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### Mom, Laughter and Optimism

Hello, my name is Ilona Kalt. I was born Ilona Bornstein. In my native country of Hungary they called me Irenka, or Irshu because I was always laughing and had a zest for life. That is one thing I have never lost - my zest for life, laughter, and my family. Those are wonderful gifts that I got from my father Max, may he rest in peace. But more about my dad later.

I am currently 67 years old and am living in Beverly Hills, California. I was born in 1930 in a very small village in the mountains called Abaujszanto. There were 9 of us in my family and we all slept in the same room of our two room house. My parents had a canopy around their bed for privacy - how else could our family have continued to grow in number?

My father was an angel, he loved life, and all that it had to offer. He believed it should be lived to the fullest. He also loved us kids very much and indulged us with all we desired - much to the chagrin of my mother. He always said to my mom "Never punish the kids because unfortunately, life will do enough of that, we are here to love them." He loved new and innovative things. We were the first family to own a radio and neighbors gathered from all around to listen to this mysterious "box" from which people spoke. Some were afraid of new things and my father was arrested as a communist for owning this radio. My stable mother got him out of jail by explaining that this was a radio, not a communist plot.

One day, Dad was supposed to purchase supplies for his business- he made sausages- or at least prepared the intestines of animals to be stuffed with meat to make sausages. Yes, things were very different in those days. This was in the early 1900's. Anyway, Max was to spend his money to purchase supplies, but he saw something better! He brought my whole family to the water when he returned, and instead of showing us his supplies, he showed us our **brand new boat**. My poor mother was shocked with her husband's eccentricities and lavish spending, but we kids loved our new yacht.

Another time, Dad took us out and one of my siblings wanted an umbrella, so of course he bought it, anything for his kids. Well the next thing you knew, all the kids wanted an umbrella, and so we all got one. 7 umbrellas total, and it wasn't even raining! Poor mom wasn't quite as happy with the purchase as we kids were. But Dad told mom "Life was for Living", he was a good man.

My mother was also a good woman, but much more practical. Her name was Cornelia, she was born Cornelia Blum, on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1900, she had a twin sister named Bella. She was the most beautiful woman, with long dark hair that she always wore up in a bun. She sewed all our clothes, and also made sure we took them off as soon as we came home so we wouldn't soil them. She polished the good silver every Friday so we could use it on Shabbat. She was also very well organized and ran our house hold to perfection. All the time spent with Mom was productive time; doing laundry by boiling the clothes, sewing, knitting, or baking. I remember her teaching me to cook as I stood on a stool to watch her. All my meals I learned to prepare from her. She taught me how to make the Chicken Paprikash and stuffed cabbage that I still make today. Mom also handled my Dad's money. She was jack of all trades, - it's a shame she couldn't have lived life a bit more. In some ways, I guess that I am a bit like her, my days are also filled with endless work and no down time. Mom had some beautiful dresses, but of course, saved them only for special occasions.

My brother, Paul, and I were like my mom. We were good money people, and could handle many things at one time. Paul was always helping everyone out, whether it was me, my mom or Duci, he was really a special person. I was closest to my brother Paul. He raised pigeons for sale as food, and I would help him. We would also pick cherries together so my mom could make jam from them. He also raised Angora rabbits, and I would help him brush his rabbits' fur. Duci, my older sister, sewed the fur of the rabbits together to make wool. But Duci was more like my Dad when it came to money, she just couldn't save it. She would constantly borrow money from Paul, and never pay him back. But Paul had a good heart, and he continued to lend it to her, knowing completely that he would never see his money again.

I remember that my younger sister Ava used to love to play with her dolls, always brushing their hair. She, like the rest of us, loved to cook with Mom. My memories of my other siblings are vague, they were so young, and it was so long ago. But they were good kids; Ava, Rosie, George, and Lotsi.

I was a very bright girl in school, I even tutored other children. My grades were the best of all my siblings, so as a reward, my parents let me travel alone to my uncle ----- ( My mother's brother) in the nearby city of ----- every Winter break. Oh how I loved to be there, my cousins were twins, and my Aunt was so elegant. And they lived in a Big City, how I loved the big city. My aunt dressed so glamorously, and I loved strolling with them through the town. How I hated to have to return home when vacation was over.

