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Telling Jewish women's stories

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Erzsebet Barsony

Personal details

Place of birth

Budapest
Hungary

Year of birth
1909

Family background

"My grandfather was called Samuel Bauer, my grandmother Leni Weiss. He probably didn't go to school at all. I remember that he used to go to the cinema with my mother, and she read the subtitles for him. My paternal grandparents lived in the same house with us. My grandmother lived on the first floor, we lived on the second. My grandmother kept a maid, too. My mother's parents, the Kellermanns lived on Hernad Street until the end of their lives. There was a synagogue on Remete Street, which we used to go to, and there was the Pava

Street synagogue, but only my sister went there; at that time they were directed there, to Pava Street from school. When I was a schoolgirl, we only went to the synagogue on Remete Street. I also went to the talmud torah, which was also on Remete Street."

"At home in the family we always spoke Hungarian, I don't even know if my father spoke any other languages. My parents also observed religion, we had a kosher kitchen and observed Sabbath; I mean they went to the synagogue every Saturday. The women didn't go to the synagogue every Saturday, only on holidays. However the men, my father and grandfather went on Fridays and Saturdays, too. We observed Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and everything else, Pesach, too. Before the holidays we were always dressed in new clothes from head to toe. In my childhood on the street where we lived there were Jews and Christians too, but there were no quarrels between Jews and Christians. We all played together; there were many children in the building. As far as neighbors and friends were concerned, it didn't matter whether they were Christian or Jewish. Our neighbor was also a Christian and he was on very good terms with my father. My stepmother made friends with all of our neighbors."

"My father [Izidor Bauer] was born in Halabor. When I was born he was 30 years old, so he was probably born in 1879. We had a shoe shop in the same house where we lived, but I don't remember whether my father was a shoemaker or a merchant. I don't really remember what he was doing before World War I broke out. I'm sure that my mother was born in Budapest, around 1888. Her maiden name was Ilona Kellermann. She died in 1912 from tuberculosis."

Growing up and World War I

"My brother, Arpad Bauer, was born on 8th September 1907 in Budapest. We spent a lot of time together in my childhood, because he was only allowed to go to play if he took me along. He was deported together with his wife and their six-year-old son, Gyurika [affectionate for Gyorgy]. The entire family perished in Auschwitz. In 1914, my father married my step-mother, Janka Bauer, nee Schwartz. After my father had been drafted in World War I, there was no wage-earner left to provide for us, so my mother had to work. Since we didn't have any reserves, we were left there without any income."

"My mother was a trained linen seamstress. She managed to get a job at a very distinguished downtown shop. She did a very good job as a homemaker, she sewed beautiful things on the model of something, they were very satisfied with

her, but she earned so little that she could only maintain herself, and pay the rent. It wasn't enough for us, so we ate at the grandparents'. Years went by, and nothing changed. We didn't see our father; we knew that he was alive, but we had no idea about when we would see him again. He returned home in 1917. My younger sister, Margit was born when my father came home from the war, in 1919. My sister was still busy going to school - she was eight years old - when I got married."

Married life

"In August 1928 I got married to Miki [Mor Fenyes]. I was 19 years old, my husband eight years older. Our wedding was in the synagogue on Rumbach Street. We moved out of our parents' immediately. It was very difficult to get an apartment. We had to pay some money to the previous tenant, and we got a one-bedroom apartment with a kitchen, which had no toilet and water, everything was outside. We rented the apartment in Kispest, because my husband had got a job there. My husband had a textile shop, too, but that was only open when there was no market. This worked well for him, but as a matter of fact we started doing better when I also opened a shop, although I didn't have the slightest intention of doing so originally. Meanwhile my son, Ervin Fenyes, was born on 25th July 1929. Three years later, in 1932 I opened a bigger shop, because we had outgrown the small shop. The small shop was in a good spot, but the other one was in the center of Kispest, in the best place. It was beautifully furnished."

