Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors Residing in South Florida

The Yellow Star House

Holocaust Survivor Laszlo Selly's Memoir

As told to Bobbi Kaufman

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Published by
The Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies
and The George Feldenkreis Program in Judaic Studies

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The information in this book is presented in good faith. It is not intended to be a history of the Holocaust. The words in this book are the words of Laszlo Selly as he recalled his personal experience in the Holocaust. This is his story and his truth.

On the cover: Laszlo and Rudolph Selly with their parents in Budapest, Hungary. Circa 1943

Cover design by Addyson Fonte
Design and art direction by Addyson Fonte and Erica Stern, M.D.
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FOREWARD

"For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.…

"... I have tried to keep memory alive…I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget we are guilty, we are accomplices."

- Elie Wiesel

As time goes on, the number of Holocaust survivors alive today is rapidly dwindling. With their passing, the incomprehensible cataclysm known as The Holocaust, or Shoah, is fast morphing from a 'lived memory' into a 'historical memory'; from a personal experience of 'those who were there' into impersonal commemorative monuments and museums.

All too soon, there will be no one left to offer first hand testimony of what it was like to actually be there when all hell broke loose; all too soon, even those who knew and heard directly from the victims of the Nazis and their collaborators, will be gone.

It is, therefore, a matter of great urgency that we gather and preserve for future generations as much primary documentation and testimony as possible about the lives and experiences of those heroes who survived the Holocaust, managed to build new lives, and were willing to tell their stories.

Memoirs serve as a very important means of preserving these testimonies. Several years ago, Holocaust survivors began approaching Bobbi Kaufman, asking for help writing their memoirs, describing their lives before, during, and since the Holocaust. She began working with the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach (HMMB), writing the memoirs of Holocaust survivors who were docents and contributors to the memorial. This collaboration was instrumental in her developing a series of in-depth, book-length memoirs. Six books were completed and uploaded onto the HMMB website and the HMMB created lesson plans for each book to be used in teaching about the Holocaust.

Now, in collaboration with the HMMB, the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies, and the George Feldenkreis Program in Judaic Studies of the University of Miami, the series has been named Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors Residing in Florida. The existing books were graphically redesigned and several new books have been added to the collection, with the objective of continuing to expand the series. The complete series will be freely available to the public in digital form on the HMMB and Miller Center and Feldenkreis Program websites.

Our hope is that this series will make a significant contribution to the growing literature of Holocaust survivors' memoirs and serve as a tribute to their ability to make new lives for themselves while never forgetting.

Dr. Haim Shaked
Director, The Miller Center and Feldenkreis Program
University of Miami

DEDICATION

To my six wonderful grandchildren
Drew, Aubrey, Stevie, Sammy,
Mikey, and Jonathan

Never Forget

— *Laszlo Selly*

PROLOGUE

It started quite by accident. I was at a friend's photography exhibit when he introduced me to the director of the March of the Living as a fellow Holocaust survivor. When she asked me if I would go on the March of the Living, a program that takes high school students from around the world to Poland and Israel to study the Holocaust, I said fine, even though the deal was I would have to talk to the teens and tell them my story. This was a story I never wanted to recall. I had never, ever, ever discussed my experiences with anybody other than my twin brother. My wife had never heard the story; my stepchildren and grandchildren had never heard the story. I never wanted to talk about it; I never even wanted to think about it. I wanted to put it behind me. I called my twin brother and said, "Rudy, I have to do this. Help me. What do you remember?" When it was finally time to speak to the kids on the March, it all came back.

With my twin brother in Budapest. 1941.

LIFE BEFORE THE WAR

My brother, Rudolph, and I were born December 31,1937, in Budapest, Hungary. We lived in a modern apartment building on Stefania Korut, a beautiful, wide, tree-lined avenue across the street from the Natural History Museum. My very earliest memory is of my mother sitting in our living room sewing yellow stars onto all the outer garments that we wore in public. Our building had a courtyard and a garden with a little sandbox where we played with the other kids until one by one they told us they couldn't play with us anymore because we were Jews. After that I played with my brother and nobody else. I clearly remember us playing outside in our bathing suits with the yellow stars on them. One day, a man looked through the gate which wasn't locked, saw us playing, and started screaming, "Lousy Jews! I want to get my hands on you!" and started coming at us. We ran screaming to our apartment. My father was a big strong man, but what was he going to do? Punch him out? He couldn't — it would have been suicide. There was no recourse. There was nothing anybody would do about it. At the time I did not know the difference between a Jew and a non-Jew, but I did understand that there were people who wanted to hurt us because we were Jewish. I was five years old.

We were not a religious family. We never belonged to a synagogue and I never had any Jewish education whatsoever. After the war, Hungary became communist and Jewish education was not possible because all religion was frowned upon. Because my father's sister was married to a non-Jewish man, our family celebrated both Christmas and Hanukah. Christmas was the time we got gifts. I always thought it was very, very unfair that other children got two gifts — one for Christmas and one for their birthday — and our Christmas gifts were also our birthday gifts because our birthday was so close to Christmas.

My father, Erno Schwartz, and my mother, Anna Bolack Schwartz, had a wonderful marriage. They were not rich, but they had a good life in Hungary. Before he married my mother my father was married to, of all people, a circus performer, a trapeze artist. They had twin daughters. For some reason they went to Turkey. My father tells the story that one day he was sitting in a cafe when a Turkish man came in and said, "Who speaks French? I need someone who speaks French." My father needed money so he put his hand up and said he spoke French. The man hired my father to teach his daughter French. Because he didn't speak French, my father started teaching her Hungarian instead. Everything was fine until the man came to him and said, "My relatives are coming from France." That is when my father got on a train and went back to Hungary. I imagine he must have been divorced by then. I have no idea what happened to the twin daughters. I know I have two half-sisters somewhere, but I have no idea who they are or where they are.

My father had one brother, Louis, who moved to America long before the Holocaust. My brother and I stayed with him when we got to America. He also had two sisters, Etka and Rozsi. Etka was married to Rudolph Novak, who was not Jewish. Rozsi lived with them. Rudolph was a very wealthy book publisher. He published medical books. He had a big, big store. My brother and I loved going there — we would run all over the store pulling books out and looking through them. We were too young to read, but we looked at the pictures. Aunt Etka stayed at the cash register. She would always slip us some money saying, "Don't tell your uncle! Don't tell your uncle!" They never visited our house without bringing us a book or a picture. I especially remember one book, a Bible. It was the most beautiful book I have ever seen; it was a true treasure. It was big, very big, and very thick and heavy. On the cover was a magnificent painting decorated with what looked like rubies and precious stones. In the book were paintings of biblical stories that were very beautifully done. I loved it. I am very sorry that I don't have that book anymore. I wonder what became of it. I hope it survived somewhere.

My mother was orphaned very young. She was brought up by two women, Tusi and Frida, who were sisters. I think of them as my aunts, but I am not sure how they were related to my mother. The sisters were married and living with their husbands all together in a two bedroom apartment. Both husbands were Jewish. Frida was married to Gyula; Tusi was married to Rezso.

Tusi was a piano prodigy, a student of Zoltan Kodaly the great Hungarian composer and music educator. After Tusi married Rezso, she never touched the piano again. The story is that years and years later when she went to see Kodaly he threw an inkwell at her and said, "You were my best student and you wasted your life. Get out of here," and he threw her out! Rezso was a watchmaker, a jeweler, quite wealthy. He had a fantastic collection of diamonds. He took old-fashioned European silver knives and stuffed the big handles with diamonds. He had three or four of them stuffed with diamonds. That was the family wealth. My brother and I recall hearing him say to us, "Children, one day, this will all be yours." One day, after the war, he sat down for breakfast, fell off his chair, and he was dead. Two weeks before he died he had gotten married and the widow inherited everything. My brother and I never got a penny.

My mother had one sister, Gyogyo, and one half-sister, Erika. All I know about Gyogyo is that she survived the war in Budapest. Erika was married to a non-Jewish man. They had one daughter, my cousin Judy, who was a little younger than me. Because her father was not Jewish and her mother did not look Jewish, they all survived the war. Judy now lives in New York and has two sons.