Then the times changed and Hitler came to power. Jews were looked down upon, abused, mistreated, and deprived of jobs and income. I was 12. We all had to wear a gold star on our arm, which was supposed to be a sign of shame, and an indication for others to beat up on us. In school, even my best friend turned on me and joined the others in beating us up. All of the Jews now had to sit at the back of the classroom, soon we weren't even allowed to come to school at all. Since I was so good in school, our teacher applied to let me remain in School as a helper, a tutor of sorts, so I was the only Jew in my school for a while.

My father and all the men were then taken to work camps ( called *Munka Taboor* in Hungarian); Daddy was taken away from us. During that time my mom took us all to the dentist and had diamonds drilled into one of our teeth and then had a gold cap placed over the diamond. This was just in case we would need it later to bribe our way out of a mess. That diamond lasted in my tooth through 2 concentration camps. Then upon entering the 3<sup>rd</sup>, Muldorf, the Nazis found it and pulled that tooth out of my mouth - without anesthesia. It was a horrible time, but many worse things happened during that time. My dad was gone about 6 months or a year, and then escaped. He came home to us, but he was very ill, and died about 3 weeks later of

pneumonia. There were no antibiotics in that time, and we could ask no one for help, because we were hiding the fact that he escaped from the men's work camp.

I was taken from my home in the middle of the night in September of 1943 by the Nazis. They had a very organized scheme of "collecting the Jews". The Jews from Hungary were taken last, so we already knew, to an extent, what horrors lay ahead of us, a very sad thing for a child of 13 to have to deal with.

First we were taken to the school in our city, only allowed to bring with us that which we could carry. We were all so scared, we ran around like the frightened victims that we were, and cried all night, no one slept a wink. The next morning we were sent not far from our city, but across the border into Czechoslovakia to a city called Kasha. We stayed together, forced to live with another Jewish family. The Jews we were forced to live with resented us, not realizing what lie ahead for them. Imagine my whole family, with all us kids, were jammed into some other peoples home. We were there for about 2 weeks and then transported to a brick factory in the same city. Our non Jewish neighbors from Hungary came all the way to Czechoslovakia to bring us blankets. They threw them over the brick walls surrounding the factory that we were confined in. He risked his life for us, and for the food, and clothes he brought us, truly incredible. My family was still together, except for my father and the youngest set of twins: Tibor and Oscar who had died at the age of 1 month as a result of bleeding to death from their circumcision.

My mom was 44 at the time. Duci was 18, Paul was 16, I was now 13, Ava was 12, Rosie was 10, and Uri and Lotsi, twins, were 8.

We were then shoved into trains and carted off to Auschwitz, an extermination camp. I still remember the sign which hung above the gate, "Arbeit macht frei" - Work makes you free. We were stripped, shaved everywhere from the top of our heads to our pubic hair. They said it was to protect us from lice, but in reality, the hair was used to make wigs and such. It was scary and degrading. Then we were placed in long lines to be "sorted". Strong men and women and teens, who could work, were separated from the old and the children, who would serve no purpose to the Nazis: and these poor souls were gassed. The gas chambers were designed as if they were showers, and the people were told they were being sent to these group showers for cleansing, but they knew, they knew! After the showers, the dead bodies were quickly thrown into the crematoriums. I was one of the people that had to remove the bodies, I never showered, always afraid of being gassed. But at times, after the gassing, some people remained alive, they were thrown into the crematoriums anyway, and then, burned alive. And now the showers were ready for the next "batch of Jews" to be senselessly killed.

I held on to my mother with all my might, but it was no use. They took her and my brothers Uri/George & Lotsi - to Mengele's "twin lager" where they conducted horrible scientific experiments on them; such as cutting the leg off of one twin and sewing it onto the other twin- looking for signs of graft rejection, and all of course without anesthetics. Or injecting one twin with a horrible disease and using the other twin as a control. They also wanted to understand the twin physiology, in order to create the perfect Aryan race. I never saw my mother or younger brothers and sisters again. But I did get messages sent to me from my mom. It was in the bathrooms that messages would be sent.