"I couldn't complain at all, until 1939 started. We had no financial problems, until 1939 [because of the anti-Jewish laws in Hungary] we had no problems at all. My husband was drafted into forced labor in 1939, and he had to go to forced labor for a couple months in 1940 and in 1941, too. After he left in 1942, he never came back. "

"In the meantime we had to close the two shops, because Jews weren't allowed to have that either. Then our house became a yellow-star house 6. I didn't want to move out of my house, so I rather took other families into my house. Everyone got a room; there was a family for example, which had lived together before, so they lived in one room. My parents, my child and I moved into one room, and handed over all the other rooms. Then everything happened the way I had expected. The deportations started the way I had imagined. Then 30th June 1944 arrived when the gendarmes came into our house. So we went to the railroad station, we were put on the train and set off for the brick factory in Monor. There were countless people there already, a couple thousand. We even slept there and

waited for a miracle to happen. There were serious bombings while we were at the brick factory, and I wished so much that a bomb would hit and that we would all die. So we hadn't even left Hungary and the horrors had already begun. We were in the brick factory for eight days, but my parents were released because their daughter was the wife of a Christian man. I found out later, they were taken again two weeks later. They were taken to the internment camp in Sarvar, and they were sent to Auschwitz from there; both of them died there."

"They deported us in cattle cars, and there was an incredible crowd. We traveled for three days, day and night, in awful conditions. We could hardly sit. After three days, on 12th July we arrived in Birkenau. We were set down; everyone took his belongings, and tried to protect themselves against the heat. The first thing they did was separate me from my child, they told everyone in which group to stand. There was such confusion in my head I couldn't even comprehend it."

"I was standing there with my emotions numbed. Then my son turned up, hugged and kissed me and told me in tears, 'Mom, you'll see, we'll meet again, you'll see, we'll meet again!' He could think more clearly than I could. I was just trembling, I feared that they would catch him and strike him dead in front of me, because he had left his row. I just kept telling him, 'Go back my son, go back. So that nothing will happen.' And poor him tried to comfort me. This was a horror. I never saw my 15-year-old son again."

"So they set us down, lined us up and then set us off. The Lager [German for camp] was situated on a huge area, in fact it was a huge settlement made up of many Lagers. There was a separate Lager for men, for women and for families. In the Lager there were barracks, which were probably transformed from stables. We could see the rings where the animals had been tied. We were the last but one transport, and they had no place to quarter us. The Lager was so full that we stood about for a night, so we slowly learned to sleep on foot leaning against each other."

"About two days later, when they gave us food, I couldn't eat, even though I was hungry. There was everything in the food, from pieces of wood onwards. I noticed that those who had been there for a longer time were able to bear things much better, because they had got used to them. "

"They set us off again on 20th August [1944], and we traveled for three days, day and night, until we arrived at a labor camp in Lubberstedt near Brema. [Lubberstedt was one of the subcamps of the Neuengamme concentration camp.]"

"In this Lager there were wood cabins, and on the plank beds there were blankets, or rather horse blankets. These were bunk beds. Everyone had a plank bed for herself. I had some kind of thin mattress under me, which was filled with straw."

"We had to get up at dawn, they whistled, and we had to rush to be all there on time and get lined up. We never knew where we would work. We couldn't know it, because they always started setting off the groups from a different point."

"Sometimes they took us to work in the bomb factory, where they produced small bombs. Sometimes they took us into the woods to pick mushrooms, and sometimes we picked stinging-nettle. Sometimes they took us to plant potatoes. That was the better scenario, because we planted the potatoes in one row, and took some out of the other. Then we could eat raw potatoes at least. Sometimes they took us to transport things in mine cars. That was very difficult, because the weather had turned very cold by then, and the rails were frozen to the ground. Then a change occurred: another Lagerfuhrer [German for camp director] came. This Lagerfuhrer dismissed two workers from the kitchen and I don't know for what reason, he put me in the kitchen. I became the last maid, and I had to do the hardest and dirtiest work."

"Winter came and I started making turbans, because we were cold. We marched to the workplace bare headed in the terrible cold, and it was so cold, that icicles were hanging from our heads. We had no coat or stockings on our feet. My leg was shiny like a mirror, and red like a roast, and swollen."

