Somehow, my friend from *cheder* had escaped from being loaded onto the train, and made his way back to Budapest. There, he told Joe where I was being sent.



Budapest Holocaust Memorial - Bronzed shoes lined up along the Danube River

It was not until May 1944, when the Hungarian Jews were deported, that Auschwitz-Birkenau became the site of the largest mass murder in modern history and the epicenter of the Final Solution. Almost one half of all the Jews that were killed at Auschwitz were Hungarian Jews who were gassed in under two months from May 15 to July 9. SS Colonel Adolf Eichmann had gone to Hungary to oversee the large-scale deportations. During that period, Hungarian authorities deported over 420,000 Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau and 90% of them were immediately gassed to death.



Auschwitz Concentration Camp

The trip to Auschwitz was just the beginning of our suffering. There were at least 70, maybe 80 people crammed into the wagon and we were in there for three or four days without any food and very little water. When we arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau, we immediately went through a selection. Jews who had already been in the camp for a while yelled to us not to

hold the hands of elderly parents, because they would have to 'go somewhere else.' We still didn't know where 'somewhere else' was. Josef Mengele, the 'Doctor of Death' inspected us. With his stick, he waved people to the left or to the right; to the left meant the gas chamber. I was, *Baruch Hashem*, sent to the right. He was looking for 150 people to be sent to Niederkönigswalde labor camp, near Breslau. I was 'selected' to work. They took everything away from us, and sent us to the showers. After being 'disinfected,' they gave us a striped uniform to wear.

At Niederkönigswalde, we were each given a number and I remember my number until today. Number 137380 was printed on my shirt. We had to carry train tracks, from the camp all the way to the mountains where they were building factories. This was extremely difficult work. The train rails were very heavy, and if there was a shorter man in front of me, then all of the weight came onto my shoulders. When I first arrived at the camp, I didn't know a single person; but once I was there, I met people. When you are in trouble, you make friends quickly. There were 150 Greek people who had arrived before we did. They were very helpful and told told us not to work too fast, because we would be sorry later on when we would no longer have the same strength.

After some time there, a Polish gentleman needed a roofer. He said, "George, come with me. I can tell you are a roofer." Now, I didn't know the first thing about being a roofer, but I went with him. We had to carry rolls of tar paper all the way to the mountains where they were building barracks for soldiers. The rolls must have weighed around 90 pounds each and I just didn't have the strength to do it. The man said that if I would carry two or three rolls a day, it would be enough and he

would accept me. It was very important to have a skill, so I agreed. We worked for twelve hours a day. The Polish man would make sure we got some extra food. Even though I was starving, when Yom Kippur came, I didn't eat. It was very difficult, but I still fasted on that holy day.

After a few months, during the wintertime, they were looking for a smith. I was lucky to get that job. Because I had to stoke the fires all day, I was able to keep warm. Others were not so lucky and had to work outdoors in the winter weather without coats.

Sometimes, a train would come in with six or eight cars full of bricks and we had to empty the bricks. One day, a train came in with potatoes! When we had emptied the potatoes off of the train, the Polish man gave each of us two potatoes. We cooked the potatoes and were very grateful for the food. To us, it was a feast!

One time, I went into a storage room and saw a box of Hungarian cookies. I figured I would go in, open the box, and take out two packages of cookies. What would they do? The worst would be that they would kill me. But they didn't catch me and I got away with it. The concentration camp was not the place to think about whether it was 'right' or 'wrong' to steal food. It was a matter of life or death. Anybody who survived the camps had to steal something or grab something, or they would not have survived.

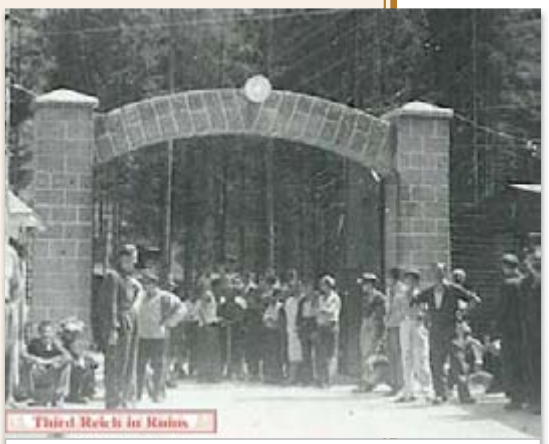
When you are truly hungry, you will eat anything. Anything. We ate the hooves of horses and chewed it like chewing gum. We ate coal and other things that are not even considered food, and even worse, could be poisonous, just to fill our stomachs. The pain of hunger was so intense, especially because we were working so hard. All we could do was pray to *Hashem*, for He alone provides sustenance. I prayed every day. I *davened* and I promised *Hashem* that if I came home, I would work with and care for the sick and needy. I would give them food.