My mother had a maid, a young girl from one of the villages, to do all the cleaning and help take care of us children. It was not a luxury to have a maid at that time, it was the custom. Housework was a big job in those days — we would buy a chicken, live, in the market, carry it home by its feet, and then the maid would have to cut the chicken's throat, let the blood out, pluck it, and cook it. It was not unusual for us to open the door to the kitchen and run out screaming because there was a huge turkey walking around in there. They were huge! "Close the door quickly — don't let the turkey out!" In Hungary, for Christmas and New Year's Eve, people traditionally ate fish. My mother would go to the fish market and buy a carp, a big fresh water fish. It would be swimming in our bathtub until the maid killed it with a rolling pin. For dinner there was fried carp which was fantastic! My father was a fabulous cook. He made Hungarian food: kopusta, chicken paprikash, stuffed cabbage. Great stuff! I think I got my love of food from him. I clearly remember him telling me, "Good food needs only one ingredient — your heart. If you put your heart in it, it will be good." I never forgot that. I cook now, and of course I became a professional food photographer.

Me with my twin brother, Rudy. Spring 1938.

When we were little we were always dressed alike.

Our building had a courtyard and a garden with a little sandbox where we played with the other kids until one by one they told us they couldn't play with us anymore because we were Jews. After that I played with my brother and nobody else.

Shortly after this picture was taken we had to wear the yellow Jewish star on our outer garments.

We led a very comfortable, middle class life in Budapest. From the left: My mother wearing a fur coat, me holding a camera case, my brother, my father.

My cousin Judy. She survived the war and now lives in New York.

Judy's mother, my Aunt Erika. She also survived the war.

My paternal grandmother carrying a fox fur.

My paternal grandparents.

Uncle Rezso, the wealthy jeweler, and Aunt Tusi, the piano prodigy.

Aunt Rozsi, my father's sister. She lived with Aunt Etka and Uncle Rudolph. Their apartment was in the Yellow Star House where we were confined during the Holocaust.

My father's sister, Aunt Etka.

Aunt Etka and her husband, Rudolph Novak. He was a wealthy book publisher and bookstore owner.

Uncle Rudolph and Aunt Etka in front of his book store. After the war, the Communists took the store away from him and took him and my aunts to a farm to work with the peasants.

THE WAR BEGINS

Hoping to reclaim previously lost territory, Nicholas Horthy, Regent of Hungary, reluctantly allied with Germany. He did little to contribute to the German war effort and he refused to allow Hungarian Jews to be deported. When it became obvious that Germany was losing the war, Horthy sought an armistice with the western Allies. This led to the Nazi invasion of Hungary in March 1944 and the deportation of Jews to concentration camps.

We knew that Hitler invaded Austria in 1938 and Poland in 1939. We heard stories about what the Nazis were doing to the Jews, but because Hungary was aligned with Hitler, the restrictions on the Jews in Hungary remained mild enough for the Jews to say, "Ach! It cannot happen here. It is happening in the next country, but it can't happen here." But of course it did. When the Nazis marched into Hungary in March 1944, the major trouble started for the Jews. Decrees were announced on posters, in newspapers, and on the radio. All the Jews followed the decrees — not that they had much of a choice. Most believed, "It's okay as long as we go along with it. What else are they going to do? This has to be the end of it. What more can they do?" By that time, news had traveled out of the camps. We knew that horrible things were happening, that people were being killed in the camps, but I don't know if we knew the magnitude of it. There was denial, it was unimaginable, the mind could not comprehend it.

My parents were terrified; they knew about Dr. Mengele and what he was doing to children, to twins at Auschwitz. My father listened to the radio all the time. When my parents did not want my brother and me to know all that was happening — it was not for the children, *Nicht fa kinder*, they spoke in German so we would not understand.

THE YELLOW STAR HOUSE

Very soon after the Nazis marched in, we were forced out of our apartment. As we were moving out, neighbors came running in to grab whatever they could. My brother recalls that my father got someone with a wagon and a horse to move some of our belongs, but as we were putting our things on the wagon people came and grabbed it, took it off, and took it away. There was nothing we could do about it. We kept our blankets and pillows, nothing else.

The ghetto in Budapest was very, very small. There was not enough space in the ghetto for everyone, so they had designated Jewish houses, actually apartment buildings, in many parts of the city. They painted a yellow star on the front door of the designated Jewish houses and Jews had to move into them. The non-Jews who were living in those buildings had to move out, but there were plenty of wonderful apartments available for them where Jews used to live.

I don't know if we were assigned to a specific designated house, but we went to my mother's relatives, Tusi and Frida's apartment, which was in a designated Jewish house. This was not in the ghetto; it was in a very fashionable area of Budapest on Erzsebet Korut. In the beginning the only people in the apartment were me and my brother, my parents, my paternal grandmother, Aunt Tusi, Uncle Rezso, Aunt Frida, and Uncle Gyula.

(My grandfather had passed away. I remember him as a very nice, old gentleman who walked with a cane.) Rezso and Tusi had a son named Laszlo who they called Laci for short. It was my nickname also. Laci was a famous jazz musician at that time in Hungary. He was killed almost immediately by the Nazis, probably because he was homosexual.

After a while, the Nazis didn't have enough space in the already overcrowded designated houses to put the Jews, but they just shoved them in anyway. They would take a bunch of people, knock on a door and say, "Get in there!" Soon there were strangers in the apartment with us, a jumble of people: other families, men, women, old people, kids.... People were sleeping on the floor; if they had a blanket they were lucky. There was no privacy whatsoever.

All able bodied Jewish men were being arrested and taken to the front to dig ditches to stop the Russian tanks. I remember my father being taken shortly after we moved into the designated Jewish house. The Nazis came in the door, pointed, and said, "You, you, you, out!" These men were in the crossfire between Soviet, German, and Hungarian armies.

My father told us that they had to sleep in a building that had only three walls and no roof. The choice was get killed by the crossfire, get killed by the Nazis, or die sleeping there in the ice cold weather. So, one night my father simply walked away and walked back to Budapest. I don't know how he made it, it is quite a mystery. He took off the star of course. He was gone from us for a couple of months.

We were given nothing in the ghetto. People were starving. At certain times on certain days Jews were allowed on the streets, so someone must have gone out to get us a little bit of food. My father couldn't go out on the streets because he was still a young man and a young man would have been very conspicuous. Rezso was a jeweler so he probably had money to pay someone to get us some food. Mostly I remember eating lentils cooked in water with nothing else — we didn't even have salt. I hated it!

I remember the filth — the apartment stank; nobody could wash. We didn't bathe for months. The building was modern — the bathroom was in the apartment and we still had running water, but the bathroom was horrible with all those people using the toilet. Nobody cleaned up after themselves; everybody was used to having a maid to clean the toilet.

Bands of young Nazis were walking the streets all the time. I remember looking out onto the avenue from the window and seeing Jews being beaten, kicked, and harassed. We listened to the cries and the screams to a point that our parents forbade us to go to the window. But, with all the people jammed into

the apartment they couldn't control us very well. I remember one particular incident I saw while looking out the window: the Hungarian Nazis stopped three or four people. There was an old man with a long beard and he was carrying a basket with some little food items in it. Potatoes, onions, something like that. They stopped him and they started beating him. His basket dropped and the potatoes rolled out and the young thugs were laughing. One of them put his boot on the potatoes and smashed them. They were hitting this old man. Even as a child I was trying to understand this — why, why? Then my mother came and dragged us away from the window. There was nothing she could say that would make it any better. I understood that he was a Jew and I knew that Jews were in danger. I was seven years old.

DEPORTATIONS TO THE CAMPS

Soon I was seeing organized deportations, not just people being grabbed off the street. The deportations were taking place every day. The Nazis would go from building to building emptying out the designated houses. There were no lists of names, just, "Everybody out of the building!" They didn't care who — they just took the whole building. Everybody went. They told everyone to pack a suitcase and bring whatever they had. The Nazis ordered, "Get in line!" then marched them down the avenue to the train station. I saw them, hundreds of them, thousands of them, all carrying bundles, walking

surrounded by German troops and Hungarian Nazis with guns. The closest camp to Budapest was Auschwitz.