My brother Paul and sister Duci who were older than I were sent to the right, to be transported to a work camp eventually. My sisters Ava and Rosie, too young for useful work were sent to the gas chambers - poor things. I kicked and I screamed to go with my mom. But one of the guards slapped my face. He was a Jew assigned to separate us, the strong from the weak. For some

reason he took pity on me, and even though I was thin, frail, and young, not good enough for work camps, he sent me in that direction anyway. But I did not want to go, I wanted to stay with my family. As he slapped my face, he also slapped stone cold reality my way. He made me look up at the smoke coming from the crematoriums, and told me that that is where I will be burnt alive if I go with my sisters. It's my choice he said. I then realized that the smell that was surrounding us was one of human flesh burning, the flesh of my family, the flesh of my people! There were children crying all around me as they were torn from their mothers' arms. "Quick, make up your mind" he shouted. But the guards on the other end would send me back once they saw my thin physique. So to prevent that, this Jew forced me to sneak under a bunker to go toward the "living side". But they had placed long nails under the bunker to prevent people from crawling under. But I was thin and he forced me. I cried as I crawled through. I still remember the sharp nails tearing through the skin on my back....one more obstacle overcome toward staying alive, there would be many many more.

Duci, my sister, and I stayed together the whole time. But we never told a soul we were sisters, they would kill one of us for sure if they knew. This was to weaken us, one finds strength in family, and weakness in loneliness.

Role call was unbearable and frightening. Standing outside, stark naked in "formation" for hours. If someone would dare sneeze, move, or fall (from hunger and fatigue) they would be shot immediately. And when the person next to you was shot, you could not react, for you too would then be shot. And all that time, while in role call, the sun would be beating on our bald heads causing severe sun burns. Our scalps would blister from these burns.

I one day found a dirty pair of underwear and ripped it into two. Now Duci and I had hats- a "*kovah*" (in Hebrew) to protect our heads from burning. We were so proud to have these hats - Imagine being proud to wear dirty torn underwear on your head- but we were! Oh so proud!

The bathrooms were another degrading experience. They were on the other side of the camp. Just long slats of splintery pieces of wood with holes in it to sit. No doors, no separate men's from women's sides, no privacy. A Gestapo guard would beat your backside during defecation if you stayed too long. But most of us had loose stool from cholera and malnutrition. But oh how I love taking my time in the rest room now, it is a true privilege.

At the bathrooms I met a family friend. She remembered me. She worked at the trains, assigned to sort all the articles that the new transport of Jews brought with them. There were to be separate piles; one for the shoes, one for the gold, one for the glasses, one for the food, etc. She also told me the truth about the so called showers- that the young and old were gassed in these, not cleaned. But it was no shock, I already knew this.

I tore a piece of my precious hat and gave it to her, so she too could protect herself from the sun's harsh rays. She would smuggle food in her bra from these big piles, and she began sharing her stolen food with me.

Life was miserable, and every moment was a struggle to stay alive. One false move, or a Nazi in a bad mood could end your life. Death and fear constantly surrounded us. But the Nazis strived to mask their cruelty under the auspices of fine, sophisticated culture. There was always beautiful classical music playing on the loud speakers in the camps. This fallacy of beautiful music playing in the background of torture and misery angered me. Who did they think they were fooling? Certainly not us, our every breath reminded us of the cruelty that surrounded us, that formed our tortured existence.

Duci and I were transferred to many camps. If you were sent to a death camp( an extermination camp) you were either killed or transferred, and thus perseverance became our goal; survive the death camp, and move on to the next camp. Transfers consisted of being shoved into cattle cars for days on end. No food, room to sit, or bathrooms. Just hundreds of us packed into a

train car, treated worse than animals. We were in 3 camps all together. Auschwitz first, then Dachau and finally Muldorf .