In March, a few days before Purim, the SS made us march from Breslau in Poland to Ebensee in Austria. It was cold and snowy and there was no food. All we had to eat was the snow. Can you imagine that? After four days of walking, they put us on a train to travel the rest of the way.

When we first arrived in Ebensee (a satellite labor camp of the Mauthausen Death Camp), they gave us one pound of bread a day. But by the end of our time there, it was down to one slice. They also gave us one cup of coffee and a little soup. If you were lucky, you got a potato in the soup; if not, it was plain water. On these food rations, we were expected to work for 12 hours and stand for another 3 hours. It was unbelievable. Ebensee is known as one of the most horrific of all the Nazi concentration camps, its motto was 'extermination through work.' The main purpose of Ebensee was to provide slave labor for the construction of enormous underground tunnels in which top secret German rockets were to be housed.

We lived in barracks that had windows. If people couldn't work, they just sat there and stared out the window until they died. I don't know how much I weighed at that time, maybe 100 pounds, but I worked. If someone couldn't work, or was moving like he was half dead, two people had to take a blanket and put it over him and throw him into a pit, even while he was still alive. If you couldn't walk, they killed you. Once I fell down and somehow I got help to get up. If I hadn't gotten up, the people behind me would have stepped on me and I would have been a dead man too.

In Ebensee, we worked in tunnels. It was so cold that anyone who was tired and lay down in the snow froze to death. I prayed to God to give me the strength to carry on. It was a miracle that I survived.



Gate at Ebensee

Every morning they had the *apelle*, roll call. They woke us up 5:00 in the morning, and we worked for twelve hours, from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm. At the *appelle*, there was a *Lago-Kapo* named Willie Weisz. He kept us in line and made sure we were standing there the whole time. If somebody went back to pick up their bread, he would beat them, sometimes to death. The Jewish Kapos were often very cruel to the Jewish prisoners to try and make themselves look good to the Germans. In the end, this did nothing for them, as they were eventually killed too.

Towards the end of April and the beginning of May, we began to feel the war was coming to an end. The Germans would say to us, "Keep up, the Americans are close by," but, the beatings and torture continued. As the end drew near, regular guards and the SS wore different uniforms, and things became more haphazard. Even the Germans had less food. Each soldier received only three slices of bread a day which was not much; but since they were not working hard, they were not starving like we were. I remember one SS guard in particular who spoke Hungarian. I thought that if I spoke with him in Hungarian he might give me an extra slice of bread. Instead, he beat me very hard with his nightstick. I knew that if I did not get away from him, he would kill me with that stick. Before I got away from him though, he kicked me in the groin area very hard. It was a very bad kick. I somehow escaped from him, another miracle. But, the beating was severe and I got an infection and later needed surgery.



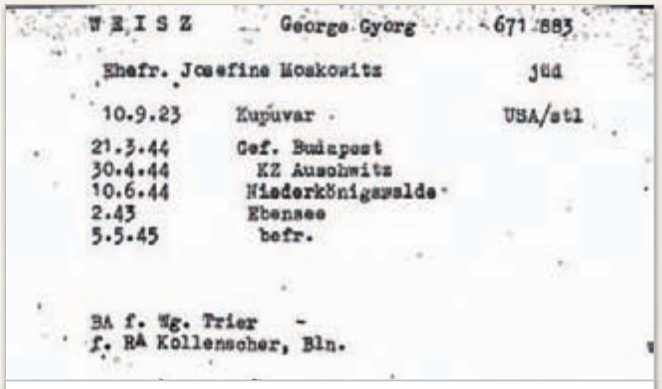
Ebensee Tunnels:
"Extermination Through Work"

By May 5th, liberation was very near. Shortly before the arrival of the American troops, the guards planned to kill all of the remaining prisoners. They planned to fake an air raid and told all of the prisoners to gather into one of the tunnels so that they could blow it up. Fortunately, in a heroic effort, some of the prisoners who were a bit stronger refused to enter the tunnel, "No, we are not going" they said. They had seen that some of the SS men were leaving. And then finally, a small American jeep appeared. American troops of the US 80th Infantry Division arrived at Ebensee on May 6, 1945 and, just like that, we were finally liberated.