We knew it was just a matter of time before they got to our building. Thinking it was a chance to keep us alive and out of the hands of Mengele, my parents made the difficult decision to send my brother and me away.

Somewhere on his walk back to Budapest from the Soviet front, my father had met a woman named Franci who was on her way to Budapest also. Franci was a member of the Nazi party. She walked around carrying a gun and wearing a big arm band with a swastika on it. My parents asked her to take us. I remember my mother holding us and crying when Franci came to take us to her place. She had a little tobacco shop, tiny. She lived behind the shop in a windowless, dingy room with one door that led to a courtyard where there was a toilet. She didn't even have a door between the shop and where she lived, just a curtain. She gave my brother and me new names, very Hungarian names. We had to learn them and were told to never, ever reveal our real names to anybody. We were kids, we didn't quite comprehend why all of a sudden we had new names that were so difficult to learn. We were given a cover story that we came to live with our auntie because our town in the eastern part of Hungary was overrun by the Russians and we had to run away because we were afraid of the Communists. The young girl working behind the counter

in Franci's shop thought something was not right about our story. She kept asking us, constantly, to tell her our real names. One day she came to me with a piece of candy. She said she would give me the candy if I told her my real name. I wanted that candy, I had to have that candy. I told her. Franci heard this from behind the curtain. She threw the girl out and within five minutes we were on the street going back to our parents. She couldn't keep us any longer. It was a capital offense to hide a Jew. Had they found out, especially since she was a member of the Nazi party, that she was hiding a Jew, they would have shot her on the spot. Of course they would have shot us also. Later on she told us that the girl did report us to the authorities and they came and confronted her. Franci laughed at them and said, "Who do you believe? The girl that I fired because she was stealing, or me, a member of the party? That girl was trying to get even with me for firing her." They gave Franci a couple of slaps, but they let her live.

While we were at Franci's, my parents somehow got papers from Raoul Wallenberg. I have no idea how my father got Wallenberg papers — we never talked about it. I never expected to talk about it again.

Raoul Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat. In June 1944 he was recruited by the U.S. War Refugee Board to travel to Hungary to assist and save Hungarian Jews. With authorization from the Swedish government, he distributed certificates of

protection to Jews. With WRB and Swedish funds be established more than 30 designated "safe" houses in Budapest reserved for Jewish families holding certificates of protection from a neutral country. His work saved thousands of Hungarian Jews – one of the most extensive and successful rescue efforts during the Nazi era. Wallenberg was last seen in the company of Soviet officials on January 17, 1945.

Shortly after we returned to our parents, my brother and I, our parents, and our grandmother moved over to a Swedish safe house which was near Pozsonyi Utca. Our aunts and uncles did not come with us. Conditions in the Swedish house were just as bad, if not worse, than in the designated house. By that time Budapest was under siege. Because there was no water pressure, we could not get water up to the apartment. Water had to be gotten from the street or the basement of the building where there was a little faucet that would drip a little water. People had to collect it and bring it up a pailful at time. That meant we didn't flush the toilet until it was absolutely filled. Imagine. Bathing, forget it; there was no bathing. The apartment was crowded beyond belief. Food was very, very scarce. I remember a horse getting killed and they butchered it right there on the street; just hacked it to pieces. I won't swear that I actually saw it, but I have a picture of it in my mind. That night we had a little piece of meat; not much, a little piece. We boiled it in water, nothing else. But it was meat — it wasn't lentils. We were still eating lentils every day. My parents were begging me to have a spoonful. They

had to force me to have a spoonful of lentils. I did not want to open my mouth for one more spoonful of lentils. I was very thin; I looked like the kids in the Holocaust pictures, just skin and bones.

MURDERS ON THE BANK OF THE DANUBE

The Soviet army was approaching. We could hear the fighting, the cannon fire; we could smell the smoke. The Germans fled except for those troops fighting on the front. There were no more deportations because the Allies had bombed the railroad tracks. They could not send anyone to the death camps anymore so they had to kill them in-house. Now the Hungarians, the Arrow Cross, had to do the killing. The Arrow Cross went building by building, taking Jews from all over Budapest. There was no respect for the Swedish houses. The Hungarian Nazis couldn't care less — you were a Jew, you were a Jew, that's it.

The Arrow Cross rounded up thousands of Jews from all over Budapest, marched them to the bank of the Danube River, and efficiently executed them. They would tie two or three Jews together and shoot only one. The dead body would then pull the still- living victims with it into the river. Children would be tied together and thrown into the river without having to shoot them. Sometimes the victims were lined up and killed by machine guns. In the winter the victims, usually the children, were forced into

the center of the frozen river and the Arrow Cross would break up the ice with gunfire so the victims would fall into the river and freeze to death. The current of the river would carry the bodies downstream where peasants would steal the clothes from the bodies. Often the Arrow Cross would force the Jews to remove their shoes before killing them. Shoes were a valuable commodity at the time.

It was no longer the thousands and thousands of Jews like for the deportations, now groups of 20, or 50, or 60 were being taken. They were always taken to the same place on the bank of the Danube — right in the city. It was an ideal spot: there was nowhere to run to escape, no way to save themselves. There was an open area where the Arrow Cross could get a truck with a machine gun mounted in the bed up close to the river. The gun would be covered with a tarp so the people couldn't see it. They lined the victims up on the bank of the river and then, at the last minute they would open the tarp, and it would start. I remember hearing the gunfire. We were very, very close to the Danube. We could hear everything. We couldn't see it — our window did not look out to that spot, but we could hear it. It was just around the corner — very close. We heard the whole thing.

One day my grandmother went out, probably to find food. An old woman was not very noticeable. While she was out, there was a group the Arrow Cross was getting together to

take to the Danube. As my grandmother was coming home they grabbed her and put her right into the group. My father saw it from the window. He knew they got her. He tore off his yellow star and ran out of the apartment. My mother was yelling for him to stop, but it was his mother, he had to save her. He ran to Franci, the lady who had hidden my brother and me. Franci, who was a member of the Nazi party, ran down to the Danube where they were lining up the Jews on the bank. She went to the commandant and told him she believed there was one Jewish woman that she needed to get even with. She asked him, "Could I have the Jewish bitch, so you don't have to waste a bullet on her? I want to take care of her myself." They laughed at her and said, "Okay sister, take whatever Jew you want, who cares." So she went down the line, found my grandmother, and supposedly grabbed her by the hair and yanked her out of there very roughly saying, "Okay, you bitch, you come with me." She marched her away and brought my grandmother back to us.

The Allies came regularly to bomb, usually at noon. The killings at the Danube usually happened in the morning because the Nazis did not want to be out on the street when there was bombing. At first we spent many, many days and nights down in the basement bomb shelter sitting on a little bench. It was a very difficult experience. It was dark except for some occasional faint candlelight. People were sitting there and everybody was scared. Everybody

was whispering, explosions were coming closer and closer, sounds were coming at me from everywhere. It was absolutely frightening. Then, "Ah! The explosions are moving away from us. They didn't get us." After a while, some people got to thinking they were going to get killed anyway, so why run to the basement. I wouldn't say we became immune, we didn't, but we developed this fatalist attitude that if we were going to die it was better to get killed instantly by a bomb that to be crushed in the basement by the building falling in on us. At that time, I could not understand those feelings; I didn't know why we didn't go to the basement. I was scared.

As a child I was excited about seeing those bombers. "Wow! Look at that! Look at those things falling off the plane!" I was fascinated. My parents no longer tried to keep us from looking out the window. We still had a window pane which was unusual because by that time most of the window panes had been blown in from the tremendous amount of air pressure created when the bombs exploded. I was standing there watching the planes when a bomb must have hit very close because all of a sudden the window shattered into a zillion pieces and flew into my face. I caught a piece of glass right between my eyes. It was sticking out and I could see the end of it moving. Blood was pouring down my face and I was screaming like a banshee. My father ran to me, saw it, took the piece of glass, and yanked it out of my head. That only one piece of glass cut me and that it didn't put out my eyes is just another miracle. Maybe there is somebody upstairs.

There was not enough space in the ghetto for everyone, so they had designated Jewish houses in many parts of the city. They painted a yellow star on the front door and Jews had to move into them.

From my window I could see the people rounded up for deportation or to be murdered on the bank of the Danube.