"Food was like drinking water to me. It was substantial only at the beginning, and then it fell off very quickly. The food became worse and worse. At the end I could say that we ate lukewarm water. There wasn't even a gram of salt in it, there wasn't anything at all in it. Turnips were floating in it, three-four pieces, and that was it. There wasn't any fat or salt in it. It wasn't substantial at all. Our life was terribly uncertain."

"Then on 10th April [1945] they didn't take us to work, but they grouped us and set us off. We went on foot, then they put us on trains. There was a German soldier in every car guarding us. They didn't give us anything to eat. We traveled in the car, and in the end we stopped in Lubeck. Then we traveled for a while, and sometime at night or in the evening we arrived at a railroad station. They got us off the train and set off with us on foot, and we settled in a forest. We spent the night there. The boss of the Lager didn't force us anymore, and led us back to the forest where we had spent the previous night. In the morning, at daybreak we

looked around and it turned out that there weren't any Germans around us. The German soldiers and German women who had been watching us had all disappeared."

"The English army liberated us, because the English occupied these territories. They transported us with trucks to the shore of the Eastern Sea; I don't recall the name of the place anymore."

"They occupied a private territory where there were cottages, weekend houses. They put us up in these weekend houses. They brought us raw food every day. They distributed meat or fish or vegetables, and everyone could do with it what they liked. We weren't starving anymore, but our bodies were very starved."

"However there were no transports, it didn't even occur to them that they should take us home. We were set free in May, but in July we were still there. They organized a transport for the Czechs, but nobody organized a transport for the Hungarians. The Hungarians were not taken home by anybody; they only organized a Hungarian transport in 1946."

"I didn't know that the Czechs were taken to Bohemia [Czechoslovakia] via Budapest. If I had known I would have got home a couple of months earlier. Soon they gathered us, too, because they evacuated the area. They put us again on trucks and took us to Neustadt. We left in August, I don't know what day, but it took a long time to get home."

Post-War

"I was the only one from my [immediate] family who came home, nobody else. My brother was killed with his family. They killed his six-year-old son, his wife and him. The fact that my sister survived is a miracle, because many of those who remained at home perished too, because there was bombing and the siege and things like that. I found two of my aunts and my uncle and his children. They had been in the ghetto [the Budapest ghetto], but had been liberated in January or February already, and went home. My sister told me to stay with them, of course. But as a matter of fact I was in an awful state then. I lost my confidence. It is very difficult to remember this, because this is an awful period of my life, I couldn't get over all that had happened; it wasn't possible in a short time."

"My only desire was to die, because I thought that I couldn't survive this. My sister could hardly raise my spirit. I was only sorry for my sister, because she was so happy that I had arrived, and she had a lot of plans."

"She had opened the shop before I arrived, because she had got a notice that relatives could open the shops which had been closed before, but if nobody opened them from the family they would have been given to someone else. I just looked at things totally helplessly. I didn't hope for anything. My life became empty. When I entered the shop it was as if it hadn't been mine, as if I were a stranger. I was a stranger in my sister's house; I was a stranger in my shop."

"My trade wasn't worth anything anymore, nobody wore hats, they were happy if they had food, and didn't think of wearing a hat. So I kept the shop until around 1947. My second husband, Jozsef Barsony, was a single young man. At this time there were many men and women who wanted to marry, because in the deportation many of them had lost their wife or husband. But I didn't want to marry someone who had previously had a wife and child. My second husband was also Jewish, but he had converted, because he thought that it would help him avoid deportation. But he was deported just as if he hadn't converted. I went back to work in 1953 at a co-operative, where we made toys. After ten years, I worked at a knitwear store as a businesswoman. After the war, even though my husband was converted, we observed Jewish traditions. We paid the Jewish community tax, went to the synagogue, and we had our seat in the synagogue. We didn't keep this a secret during 1956 either. When my husband died, we buried him according to the Jewish tradition in the Jewish cemetery in Rakoskeresztur. "