Ebensee was not technically a death camp, and there were no crematoria there. But there still was plenty of murder and killing that took place there. I remember that right before liberation the SS wanted to hide the bodies. It took a hundred horses and buggies to transport the bodies of the thousands of people who had died there. Only about 600 people 'survived' Ebensee; but, weighing only 75 pounds, I would not have even called myself a person at that point.



Ebensee inmates after liberation on May 6, 1945



W E I S Z ... George György ... 671 883

Ehefr. Josefine Moskowitz jüd

10.9.23 Kupuvar USA/stl

21.3.44 Gef. Budapest
30.4.44 KZ Auschwitz
10.6.44 Niederkönigswalde
2.43 Ebensee
5.5.45 befr.

BA f. Wg. Trier -
f. RA Kollenscher, Bln.

George Weisz's Record After Liberation

# Steps to Freedom

~ Chapter 6 ~

תְּקַע בְּשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל לְחֵרוּתֵנוּ.

שמונה עשרה

**Sound the great shofar to proclaim our freedom.**

Amidah Prayer

Even though we were free, our troubles were not yet over. The Americans were so eager to help, that they gave us all the food they had including processed meat like SPAM. I got diarrhea and others died from it. After living on starvation rations for so long, the SPAM was too fatty for our stomachs. I thought to myself, "I am finally a free man and now I am going to die after being liberated." Many died after liberation. The Germans had poisoned the bread and even though the Americans announced in many languages not to eat the bread, for some it was too late. Eventually, they gave us cereals and breads to help us slowly rebuild our strength.

I met a soldier there who I recognized from Kapuvar. I said, "Your name is Fuzi." He asked, "Who are you?" When I answered, "Weisz, the butcher's son," he had to look very closely just to recognize me. I was so weak and looked so different. He gave me some chocolate and did what he could to keep me away from the many people who had contracted typhus. That would have been the end of me. The Americans put up a tent as a hospital and a kind Jewish US Army doctor operated on my injury. After I recovered, I wanted to return home to Kapuvar.

The journey back to Kapuvar was not an easy one. First, they took me to Melk where the Russian army was in control. I told them I wanted to go to Sopron which was close to Kapuvar. They kept saying I could get on the next train, and then the next one, none being the 'real' one. I was so weak, I couldn't wait for long. Finally they let me on a train. I needed help to board, and when I got on, I had to lie down.

When I arrived in Sopron, I found some people from Kapuvar who called up my uncle, Oscar. He and my cousin Miki came to pick me up. As Miki remembers, I was so weak that they literally had to carry me home from the train because I was unable to walk. We weren't able to go by train any further because the tracks had been bombed. Somehow, through the Russian soldiers, Miki and Oscar got word to Joe in Budapest that I was home. Immediately, Russian army truck and drove to Kapuvar where we were reunited.

After returning to Kapuvar, I had to go to the hospital every other day because I was so sick. I had puss all over my body, and in fact, I still have scars from that

time period. They told me I have to eat small amounts of food at a time, and slowly to build up my strength.

The town itself did not suffer much damage in the war. Only the train tracks had been blown up. The real destruction was to the families, especially to the Jews. Out of 500 Jews in the town before the war, there were only 25 left. That's all. The rest of the Jews of Kapuvar were all killed; including my mother and father, and all seven of my mother's sisters. I heard that when the Jews were being deported, a woman went to the train station and started beating up my mother. When I heard about that, I confronted the woman. She denied the story and said that she had come to the train station to bring her food. Although I didn't believe that to be true, I didn't want to start a fight. I walked away.