Shoes on the Danube Bank Memorial.
They rounded up thousands of Jews from all over Budapest, marched them to the bank of the Danube River, and executed them. I could hear the screams.

LIBERATION

The Arrow Cross was still going building by building rounding up Jews and taking them to the Danube. They knew it was hopeless, but they kept killing until the last moment. The day they were going to take us is when Soviet soldiers came into our building. We knew we were free because the Nazis were gone and Soviet troops were on the street. We knew it was over, but we did nothing. We stayed in the apartment because there was still shooting in the streets. The city was in ruins so we could not know what was hidden in a bombed out building or what danger was behind a mound of rubble. There were no celebrations. There was still nothing to eat. Nothing was different except the bombing stopped and we weren't being killed anymore.

Aunt Tusi, Uncle Rezso, Aunt Frida, and Uncle Gyula never left their apartment and survived. They were not deported because the Nazis did not have time to get to their building, which was pure luck. We may have been okay too if we had stayed there, but nobody knows.

A couple of days later my father finally left the apartment and went to check out our old apartment. Somebody else was living there — we never recovered anything that had belonged to us. We went to my uncle, the book publisher's apartment. Since he was not Jewish, his apartment was not

ransacked. The door was closed and locked and we had no key. I remember my father broke down the door. There was nobody living in there. The apartment was intact minus window panes. We opened up the drawer under one of the beds looking for linens and instead found a sack of beans, potatoes, onions, and some canned food. All of a sudden we had a feast — we had food! After a while, my uncle and my aunts returned home. My aunts had been hiding in a convent. My uncle probably paid the nuns to keep them. He may have been with them. Soon after they returned, my father found an apartment to rent. Nobody worried about how to pay the rent — they would pay when they got work. The only thing that mattered was that we were still alive.

REBUILDING OUR LIFE IN BUDAPEST

Because we had never been to school, my brother and I started in the first grade even though we were quite old for it. During the war, my father did try to teach us our numbers and the ABC's, but that was a disaster. He could not understand how he would tell me something and five minutes later me not knowing it any more. He was not a patient man — his hand would go up and that would be the end of it for me! He tried to teach my brother, who was a far better student than I was, but that didn't work either.

Our apartment had two coal burning potbellied stoves, one was in the kitchen, the other was in the bedroom where my brother and I slept together in the same bed. The stove in our bedroom was lit in the afternoon when we came home from school, so our room was warm when we went to bed, but it got cold while we slept. We had big down comforters, so it wasn't too bad. I was an early riser, so it was my job to light the fire in the kitchen stove in the morning. In the winter it was freezing cold until that fire got going. As soon as I lit the stove, a big pail of water went on top of it and when that got warm we all washed up. Everybody in the building had a secure area in the basement where they would store coal for heating and cooking. It was my job to bring the coal up from the basement. If we ran out of coal I would take a sack, go to a shop, and schlep home 20 kilos of coal.

I was the older twin, but my brother was bigger. Many times he would throw me down on the floor and sit on me. It's not that we didn't like each other, we loved each other, but we were very different people with very different habits. I was the neat one, he was a slob. Because we shared a room and a bed, it was a constant issue between us. I kept my stuff in a little cabinet, arranged very neatly; his stuff was thrown all around. When we were a little older and we had to get dressed up and wear a shirt and tie, and all of his were stained with food and mine were pristine, he would want to borrow mine. I would say absolutely not. My mother would say, "Let him have it. He's your brother." I would be screaming, "No. No. No!" but he would take them anyway. Of course they would come back stained.

After the war, my grandmother lived with us. She was a wonderful lady, very loving, very warm. I remember her presence; I remember the comfort we felt when she was watching us. But she was a little old lady. I remember the day she passed away. It was very shortly after the war ended. It was summertime. Beer became available just around that time. We were sitting out on our little terrace eating when my father sent me down to the local bar with a pitcher saying, "Bring back a pitcher of beer." I got the pitcher of beer (and drank mine on the way home.) They all had their beer. My father told us later that there was a little beer left at the end of the evening and my grandmother said, "Gee, if nobody wants it, I would love to have the beer." My father gave it to her. That night she had a stroke. There was no ambulance, there was nobody to call, so my father borrowed a wheelbarrow, put her into the wheelbarrow and rolled her to the hospital. She never came back. That's how we lost her. And from that day on, my father always thought that it was because he let her drink that little extra beer. He always felt guilty about it.

LIFE IN HUNGARY UNDER COMMUNISM

My parents were going to make a life in Hungary. Before the war my father had a great sense of humor: he was very funny, laughing and joking all the time. I don't remember him ever joking during the Holocaust, but afterwards

he recouped and he was his old self. He set up a business in a space in our building that was like a storefront. He saw that there were no window panes left in Budapest, so he started making window panes. When there was no further need of window panes, he needed another business. Noticing the lack of milk, he started making milk out of soybeans. That was okay until the farms were replenished. Then he started a coffee business because there was no coffee. Because all the livestock was killed during the war, there was no leather to be had in Europe, so my father got together with a chemist and began a factory to make artificial leather. This is when the Communists took his business away. They came in and said, "Out! It is not yours anymore. It belongs to the state." They told him to get out of there. Then he went to work as a warehouse manager for a company making measuring instruments for the Communists. My mother went to work in a light bulb factory.

My parents were making enough money to stay alive, not much more. They were grateful they were alive and nobody was killing them on the streets. Our big concern was to stay out of the way of the Communist system: don't tell a political joke, don't say one word against our leaders. That was pure death. If you said something against the government your neighbors would report you and the secret police would get you. Neighbors were urged to spy on neighbors: "If you hear something anti-Communist it is an enemy of the people speaking and it is your duty

to report it." People never knew who they could talk to freely.

Around this time, my father changed our family name from Schwartz to Sellei. He chose a name that did not sound Jewish because anti-Semitism was rampant in Hungary and he wanted to protect our family. When I became a United States citizen I changed the spelling to Selly.

My uncle, Rudolph Novak, the book publisher, began publishing language books — *Let's Learn Quick and Easy English, Let's Learn Quick and Easy French,* and so on. Those books became very popular. He knew it was just a matter of time until the Communists would take the store away from him, so he took a truckload of his books and put them in the basement of our apartment building. Everybody in those days had their own locked place in the basement where they stored firewood or coal for heating and cooking. They put the books in our space and covered them with a tarp. The superintendent of the building reported to the police that there was something suspicious in our basement. The police came, raided our apartment, and tore it apart. Then they went down to the basement and found the books. They claimed the books were stolen merchandise from the government, because the government owned everything. When my brother and I came home from school our door was open and nobody was home. The apartment was in shambles.

We had no idea what happened. Finally, one of our neighbors came and said, "Oh, your parents were taken away by the police." They let my mother out several hours later, but my father and my uncle stayed in jail for about a week. My uncle probably paid the police off to get them released. Whatever of value they found in our apartment: jewelry, money, whatever, was gone.

The Communists took my uncle's book store away. They just threw him out one day. They wouldn't even let him take his hat that was hanging on a coat rack — everything belonged to the state. He had a large, beautiful apartment with lots of art work and Persian carpets. They threw him out of there also. They put him and my aunts on a truck and took them out to a small village in the countryside and said, "Now you work with the peasants in the fields." Aunt Etka died on that farm. Uncle Rudolph then married Rozsi.

Before the war my uncle bought two apartments and put them in my and my brother's names. They were supposed to be his gift to us. Of course the Communists took them and moved people into them. We could not get the apartments back, but they did offer to pay us a ridiculously small sum of Hungarian currency. When communism ended in Hungary, I contacted a friend to look into it for me. He got the money and invested it for me. It turned out to be a bad investment. My brother had his money put in a bank in Hungary, but the bank would never tell him how much money there was. When he hired an attorney to

look into it, the attorney found out it was $250. He took the $250 and sent my brother a bill for $2,000.

