

ZUZANA ELBERTOVÁ

It was not long ago when my father was told by my grandfather's friends that he came from a Jewish family. Many of my ancestors from my father's side of the family did not survive the Second World War. I would like to share the stories of their life with you. Sadly, they are far from complete, the information is composed from only a small number of documents, because the subject was a taboo in the family until not long ago. My grandfather does not live anymore and my grandmother is afraid of the past and is reluctant to remind herself of it.



Questions:

- Where are the author's grandparents from?
- Did Zuzana know about her Jewish origin?
- When and how did she find out?
- Why was Zuzana's grandmother afraid of the past?
- What may be the reason for parents to hide their Jewish origins from their children?

Author

Zuzana Elbertová

NEIGHBOURS WHO DISAPPEARED

My Story



Only recently my father learned from my grandfather's friends that he comes from a Jewish family. Unfortunately this information is fragmentary, only assembled from several preserved documents, as this topic has been taboo in my father's family until recently. My grandfather is not alive and my grandmother is scared from the past, she has never spoken about it as she does not want to be reminded of it any more.



My great-grandmother Erőss probably went directly to the gas chamber. According to the death certificate, issued after the war in Szeged, she died on 23 July 1944 at the age of 53.



My great-grandfather Izidor died on 15 August 1944 at the age of 62. I presume these data are approximate. In the death certificate the column "Denomination" is not filled in.



My grandmother was born on 4 June 1913 in Szeged, Hungary. In spring 1944 the deportation transports of Hungarian Jews to the extermination camps began. My grandmother was dragged off for forced labour in Germany. As she spoke German very well she served as an interpreter between female prisoners, workers and foremen. There she got acquainted with foreman Janeky who tried to help the female prisoners. We have stayed in touch with his son's family up until now. On 20 April 1945 under persistent bombing the female prisoners started the march of death. My grandmother managed to escape under very dramatic circumstances. She returned to Szeged but had no relatives there and she only moved to Budapest and later to Bratislava. In 1948 she married Rados Elbert and on 20 September 1949 their son Tomáš - my father - was born. My grandfather had been captured. She was afraid that the past might repeat itself.

I found the autobiography of my grandfather on my father's side. His name was Karol Elbert and he wrote it after the war. He was born in Szeged, Hungary in the south of Slovakia in 1905. He worked as a bank clerk in Nové Zámky. Due to his Jewish origin he was dismissed in 1942. In the years of 1943 and 1944 he was being shipped off to built German defence lines in Romania and southern Hungary. When the Red Army broke the front he escaped from the labour camp into the liberated territory. He signed up for the 1st Czechoslovak Army Corps in the Soviet Union. He was demobilised on 4 July 1945 and went back home to Nové Zámky. His flat was empty and plundered. He found out that his wife and ten-month old son were deported, probably to Auschwitz. As all the documents got lost we do not know the name of his wife and his son. My grandfather founded a small accountancy office and one of his employees was also my grandmother, his future wife. Later he never spoke about his first wife and his son.

The photo is of me, Zuzana Elbertová. To write this I have sorted through the information about my own family. It was of great benefit to me, as if I touched the past. Though the story of my family is so sad I do not feel emotionally exhausted as by it. I rather admire my grandmother for what she did. It must have been hard for her. I have written the story so that people will not forget.

Zuzana Elbertová

Grammar School Přípotoční, Prague 10

Grandfather's story



My paternal grandfather, Karol Elbert, was born in 1905 in Nová Ďala – Staré Zámky in Southern Slovakia. Coming from a poor background, he was unable to finish his studies at the Technical University in Prague. During his service in the army, he graduated as a reserve officer in Litoměřice. Then he returned to Slovakia to work as a bank of cer in Nové Zámky. At the end of 1942, he was dismissed on the grounds of his Jewish origins. For a short time, he earned his living as a manual worker and between the years 1943 and 1944, he was twice arrested and forced to work for the German army, building its defense lines in Romania and Southern Hungary. When the front was broken by the Red Army at Békescaba, the resulting confusion gave grandfather him a chance to escape from the work camp with a few friends and reach the liberated territory. Once there, he enlisted in the 1st Czechoslovak Army Corps in the Soviet Union. He was first sent to Bucharest, where a unit was being formed, and was sent to the liberated territory around Poprad by the end of January 1945. His unit fought in the liberation of Liptovský Mikuláš towards the end of March. It continued to ght on the front lines until the German surrender in May 1945. Grandfather was demobilized on July 4, 1945, and returned home to Nové Zámky. His apartment was empty and plundered, and he found out that his wife and son had been transported, most likely to Auschwitz. He had never heard of them again. Since all the documents from his apartment were lost, we don't know the names of his wife, his son, or the date of their marriage.

Grandfather founded a small accounting of ce and among his employees was his future wife, my grandmother. He never spoke about his rst wife and son. My father didn't have a clue about them until 1993. Grandfather died in 1985. From grandfather's family, only his older sister Bela and his brother Eugen survived the war, but neither is alive today.

Grandmother's story

The story of my grandmother is known in more detail from herself and from a letter she wrote shortly after the war to Mr. Janetzky, the foreman of a Berlin factory, where she was subjected to forced labor.