I had many jobs while I was in the Camps. I first worked in the hospitals in the city, as a janitor per se, cleaning clothes and such. But so many people had lice, and I was terrified of getting them. So when the opportunity to transfer to the forests to cut wood arose, I jumped at the opportunity. Most women dreaded cutting the trees in the forests, it was cold, and we had no shoes, but I loved it. Fresh air, trees, and mountains. At least to be surrounded by beauty helped you go on, and most importantly, there was no lice out there. Next, I delivered coal to the German families in Munich. This was when we were transferred to a new camp, Muldorf, which was close by.

There were 4 of us women and a guard, pushing a heavy cart through the cities. At times there would be air raids, and all the Germans would run into the underground bomb shelters. This was a wonderful time, me, and my fellow Jews would scavenge through the homes of the German families, and eat the food they had left on their dinner tables, ah, the indulgence of food.

In Dachau, Duci became very sick with a high fever, she had black fever. If they knew she was sick, she would have been immediately killed, so I had to hide her illness. It wasn't easy, she became delirious and was screaming in her bunk. The other girls in the cabin were terrified that the Nazi's would come in and kill everyone, so they shouted at me to keep her quiet. The only way I knew how, was to smother her screams with a pillow over her face. How cruel you may think, but it saved us both. She eventually got better, but I don't think that she was ever the same again.

We were put to work to help the camps run efficiently and to serve the Nazis. In Muldorf I worked in the forest cutting down trees to make lumber. We then cut the trees into smaller pieces, loaded them into wagons and transported the wood, by foot, into cities, about a 10 mile walk. Each wagon had 3 girls carrying the heavy wood. We distributed the wood to German homes. At times, we also delivered coal to peoples homes.



The war was coming to an end. The Americans and Russians were slowly liberating the Jews. The Nazis began to panic, there were too many Jews alive to act as witnesses to the cruelties that had occurred, they needed to get rid of us. Duci and I were loaded onto yet another transport - where we were headed on this train we were not told. The purpose of this journey was annihilation. Dynamite was placed under the railroad tracks, and when our train passed over, we would all be killed. That should take care of a large amount of witnesses at once. But some Czechoslovakian Partisans were made aware of the Nazi plan. And our train was damaged and came to a full stop in Feldafing, Austria, a city in the middle of nowhere, well before the site that the dynamite was placed. The Nazi's had to think fast, they still had to destroy us, and our ability to tell people of the evils that had occurred here.

The Nazis began to shout, "Leave the trains, you are free". People began to rush out. And as they did, the Nazi's began to open fire. Everyone leaving the train was gunned down. We ran back into the trains, but the Nazis followed us back in, shooting everyone. There was no escape, we were trapped. Duci and I grabbed two bodies of people who were already killed, and we hid under them. People were screaming, there was blood everywhere. The Nazis shot people some more to make sure they were truly dead. And we lied still, not daring to breathe. We had once again survived.

I peeked my head out from under the dead bodies, and I saw the Nazi's stripping off their uniforms. They had civilian clothes on under their uniforms. When the troops came to liberate us, they didn't want to be found as war criminals, just as everyday people.

We waited under those bodies - forever it seemed, and then finally the Americans came. They didn't expect to find us there in the middle of the fields, not in a concentration camp. They gave us cigarettes and chewing gum, but didn't really know what to do with us. They told us to go to a safe house and wait, and they continued marching on, to liberate more of us.

We desperately searched to see if our brother Paul was still alive. But we were told that he was shot and killed a half hour before his area was liberated. He was assigned to carry heavy boxes from city to city on foot, without food, in the harsh weather extremes. He was weak and fell, the Nazis shot him and left him to die. My poor Paul, how I loved you. May you rest in peace always.

I share these words with you my children, not to scare you or to make you sad. All your lives we have hidden these horrors from you because we wanted you to know only happiness. We didn't want you to have to hurt with our pain. But now people are saying that the Holocaust never happened. And they are saying it while we survivors are still alive. What will happen when we are no longer here as proof. And so thus, we share with you our childhood. One that has been buried so deep for so many years.

- To my kids I leave these words.
- sign.