My brother and I were always together at school which was good because when the bullies wanted to beat us up, they had to contend with two of us. They were not attacking us because we were Jewish — there was no such thing as religion anymore; now the big question we all had to face in school was, "What did your father do before 1945?" That is what determined whether you were a good Communist or an enemy of the people. We didn't know what to say, we were kids. If we said our father was a businessman, then, "Ha! You are an enemy of the state!" and that would go on our record and follow us through life in the Communist system. We spent eight years in grade school. It was intense communist education. We had to go to political education classes and talk about how great the socialist party is. We were taught how to shoot a gun. (I was a good shot — I still am.) We were taught how to throw a hand grenade in case the American imperialists would come and attack our beloved country. We had to know how to defend ourselves and how to defend communism. We were no longer run by the Nazis, now we were run by the Communists. This was our life now. Stalin's birthday was a big thing. In school we would plan what we would offer for Stalin's birthday, "Oh, we are going to study much harder for our father Stalin." My parents had to offer to work two Sundays for free for Stalin's birthday. They got the whole nation working two extra days as a gift for our father, Stalin.

As children we had to be Young Pioneers. Our uniform was little blue shorts, a white shirt, and a red bandana worn around our neck. On May 1, Workers' Day, everybody had to march in front of the parade stand. As we marched in front of the government leaders we had to yell in unison, "Long live Stalin!" People had Workers' Day off from work, but they had to parade. Everybody. After we walked the parade route and did our yelling, we went to a park where they gave us a ticket for a free hotdog and a soda. The adults got beer. That was the big celebration.

We were forced to learn the Russian language in school. The teacher was barely one lesson ahead of us; we all spoke Hungarian. I have no idea how to say anything in Russian except a couple of swear words. We were taught that nothing American was good, that if it came from America it was not good. In America people starve; in America people have no freedom. Everything that was ever discovered that was worth anything was discovered by the Russians and the Americans just stole it. Electricity was a Russian invention, the telephone was a Russian invention. All advances were made in Russia, not in America. We had to go along with it, there was no choice, but I was not really buying all of it. My father insisted on us being together for dinner every night. Dinnertime was the time for family discussions. He wanted to know what we learned at school that day, what the teacher said about the communist system. Then my father would say, "Don't believe everything you hear because that is not the way it was. It was this way..." So we had a counterbalance.

The Communists were not good for the adults, but for the children it was not bad. The Communists made sure that we had food and they gave us a decent education — brainwashed as we were. We had theater, we had opera, we had summer vacations. There was a youth house we could choose to belong to that was an outgrowth of the school. They had dance classes, history classes, biology classes. We could play sports. It was much more relaxed than school. I took biology. I remember one experiment where we cut off a frog's head and kept the frog alive for several days.

Around that time, I was rummaging through my father's closet, like all children do at some time, and I found an old camera. I went to him and said, "Can you show me how to use it?" He said no, he didn't know anything about it. I said, "Can I have it?" He said, "Sure, have it." From that moment on I never went out without that lousy little camera. I loved it. I started taking pictures on the street. Kids knew me as the guy with the camera. At that time, my brother and I were being tutored in the German language. We became fluent in German; we read and wrote it fluently. (I wish I remembered it now, but I don't.) I remember begging my father to give me some money so I could order a monthly photo magazine from Germany. I would read it from beginning to end — trying to learn. It fascinated me. When everybody went to sleep at night I would darken the kitchen and try to develop my film.

My brother took school seriously. Unfortunately, I didn't. I played hooky from school and went out to the cafes and drank beer instead. When the other kids never had any money, I was going to the night clubs. I got into all kinds of things. I would go to the market place with my camera and take pictures of all the peasant ladies as they sat there selling their things, then go back the next market day and sell them the pictures. I also bought some raunchy pictures from France, made X-rated calendars out of them, and sold them. I always had money because I was doing stuff like this. I didn't make a lot of money, but for a kid it was enough for a taxi, and for impressing the other kids.

After eight years in school, my brother went on to gymnasium and I went to trade school hoping to learn to be a movie film cameraman. (There were movies in Hungary, even before the Holocaust. I remember seeing *The Wizard of Oz* and being very afraid of the Tin Man. When I saw him, I cried and cried; I was just a little kid.) Hungary had a very good motion picture industry. Most of the films were propaganda films, but I loved the idea of doing movies. Unfortunately, I never got to do it. If your family background was not the peasant class, the miners, the steelworkers, then this kind of education was not available for you. Because they had to bring the lower classes up and push the middle classes down, and my family was middle class, that kind of education was not available to me. When I had no future as a movie cameraman, my uncle offered to teach me to be a watchmaker — I was horrified!

I stayed in school and at age 15, I became an apprentice to a portrait photographer. Three days a week I went to school and three days a week I went to him. I did this for three years. At first I was mostly cleaning the studio and in the wintertime dragging 25 or 30 kilos of coal back to heat the studio. The photographer was a very nice Jewish man. First, he taught me to work in the darkroom, then he let me stay in the studio and watch how he took the pictures. Later, he let me take pictures. By the end, I did everything. I loved it! I was doing what I loved doing. After my apprenticeship, to get a degree I had to complete a graduation exercise in a studio where I had never learned. To work as a professional photographer I had to have this degree. I took the test and I passed it, but before I received the degree the Hungarian Revolution started and I left Hungary.

My parents in Budapest after the war.

My family in Budapest after the war in Rezso and Tusi's apartment.

From the left: Gyogyo, Rudy, Judy, Laci (Judy's father), my father, Rezso, Tusi, my mother, Erika.

This is one of my first attempts at photography. I developed it at night in our kitchen.

Me just before the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.

I took this portrait of Rudy shortly before we escaped from Hungary.

Me in our apartment after the war. The beautiful bookcase was filled with books from Uncle Rudolph's store. I believe I am reading a German photography journal.

ESCAPE DURING THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION

The Hungarian Revolution, which lasted from October 23 until November 10, 1956, was a student lead revolution against the Hungarian People's Republic and its Soviet imposed policies. The revolt spread quickly across Hungary, and the government collapsed. Rebels installed Imre Nagy as premier. Initially appearing open to negotiating a withdrawal of Soviet forces, Russia soon changed its mind and moved to crush the revolution. On November 4, Soviet forces invaded Budapest. Over 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet troops were killed in the conflict, and 200,000 Hungarians fled as refugees. The Soviets executed Nagy.

In 1956 the Russian army was still occupying Hungary, but they were very lax by this time. The Hungarian Communists now had complete control. The Hungarian Secret Police were feared and hated. The revolution began with students attacking a police station and taking the guns. After cutting all the telephone lines, the students were able to surprise the other police stations and take more guns. The Russian army packed up and left. That is when mob violence took over. There was a siege at the Secret Police headquarters in Budapest. There was shooting back and forth. The police could not handle the mob. The rebels stormed the headquarters and what they did to the Secret Police is not to be believed: People were hanging from lampposts, they were hanging upside down with cigarette butts in their eyes, with bullet holes right through them.

Dead bodies were all over the place. It was difficult to see the aftermath. I wasn't there when it actually happened, but I was there shortly afterward. Very close to where we lived was a bread factory — not just a bakery, but a big factory. They sold bread very early in the morning. I would go to the bakery at the crack of dawn, stand on line, get some bread, and take it home. That day, I had extra, so I decided to take the extra to Tusi and Frida. Walking to their apartment took me past the building where the Secret Police headquarters was. It was not a pretty scene.

The rebels were successful and Hungary declared itself a neutral country. The Russians asked the leader of the new Hungarian government to come to Moscow for talks. He went to Moscow and they hung him, just like that, immediately. Then there was no leader of Hungary. The people had just a few rifles and handguns, but the Russians came back with tanks and machine gun artillery. Budapest was shot up and destroyed once again. They just blasted it to pieces. Radio Free Europe kept saying, "Hold on one more day. Help is coming." Help never came. The revolution was put down. There were two or three days while this was happening that the border was very chaotic and not guarded well — that is when my brother and I escaped.