As I walked down the streets of Kapuvar, I wondered, "How could all this have happened?" I couldn't come to grips with the fact that *out of my whole family, I was the only one who came home from the concentration camps.* I thought maybe my father or *somebody* else would have survived. It was a terrible sense of loss and grief to have to go through. At this point, I didn't know if I believed in G-d. I didn't believe in anything. At first, I didn't keep all the *mitzvos*, but later on I felt that I should keep them for my parents' sake. I said to myself, that if *Hashem* wanted me to live, then there must be a reason and I have to keep going. This value has guided me through the rest of my life.




Kapuvar Monument at Yad Vashem

After the war I went into business with a man who had a rum liquor factory. He was older, and all alone; his wife did not come home from the camps. He took me in as a 40% partner since I was only 21 years old at the time and in a short period, I was able to build up a very good business. The Germans however came and demanded a fine of $1,000. We each paid $500, but we knew that that would not be the end of the problem. They really wanted us to give up the business and were going to continue to harass us. At this point, I told my uncle Oscar that by the end of 1948 I would be out of Kapuvar, and I was.



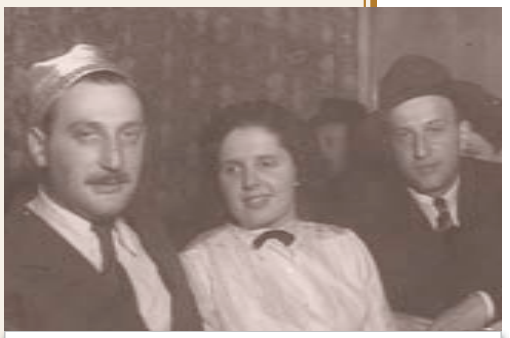

Peppi and George Weisz visiting Kapuvar, 2003

When I said 'goodbye' in 1948, it was the last time that I would see Kapuvar for many years. For Linda's 48th birthday, we went back to visit. My father's butcher store is now a hat shop and my textile store is now a restaurant. There were no Jews left in the town. The only trace of hundreds of years of Jewish life is the cemetery. But, I could not even visit the graves of my relatives, because they were all sent to Auschwitz and have no gravestone.

In January of 1949 I went to Vienna, Austria with my brother, Joe. We opened up a kosher restaurant there, the 'Vaiburg Restaurant.' It was the only kosher restaurant on our side of the border and during the two years we owned it, it became a landmark of sorts. We knew the meat business from the time we used to spend in our father's butcher store when

we were young. It was there that I met Peppi's uncles, Shloimeh and Moishe, before I even met her.

In 1949, the US Army heard of our restaurant, and gave us food to feed 200 American Jewish soldiers for the Pesach seder. It was an unbelievable thing. Two hundred American Jewish soldiers ate at our restaurant! And a few months later, before Yom Kippur, we prepared the special meal for two hundred soldiers, who prayed with us too. Hard to believe!



(Left to Right) Joe, Judy and George Weisz before Pesach, 1950. Salzburg, Austria

Joe got married to Judy in 1950 and went to Salzburg. I didn't want to be separated from my brother again and followed him to Salzburg where I got a job in another kosher restaurant.

We knew that we had to finally leave Europe and so, Joe and I got paperwork to go to Australia. But Judy couldn't get a proper affidavit. At that time a new law came into effect that allowed people who were in Austrian-German territory to go to the United States and so we moved quickly to take advantage of the new law. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society had an office in Salzburg and arranged for our immigration to the US. We had no one to sign for us, so HIAS sponsored our immigration and chose Chicago as our destination so the three of us, Joe, Judy and myself sailed to New York on the US military ship, the 'General W.'

We docked in New York around October, 1950, and were met at the harbor by my great- uncle whose name was Deutsch. He was the brother of my mother's father. My mother had sent him a photo of the entire family before the war. He gave me that picture and I still have it and cherish it today. That's all I have left from the family I was so close to in my childhood, the grandparents who I would visit every day and all of my aunts, uncles and cousins. But I feel fortunate to at least have that photo. Peppi has no photos of her family from before the war.