Grandmother was born on June 4, 1913, in Szeged, Hungary. Her father, István Máté, was a construction engineer and co-owner of a furniture factory. Her mother, Erzsébet Pető, was a housewife. Grandmother wanted to study at a university, but my great-grandfather was convinced that a woman does not need higher education, and he sent her to Vienna into apprenticeship. There she learned to make gloves and also to speak German very well, which probably saved her life later on. When she returned from Vienna, she married a bank clerk, doctor Ondřej Fischer, but they divorced in 1937. Their marriage was childless. After the German occupation of Hungary in the Spring of 1944, the Germans began to orchestrate transports of Hungarian Jews into extermination camps. Grandmother's family was taken away that very same year. Only her younger brother Petr escaped the transport, fighting in the Hungarian army in the Soviet Union. He didn't survive the war either. He was wounded in his leg in the battles on the Hungarian-Austrian boundary and died of blood intoxication. The date of his death and the place of his burial is unknown. Grandmother and her parents were taken to Auschwitz,

where they saw each other for the last time. Great-grandmother Erzsébet went probably directly to the gas chamber. According to the death certificate that was issued after the war in Szeged, she died on July 15, 1944, aged 53. Great-grandfather István lived a month longer than her and he suffered greatly because he did not know what happened to his family. He died August 15, 1944, aged 62. The dates are probably approximate. The death certificates are incomplete, even the entry for "confession" is blank.

Since my grandmother was young (31 years), she was taken away with other women to work in Germany. She was brought all the way to Berlin, in a factory making Argus engines for airplanes. Speaking very good German, she could serve as interpreter between the female prisoners, guards and the production foremen. Gradually, she made closer acquaintance with foreman Janetzky, who tried to help the prisoners – he secretly brought food to them and, most important of all, gave them moral support. His support was an example of true heroism; if he were revealed, it endangered not only him but also his wife and their six-year-old son Dieter. Happily, nothing like that happened and my grandmother corresponded with Mr. Janetzky after the war. Moreover, we are still in contact with Dieter's family who live in Berlin. She saw Mr. Janetzky for the last time at the end of April 1945 during a line-up on the court of the factory, when he stepped up to her, despite the fact that the court was crowded with female guards, and he told her that it won't be long before it's over. She read in his eyes that she is to expect death very soon. On April 20, 1945, all the prisoners were marched out of the camp under persistent bombing and were forced to march without repose the entire 32 kilometers to the camp in Oranienburg. They reached it in the morning and stood on the court in heavy rain until lunch. This camp was also being liquidated. Some men managed to collect blankets. All the women were soaked to the bone and suffered from various illnesses.



Zuzana's Grandmother Klára

ZUZANA ELBERTOVÁ

After the evening count, they resumed the march at 7 PM. Next day, they locked them into a barn and told them that they may sleep. They were all so exhausted that they simply sunk to the ground where they were standing. Later, with the air so chilly, grandmother and her friends Greta and Magda climbed up under the roof and covered themselves with hay that was sheltered there. Around nine o'clock, at dusk, they heard the guards' orders to line up and that the march could be resumed. Greta had a weak heart and could not go on, the older Magda said that she will not continue either. Grandmother was exhausted and she, too, would be happier if the Germans shot her so she would not have to continue marching. In the black of the night, they only heard cries for help and the cracking of whips. They were afraid that the guards would bring in dogs to sniff out the hidden prisoners. But then they heard the commander shout to stop counting because the Red Army was already very close. The transport moved on. Silence covered everything and they fell asleep. When they woke up, grandmother dared to climb down from her place beneath the roof. The barn was full of Germans trying to escape from the Red Army. She asked them for something to eat and was given water and potato peels. After two more days, they were caught by the Landverschütz and closed into the barn crammed with more recaptured fugitives. Next day, they went on the march again. Grandmother began to talk with a guard who asked where she was from and how she got there. He gave her his last piece of bread and helped her and her friends escape again. They hid themselves in the forest during the whole day and they ate raw potatoes. They reached a village called Radensleben at Nuerupin, where they came across a large number of SS soldiers. Grandmother told them that they were Hungarian women who were on forced labor in Berlin and that they lost their group during evacuation. The mayor assigned them to the kitchen where they cooked for the SS.

On April 30, 1945, the last unit of the SS left the village and in the afternoon, the first Russian tank appeared. All the residents hid themselves in their bunkers, only grandmother and her two friends flew to the tank, out of which appeared a soldier from Kyrgyzstan.

They stayed in Radensleben until the first half of June, when grandmother and her friends found a place on freight trucks en route to Berlin. There they stayed in an enormous camp administered by the Russians. At the end of June an approximately fifteen-member group of Hungarians set out for home. In her native Szeged she found only an empty apartment and learned about the death of her relatives. She didn't have any relatives in Szeged now so she went to Budapest where she began to work in a sanatorium. In November 1946, she moved to Bratislava. She was employed by the firm of Karol E. and on August 8, she married him. Just before the nuptial, she converted to Roman catholicism. On September 20, 1949, their son Thomas, my father, was born. Grandmother had him christened out of fear. She was afraid that history would repeat itself.

Today, grandmother lives in a hospice and she is very reluctant to talk about what happened. She does not have enough strength to live on her own anymore but I admire her for what she did then. These relatives of mine were ordinary people like all of us and even so they lost their right to live. Small trifle made enormous differences – a different faith, a different shade of skin, a different way of thinking.

I wrote this story down so that people don't forget.



Zuzana's Great-Grandmother