Our escape started when my brother's friend Peter's apartment got a direct hit from a canon. He couldn't stay there anymore, so he stayed with us and his mother stayed someplace else. She must have had some connections because one morning, very early, we got a telephone call,

"If the boys want to leave, there will be a truck in front of the building in five minutes. They have to be on it." The decision was made in not even five minutes. It was very fast and very impulsive. We were in bed, all three of us in the same bed. We jumped up, put our pants on, barely said goodbye to our parents, and ran downstairs. There was a truck, a Hungarian army truck. We got on, laid down in the back, and they put us under a canvas tarp. The drivers were Hungarian soldiers; they had papers, we did not. Because there were road blocks, it took us two days to get to the border. At one road block there were two tanks with machine guns facing each other on opposite sides of the street. Our driver pulled over and said, "Very quickly get off the truck and go into the forest. Go around the checkpoint. We will pick you up on the other side." We ran into the woods and went around the checkpoint — not knowing if they were going to pick us up or not. They did wait; they were very decent people. They picked us up and took us to a little town near the Hungarian-Austrian border. They took us to a peasant's house and told him why we were there. The peasant gave us food and put us in bed. We were in a very nice room with a big quilt. He woke us at three o'clock in the morning and said it was time to go. He walked us out to the corn field. The corn was already harvested, but the stalks were still there. It was pitch black. He had us look into the distance where we could faintly, faintly, see a watchtower. Then we looked another way and we could faintly see another watchtower. He said we must go between the towers. He warned us that every once in a

while they would shoot up flares and it would become lit up almost like daylight and when that happened we must hit the ground and not move because they would shoot us. We were still in Hungary. We started walking. We were tripping because we couldn't see what was under our feet. The next thing we knew, there were flashlights and the Hungarian border police were yelling, "Stop!" What were we going to do? They had guns. They wanted our money; we didn't have any. They took our watches then let us go. We walked some more and we were stopped again, only this time it was the Austrian police, what a relief! We were not in Hungary anymore.

For months our parents had no idea if we made it or if we didn't. We couldn't call them and tell them we were okay because the Communists would have punished them if they had knowledge of our escape. This way, when the Communists looked for us, my parents could honestly say, "They went out one day and never came back. We don't know where they are or what happened to them. We are worried, but we don't know where they are."

The Austrians took us to a refugee camp where they fed us and kept us overnight. In the morning they put us on a train to a refugee camp in Salzburg, Austria. We were in that refugee camp for maybe a few weeks. The camp was very crowded. We had to stand in line to get our meals. After breakfast, I had to get back on the end of the line to

wait for lunch. I got tired of it. I got very sick — of course I faked it. They took me to the sick bay which was fantastic. I had a bed, I had what to eat, they served me my meals. I would take the thermometer and rub it with my hands to show I had a high fever. When they finally figured that out, they threw me out.

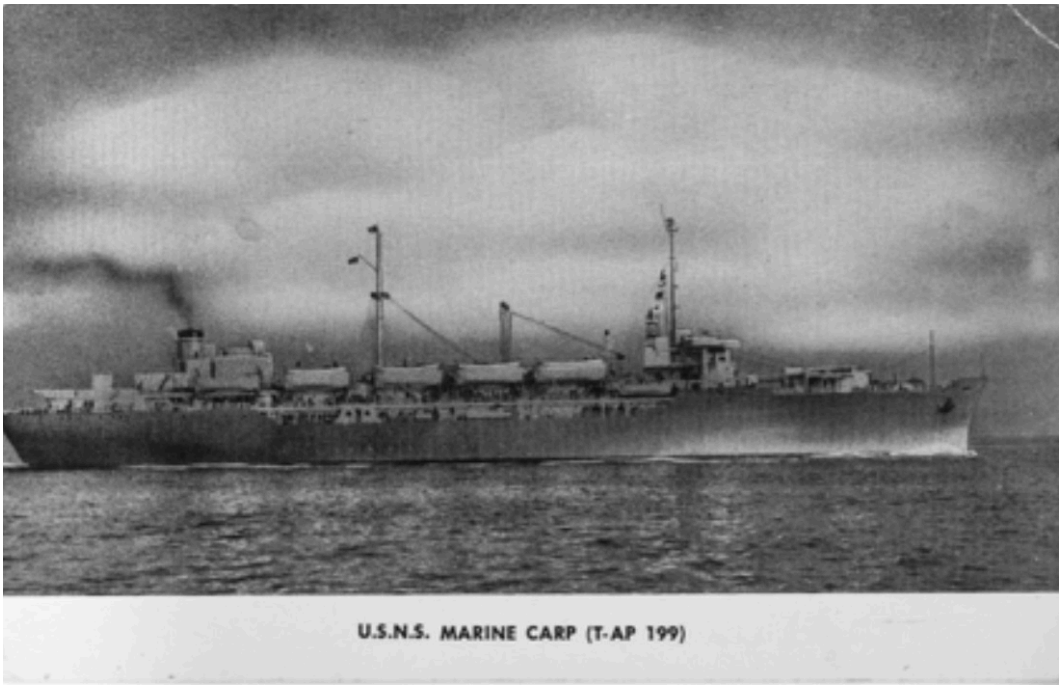
We had to get papers. My brother decided, along with Peter, to go to the American Embassy in Vienna. We had no money, nothing, so I gave him my gold necklace which he sold and bought two train tickets. My brother stayed with a very distant relative in Vienna. He sent me a postcard saying I should come to Vienna. I had no money for a train ticket so I just got on the train — what were they going to do to me, throw me off? I got off the train in Vienna and came out of the station on one of Vienna's main thoroughfares, Mariahifler Strasse. It was Christmas time. The street was lit up for Christmas like I had never seen in my life. I had an address and I could speak the language, but I said to myself, "There is no way I am going there until I walk down this street." I walked down the whole length of the street looking in the windows and at the lights. It was just incredible. I found the address and my brother and I were together again.

Through the International Refugee Committee and the American Embassy we got in touch with my father's brother, Uncle Louis, in the United States. We asked him to sponsor us and our friend. His reply came back, "I have no idea who this boy is. I am not interested in sponsoring

him." So we got papers for America and Peter went to Australia or New Zealand. He passed away about ten years later. When we lived under the communist system we didn't even dare to dream that we would ever live in America. It was just too farfetched. I never even thought about it until we were out of Hungary and in Austria getting in touch with my uncle.

We left Bremerhaven, Germany, on December 20, 1956 on the U.S.S. General Leroy Eltinge, an old United States Navy troop carrier. We had never seen an ocean before; we knew about it, but we had no concept of what the ocean was. The voyage would be miserable, quite miserable. We were in a cabin with probably 150 young Hungarian guys. We slept in swinging beds, stacked three in a row. The first night, we took off our shoes, put them on the floor, and climbed into our swinging canvas beds. The ship left the harbor and everything was fine — until there was a storm. All of a sudden the horizon was up there and then it was down there and then everyone was puking their guts out. All the shoes went from one end of the cabin to the other all night long. The whole next day everybody was throwing shoes at each other — it was quite a scene! When the announcement came that everyone had to be up on deck for the life station drill, I was so seasick I said, "There is no way I can get out of this bed." They said I had to go. I said, "I'm not going." My brother who was not as sick as me kept me alive feeding me oranges. We were in a storm for practically eleven days. The ship had to alter course to get out of the storm.

There was plenty of food on the ship. It was served military style — we had to take a tray, walk in a line by the kitchen which was just a long narrow opening, and they shoved food at us. They gave us something white, soft like a brioche, and said it was bread. We looked at it and said, "This is not bread. Bread is crusty, rough, crunchy, delicious." We had never seen white bread in our lives. The smell that came out of the kitchen made me sick immediately. When we finally arrived at the Brooklyn Navy Yard on December 31, I got off the ship and swore I would never, ever get on a ship again.



U.S.N.S. MARINE CARP (T-AP 199)

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We were in a cabin with 150 Hungarian men. We slept in swinging beds, stacked three in a row.

The ship carried 1,747 Hungarian refugees, including 1,500 single men.

My father's brother, Louis, sponsored us to come to the United States.

LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

From the ship they took us by bus to Camp Kilmer in New Jersey. It was a military camp that was being used as a refugee camp. The first time I ever saw television was at Camp Kilmer. There was a big room where people sat and watched TV all day long. I saw this show, *Mr.* Ed — the talking horse. Of course I didn't understand one word of English and I couldn't understand the idea behind it, but I said to myself, "What kind of a country did I come to where people believe a horse can talk?" It was very interesting to me that America watched this — a horse talking! It just shows how green I was.