When we got to America, Judy was seven months pregnant. HIAS, which was like the Jewish Federation back then, helped us find jobs and an apartment. When we arrived in Chicago, I tried a few different jobs, but at that time in America everyone worked on Saturdays. It was nearly impossible to find a job that would allow me to keep *Shabbos*. Every Friday when they gave us our paycheck they would say, 'If you don't come in tomorrow, don't bother showing up on Monday.' I worked in a bakery until I dropped a box full of thumbtacks into the dough. After that, I found a Sabbath observant job with Mogen David Wines. I had to schlep large barrels every day. It was back-breaking work. I had a few other jobs until finally, I opened up a kosher butcher shop. It's something I hoped I would never have to do because I did not like the blood. But I knew the business and was glad that I would be able keep *Shabbos,* so I did it. *Baruch Hashem*, we did well.

One evening in May, 1952, I went to see a play at the Jewish Theater. Through a friend of mine, I was introduced to Peppi Moskowitz. She was visiting her cousins and was at the same theatre that night. I did not ask her for

her number that night because I thought I could get it the next day. It turned out that it took me two weeks to get her number. When we went out on our first date, it was a Sunday night. Peppi asked me why I was so tanned. I didn't want to tell her that I did outdoor work on Sundays to make a few extra dollars, so I told her I had just come from the beach. When I came home that night, I told my brother Joe that Peppi would be my wife; I knew it right away. A couple of months later, on August 31, 1952, we got married at the home of Peppi's Uncle Sam (Mechlovitz) on Washington Avenue in Cleveland.



Peppi & George Weisz Wedding Photo, 1952

After the wedding we went back to live in Chicago because my business was there. One day, when I had to go to see a doctor, my friend recommended Dr. Caesar Schweitzer. When I went in for my appointment, he asked about my medical history. I told him that I went through the concentration camps and was severely injured right before liberation. It turned out that Dr. Schweitzer was the American surgeon who operated on me in Ebensee! He was amazed and said, "Look how God helped you. You are still here!" He even brought out a record book that he had kept that had my name written in it. When I went to pay, Dr. Schweitzer wouldn't take a penny from me. He warmly said, "You can come back any time."



Moskowitz Siblings: Peppi, Fazi and Ruchie

While we were making a life for ourselves in Chicago, Peppi always wanted to move to Cleveland, to be close to her sister Ruchie, and brother Fazi, and I promised her we would. But, it took twelve years to move there. We both worked very hard, and the butcher shop was doing well, *Baruch Hashem*. Peppi always advised me not to give up something good if you don't know what you will do next. At that time, we preferred to have the sense of security the butcher shop offered us.

Peppi came in to help in the butcher shop on our two busiest days of the week. I really appreciated it when she came in not only because it was nice to see her during the day, but because she was the best worker. Sometimes, she *schlepped* Michael along. Later on, when he was a bit bigger, she left our children, Linda and Michael, with Oscar's wife, *Eda Naynee*.



Tommy Weisz Bar Mitzvah
(From left to right) George, Peppi, Oscar, Eda, Tommy, Judy, Joe Weisz

A highlight for me was on the weekends, when I was able to pursue my real dream of owning a nursing home. There was a Jewish woman I delivered meat to and I asked her if I could volunteer at her nursing home on the weekends in order to learn the business. I was there every Friday, Sunday and Monday. I would do whatever needed to get done. I helped feed, bathe and entertain the patients. One of the patients liked to drink, so I would take him down the street to a bar. When I worked in the nursing homes, I saw myself feeding the old people as my

father had done with my cousin Miki in Auschwitz; but, they had done so at the risk of beatings and possible death. My father was beaten more than once for taking food from the kitchen, and helping others in need. Sadly, he became ill, and died before liberation.

Here, I was able to fulfill my promise of caring for the old and needy. Although Americans are less respectful of those older than themselves, I respect the elderly and always will. In Europe, we used to stand for seniors, but that is not done here. I do, and even as I am getting on in years, I will continue to stand for those who are older than I am. As the children will recall, I would walk to *shul* every Shabbos holding Linda's hand on one side and Michael's hand on the other, sharing with them the most important message of our family: "I don't care how well you do in school or how much money you make when you get older. Promise me one thing, that you will always remain Sabbath observant and dedicated to *Hashem* all your life, like my parents and grandparents." Peppi and I are so proud. We are the foundation, and they, all of the children, are the frames. They're even more religious than we are. You, the next generation, are why we survived and we are so grateful to *Hashem* for His blessings.