

Speech Livia Fränkel, commemoration ceremony Neuengamme, 3 May 2021

I was born in a small town, called Sighet, located in Rumania (Transylvania). By that time, it belonged to Rumania, but before the WW1, it belonged to Hungary.

Sighet had 30.000 inhabitants, one third were Jews. We were 4 in the family, father, mother, my older sister and me. Father had a business of his own, manufacturing *Wellpappe* (boxes i. e.). Business was good, we had good economy, lived in a very nice, extremely modern house. My childhood was safe and happy, there were no anti Jewish laws, apart from anti-Semitism among the people. But that was something you had to get used to it. So did I. It happened that I heard in school: you dirty Jew, go back to your own country, you are not welcome to stay with us, nice Christian people!

In spite of this, I remember my childhood as nice and surrounded with a warm atmosphere.

I remember clearly the 1st of September 1939, when the war broke out. Mother sobbed listening to the radio, saying that she had already experienced one war (meaning the WW1), is it now the second time she will have to get through one?

To begin with, we were not affected by the war, but we listened to news, and learned that Hitler had great success. In Europe, one country after another surrendered and the killing of the Jews had begun with the occupation of Poland. In summer 1940 Hitler decided that Transylvania should return to Hungary. In August 1940 we changed citizenship from Rumanian to Hungarians, and our lives changed completely. Hungary entered the war, and anti Jewish laws were introduced. Our daily life became more and more restricted.

Rumours, that the SS was killing Jews in Europe reached us, but it was very hard to believe that civilized people, like Germans, could make themselves guilty for such atrocities. So, we choose not to. Four more years passed, that were quite OK, considering that the slaughtering of Jews continued in a big mass, and we still lived together with our families, in our homes!

But then in winter 1944 Hitler realized that he had lost the war. He was quite satisfied because he almost succeeded in getting a *judenfrei* Europe. There were no Jews alive in Europe, apart from 850.000 Hungarian ones. And he was determined if he had to die, than he would surely take those 850.000 Jews along with him. And he turned to the Hungarian president Miklos Horthy and demanded the Jews. Horthy denied this, but then Hitler did something unexpected: He invaded the country and occupied it, although they were allied.

That day in March 1944 when I first saw German soldiers on the street of Sighet, I started to fear for our lives. And now everything went on rapidly. The first law was the compulsion to wear the yellow star. That was not so bad, we thought, is this all?, then ok, we will wear that star.

But after two weeks, another law appeared. A ghetto will be raised at the outskirts of the town, and we were told to pack our belongings, and get ready to move to the ghetto.

That was very painful, to leave our beautiful house, and everything inside. But, that was still not so bad. We did as we were told, packed all necessary items and moved to that ghetto. It took four weeks to move the 10.000 Jews to the ghetto, and then the gates were closed, nobody could leave the place, or enter it those who didn't belonged there.

After six weeks in ghetto, we were told that the authorities had decided to empty the place and we would be transported somewhere else. Each of us should carry one suitcase, not heavier that 15 kg. Where are we going? No one could answer that question.

Then the rumour that Germans were killing Jews in Europe aroused again, but it was still hard to believe. Those who were optimistic, said that it was spring and they would bring us most probably to work on the fields. The people could not do the agricultural work, because all men were out in the war, so the Jews would do it. And this was also OK for us, as long as the family could stick together everything will be fine!

So, we packed our suitcases and got ready for the trip. Early in the morning we stood in front of the house in the ghetto, and Hungarian soldiers came to get us. A huge mass of people left the ghetto, this was the first transport from Hungary, 3001 people. (I didn't know it by then but now I know, because all is documented.) It was a beautiful summer day, with a clear sky. We passed through the city, I took farewell of the houses, my old school, and I thought this is a much too beautiful day to die on. Those were my feelings.

We arrived at the railroad station, where German SS and Hungarian soldiers helped each other to take care of us. Cattle cars were waiting for us, ment for ten horses. 80 persons were loaded in those cars, then we got four buckets, two for our needs, and two with water. The doors were locked with a huge padlock and the train started to move.

I decided to keep track on what direction the train was going. Into the country would mean life, but if it was going in direction to the borders , then it would mean death. The second day it passed the border and I realized that we were in Poland. Then I understood that I had to accept the fact that we all would die. The situation in the car was very harsh. We could hardly breathe.

But the worst thing was the lack of water. The thirst made us crazy. The trains stopped at the stations, and I asked the people to give us some water, but they turned their heads away as if they did not hear anything, and nobody gave us water.

This trip lasted three days, on the third day late in the evening, the train stopped, and a big noise reached us. We understood, that this must be the *Endstation*. I checked the name and read the polish name Oswiecim, below in German: Auschwitz-Birkenau. This place I had never heard of.

The doors of the wagon were opened and a terrible stench reached us. We jumped down on the platform, and we were immediately separated from father, without being able to take farewell. Only women and children were left. It was a very chaotic situation. We were told to stay put and wait for our turn. We could see that something far away in front of us was happening. We didn't know what.