My brother and I tried to get in touch with Uncle Louis, but we couldn't reach him. The Red Cross would not let us out of the camp until somebody came to vouch for us or until we had a job. Since we couldn't get in touch with Uncle Louis, I got a job with a photographer in Brooklyn. He came and took me out of the camp and put me up for the night in the Hotel St. George. The St. George was one of the tallest buildings in Brooklyn overlooking Manhattan. My jaw dropped open! The lights in the office buildings were left on all night — I had never seen anything like it. In the morning I did not go to work for the photographer — I was already out of the camp — I went to find Uncle Louis. I had Uncle Louis' address: 96th Street just off of Central Park West.

Somebody gave me a subway token, told me to go to the station which was in the hotel's basement, take the train that said Uptown, and get off on 96th Street. I had this little token and I had no idea what to do with it. I saw people go to this little booth, get something, then throw it in the turnstile. So I took my token to the little booth gave it to the man, and he shoved it back to me. My English was non-existent, I did not know one word. I thought, "Okay, this is it." I threw the token in and got on the train. I had no idea if I was on the right train. I watched the stations zipping by and I wondered how I would get off. What did people do? I saw the emergency brake and I thought if I saw 96th I would pull it. Luckily, 96th Street was an express stop. I walked up to the street and had no idea where to go. I didn't see any street signs, nothing. I thought, "What a crazy country — how do people know where they are?" I was looking and looking and couldn't figure it out until I saw signs on the corners of buildings. I found 96th Street, I found his building, and I rang the bell.

He opened the door and I said, "I am your nephew." There were no hugs or kisses; it was just glad you are here, how did you find me, and so on. In the apartment were a huge dog named Bobby and a young man named Tony, whom Uncle Louis introduced as a friend. I was so naive that it did not occur to me that there might be a relationship there.

Uncle Louis gave me some money and said, "You have a hotel room, go back there for the night." Tony took me to the subway station, put me on the train, and told me where to get off. I got off at the right station, but I could not recognize anything. So I started walking around until I found the tallest building and I figured that must be the hotel. The next morning Uncle Louis picked me up and we went to Camp Kilmer to get my brother.

Uncle Louis asked us if we wanted to have a place of our own or if we wanted to live with him. I thought, "Why would I want a place of my own — I'm a kid?" We said we would live with him. His apartment was a one-room studio apartment. My uncle slept in one bed with Tony; my brother and I slept in the other bed with the huge dog between us. Soon it became impossible for all of us to live in a studio apartment. My uncle was not rich, he was a lithographer doing etching on stones from which prints were made, but he was able to afford a two bedroom apartment on 100th Street and West End Avenue where we could all stay together. I got a job as a messenger delivering a photographer's pictures to clients, and my brother got a job working the night shift at an envelope factory. My uncle couldn't take it that my brother was going to bed when he was leaving for work. Trouble started right away. Every weekend my brother and I had to clean the apartment. Here we were, an old guy set in his ways, and two young kids who had never cleaned anything before.

When I opened the window to shake out the dust rag he yelled at me, "You can't do that in America!" I wondered, "What do you do with it here?" Uncle Louis did the cooking. He was a miserable cook. My brother and I had to wash the dishes. I didn't mind, but my brother hated it. My uncle and my brother never got along. One night, Rudy went into the kitchen, took all the dishes, let them go, and they all fell and shattered. Pretty soon my brother left for school. I knew I couldn't stay there much longer. I moved to Brooklyn and lived in the basement apartment of a little two-family house. I had one room with a tiny kitchenette.

I got a job as an assistant to a fashion photographer whose main business was ladies' lingerie. Imagine! I was 20 or 22 years old surrounded by all these gorgeous women running around in their underwear. I remember one day they were shooting some panties. There were these gorgeous girls in little skimpy panties standing in front of the camera when I saw a label sticking out. I went to the photographer and pointed and shyly whispered, "Label." He said, "Go fix it." My hands were shaking as I tucked in that label.

I then went to work in the darkroom processing pictures for a food photographer named Midori. I was there for a year when I said to him, "My parents are coming and I would like to have my vacation at this time. And when I come back can I please have a raise?" He didn't say anything. So, I went on vacation and when I got back there was somebody in the darkroom doing my job. My parents were coming and I was unemployed. I had to find a job.

When my parents reached retirement age they were no longer of use to the communist system. Actually, they would be a burden because the Communists would have to pay them pensions. When they agreed to not take their pensions, they were free to leave the country. They were not allowed to bring anything with them, nothing, just the clothes on their backs. My mother wanted to take her pillow with her, but at the border they took it away from her because it was goose down and goose down was a Hungarian national treasure. My parents went to Vienna and waited until I could arrange papers for them. When my parents first arrived in the United States, they stayed with Uncle Louis. After a very few days, my father pleaded to me, "Get me the hell out of here!" When my landlord let me have the little room behind the room I was living in, my parents came to live with me.

I got a job as a portrait photographer with a company that sent photographers all over the country to take pictures for college yearbooks. The company paired me with another photographer, Joe Korn, a young man who had a car. They gave us a map and a ton of equipment and sent us to Ohio. Joe Korn turned out to be totally incapable. I had to find another job. The studio where I used to work for Midori had a second photographer named Joe Singer. When Joe Singer decided to go out on his own, he hired me to work nights doing all his processing. I had a day job doing portrait photography at Lorstan Studio on 86th Street during the day, and a third job doing darkroom work for a studio in SOHO on Saturdays.

After a couple of years, Joe Singer hired me as his assistant and much later let me get behind the camera. He had two kitchens so we started running two camera sets doing very intricate setups. The clients were not so sure about me, so they would ask him to check my setups before I shot the picture. He would go behind the camera — it had a big black cloth — and say, "That glass back there — move it a little to the right, bring it back a little, a touch to the left. Okay. Now you can shoot." It was always back in the same place where I put it, but the clients were happy. I was with him for well over six years.

Joe Singer developed cancer and he was gone. When his widow refused to offer me a partnership, I told her, "There are bookings for three months in advance. I will take care of them for you, but then I will leave." Those three months gave me enough time to talk to every one of the clients and tell them where I would be working.

I didn't have money to start a studio, so I called Joe Korn and said, "Joe, how would you like to open up a photography business? For $10,000 you will be a partner." He gave me the money and I rented a studio, borrowed some equipment, and I was in business. From day one I didn't have a free day. Practically all of Singer's clients came to me. I told Joe I would do the photography and he would do the darkroom work. Joe was hopeless. I could not show his work to clients. Finally, I told him I would do the darkroom work and he could do the paperwork. Our system was that every job had an envelope and all bills

pertaining to that job would go into that envelope. Everything we did was written on the front of the envelope: the number of pictures we did, the time we spent on the job, and all the charges. Joe decided to take all the envelopes with a whole month's receipts home to work on them — and he left them on the subway. They were gone! That was the end of it; I couldn't do business with him anymore. I gave Joe his money back and from that moment on I was on my own.

I had a 4,000 square foot loft studio on 30th Street between 5th Avenue and Broadway. It had two kitchens. I had the most fabulous cooks in the world in my studio every day. I worked with almost everybody in the food business. I worked with advertising agencies, hotel chains, and package designers. I did billboards and cookbooks. I did the pictures that went on the front of the packages and cans in the supermarket.

(There was a tremendous amount of work when the ruling came out that packages had to have nutritional information on the labeling.) I did advertising, high-end, for fancy magazines like *Women's Day* and *Better Homes and Gardens*. I did cover photos and inside spreads. The creative work came when we had a magazine spread like a Thanksgiving spread. They would give me a big platter of turkey and a big platter of mashed potatoes, and a big platter of vegetables and I would make a picture out of it. I had to do the flowers, the napkins, the silverware, the candles, everything.

Truckloads of groceries arrived at my studio every day. None of it was ever picked up by the client. There was tremendous waste. Switzerland's Cheese Association was my client. I will never forget the day we had this wheel of cheese standing on its edge with the whole set built in front of it. The lights were blazing on this cheese when all of a sudden, because it got soft, this big huge 160 pound wheel of cheese collapsed and smashed everything underneath it! We had to set it all up again with another wheel of cheese. I had hundreds of pounds of cheese left in my studio. When General Foods needed a picture of a cake with a slice cut out of it, they sent me five cakes, all beautifully decorated. I was giving cakes away to everybody. When the California Avocado Board wanted one picture of half an avocado with the hole filled with caviar, they sent me cases of avocados and fourteen big jars of Russian caviar.I ate every morsel of the caviar.