It was late in the night, the area was lit up with huge spotlights. There we stood the three of us, mother, my sister and me, holding hands. I don't think that we spoke with each other, but I remember my own thoughts. I was quite sure that those were my last hours in life, of course, we all would be killed. I just wondered what method they would use to kill so many people. No, the method I could not guess. Anyway, I took farewell from life, hoping that it would go fast, and it would not hurt.

Suddenly, we stood in front of an SS officer. The next day we learned that it was Dr Josef Mengele on duty that night. He decided who should live and who should die. He pointed to mother and sent her to the left. Then he pointed to my sister to the right, and even me. Mother did not let us go, she appealed to the officer that we were one family, and we would like to stay together. Couldn't we just follow her?, she asked.

But the man was very determined, he said: "No, you older people go by lorry, but the young will walk. But tomorrow you will meet again! "Water, please give me some water", mother sobbed. Then he became impatient and shouted to mother: "No *schnell, schnell!* If you move faster, you will have water faster!" So, mother had to let us go, and her last words to us were: "Take care of each other, girls!"

That night, between the 17th and 18th of May, 1944 were my mother and father gassed in Auschwitz! And I don't know if mother got some water before she had to die....

We young women between 15 and 40 years had to walk a bit. Then in front of a large barrack we had to strip, then entered that barrack that was filled with female and male prisoners. They were all dressed in striped clothes. Then we sat down, and the men came forward and shaved our hair. With that all our human dignity had been taken away. After that we had to shower, got our prisoners clothes and entered the camp. We passed under the sign *Arbeit macht frei* and a women orchestra greeted us, playing joyous music.

Then we reached our barrack, a big house of bricks. By now it was morning, and I recalled that the officer said that we should meet mother on the next day. So I went to one of our *Aufseherinnen*, and asked: When is mother coming? She looked at me, took my arm and pulled me to the window, where she pointed at the chimney where smoke and flames were coming from. "Can you see that chimney?", she asked shouting. "There are your parents and your family burning. Don't you think that you'll ever see them again! This is not a sanatorium, you

idiot, this is an extermination camp you come to!" I just starred at her and could not believe her words.

After six weeks in Auschwitz, we were lucky enough to be selected and sent away to forced labour into Germany. After a trip in cattle cars that took three days the train stopped, and I could read the name of the station: Hamburg! I found it a little amusing, to arrive at this big city, of which I learned in my geographic book at school. There, we were installed in a building that was located in Dessauer Ufer. I still remember how we enjoyed the beautiful view from the window to the Elbe.

Those were quite nice days, but unfortunately it did not last long. After some time we moved to another camp in Wedel. We also worked hard, with different tasks. This place was far from being as nice as the previous one. This period did no last so long either, again were we moved to another place called Eidelstedt. (Today called Lurup) There we spent the longest period, approximately six months.

We worked hard, the hunger haunted us constantly, and the cold as well. Hamburg was bombed frequently, each night came the allied planes and dropped their cargo around us. Sometimes we wished to be hit by one, to get an end for our sufferings, but that didn't happened.

At the beginning of April the SS decided to empty the camp, and we were again put in freight cars. After a three days trip we arrived at another "famous "place called Bergen-Belsen, where we finally were liberated by British troupes, the 15th of April 1945. The situation was very chaotic, people died constantly. Typhus and all kind of diseases ruled in the camp. It took some time until the British could handle the situation. After two months we got an offer to go to Sweden. By a coincidence, and with the help of the Swedish Red Cross we arrived in Sweden in July 1945.

75 years passed since we (my sister and I) were reborn, and started our new life in Sweden. I look around in the world, and what I see is not very encouraging. We thought, that with Auschwitz we reached the end of the hatred of Jews, the terrible anti-Semitism. But, how wrong we were...

Anti-Semitism shows its ugly face all around the world, even in our own country, Sweden. Anti-Semitism, related to xenophobia and racism! Unfortunately, we have now a racist party in the parliament, the "Sverigedemokrater" that turned out right now to be the third biggest party! I am scared when I listen to them. Their aim is to send back all the immigrants from the country, and control the newspapers and the public service. This was a clear Nazi-party from the beginning. But now, they spread hate around, mainly of Muslims.

Last year in February, when I started to write this speech, we were quite ignorant about how our life would change rapidly. Who had ever heard the word Corona? My trip last May to

Hamburg had to be cancelled, and so this year too. I am grateful so far that I haven't been affected by the disease, and now I am vaccinated.

I am a very old woman now, one of the last survivors. The last 30 years, I was occupied by travelling around in the country, meeting Swedish youngsters. I am lecturing about the WWII, giving testimony what can happen, when you allow hatred and violence take over the society. And the importance to stress the equality of human beings!

I am thankful to the destiny that I have got such a good life after the war. I married a German Jew, Hans Fränkel, born in Wuppertal-Elberfeldt. He passed away in year 2000, after 53 years of marriage. We got three children, six grandchildren. And today I have a large family with 15 great grandchildren! This makes me appreciate life. Even my sister, who is four years senior, is doing well. She has also a big family with ten great grandchildren.

And this makes me to point out, that Hitler has not succeeded to annihilate us. We are the ones who won, our life goes on in the coming generations!

Wir leben ewig...