I was the ice cream king! I did a tremendous amount of ice cream work. Photographing ice cream is incredibly difficult. On one job, I had to do the pictures that went on the front of the ice cream containers. The pictures had to be absolutely identical, but with a different flavor of ice cream on each one. There were eight or ten different flavors, chocolate, vanilla, Neapolitan.... I had eight freezers lined up, each set at a different temperature because each flavor had a different melting point. I had an assistant who did nothing but scoop the ice cream and lay it over a styrofoam ball in the serving dish. It was scoop — garbage, scoop — garbage.... Finally she would say, "I've got one!" There was no time for me to focus the camera — just click.

Taking a picture of a hamburger was an incredible production. First I had to have the perfect hamburger bun. To get the perfect hamburger bun I needed three or four cases of hamburger buns — this one is dented a little bit here, that one is not quite even, this one has too few sesame seeds on top. The hamburger patty had to be just the right brownness. Then the lettuce had to go under it with a tweezer. The sauce went on with an eyedropper — just on the right place — not too much, not too little. Then, just before I shot it, everything had to be oiled with a little brush so it was nice and glistening and fresh looking. Hours of work to do a hamburger! To put a cup of coffee into a set I would use a hypodermic needle to add a little air bubble into it so it would look freshly poured. I still have my case of tweezers and scissors and eye droppers and brushes and hypodermic needles.

I was very well-known in the business; I had my studio for 40 years. It they wanted to have the job done, they came to me. If they wanted to spend a million dollars, they went to the stars. They were the stars and I was the workhorse. That was fine with me.

A photographer in New York named Laszlo Stern and I met quite by accident. His studio was Laszlo Stern Studio and my studio was Laszlo Studio, Inc. One day, I received a sizable check made out to Laszlo Studio from a corporation who was not my client. So I called Laszlo Studio, Inc. One day, I received a sizable check made out

to Laszlo Studio from a corporation who was not my client. So I called Laszlo and asked him if he was his client. It was. I said, "I have a check here for you, come and get it." He came and got the check and we stayed in touch. Years later, when Laszlo needed a new studio, I sold him half my loft. (He still owns it to this day. I sold mine a long time ago; I wish I hadn't.) We had our studios next to each other and we both were named Laszlo — it confused everybody. I did food and he did products — things like toothpaste and shampoo. His big client was Colgate Palmolive. He is an unbelievable photographer — beautiful, beautiful work. Laszlo and I are now working on a photography project together at the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach. He is also a Holocaust survivor.

I still thought about being a movie cameraman, so I went to NYU Film School in an evening course. Four or five of us had to get together and produce a film as a requirement for graduation. The only film I ever made was for this graduation project. I did not pursue a career in movies because I didn't want to leave a successful business to do something that was very iffy. I had to support my parents; I didn't want to take a chance.

By that time my parents and I were living on 74th Street and Columbus Avenue in a rent-controlled, one bedroom apartment. My parents slept in the bedroom and I slept on a pullout couch in the living room. We lived very nicely. Then, my father developed cancer. It was a rough time. They removed one kidney, but that didn't help. He was in

pain. He just went down. He was in his 70's when he died. Then I was living with my mother.

I was a food photographer, but I had models, I was in the star business! The models would show me their pictures and I would say, "These are not good, I can do better for you. Come to my studio on Saturday and I will do pictures for you." I didn't charge them; I learned from it. I could experiment and have fun. By that time I had some money, I had a car, I was going out with beautiful girls — things were good. There was one girl who broke my heart. We were talking about a life together when I discovered she had a boyfriend. I was very angry and emotional. I was working on a cookbook at the time and for the seafood section the client wanted pictures of fishing boats at a pier. The printer I worked with invited me to his house on Long Beach Island, New Jersey, saying he would show me the fishing boats. The place was beautiful. I asked him, "What does a little house cost here?"

We went to a real estate agent who showed us a small, two bedroom house just three houses from the beach. I made a deal with the owner then went home and said to my mother, "I just bought a house." At that time I was renting a place in Vermont every winter and went skiing every Friday. My clients all knew there was no overtime on Fridays because at 5 o'clock I got in my car and went skiing. I always thought that if I ever had money I would have a ski house. Now I had a house on the beach. It was an emotional decision.

Driving over the 59th Street Bridge, on the way to pick up the stewardess I was dating, I saw apartment buildings going up on Roosevelt Island with brand-new, big, spacious, sunny, apartments overlooking Manhattan from every window. There was a swimming pool, a health club... I thought it would be fantastic to live there. My banker said I should get an apartment in the city instead. My attorney said, "Don't touch it! This is not something you want!" I thought, "Why do I listen to these people? I'm the one who will live there. I love the place," so I signed the deal. I also bought a studio apartment across the street for my mother.

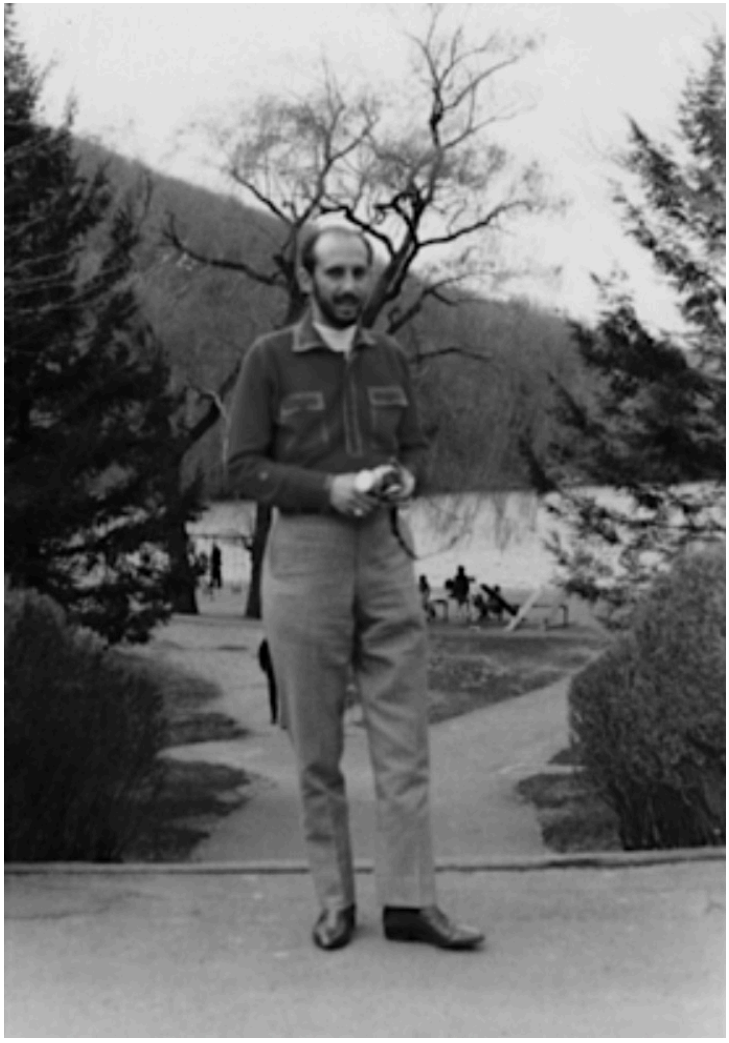
My cousin, Judy, my mother's sister's daughter, kept bugging me to go with her to visit Hungary. I said I would go for a week. While I was there I met a beautiful girl who knocked my socks off. We wined and dined and had a wonderful time. I returned to America and we began towrite to each other. I sent an official invitation for her to come to America for a visit so we could get to know one another. The Hungarian government, which was communist, refused to let her go. Me, being a hot-headed, stupid Hungarian, said, "I'm going back there and I will bring her out. If I marry her, they can't say no." We married and she came to New York. It was the biggest mistake of my life.

After several very, very difficult years, we got divorced. My ex-wife stayed in the apartment and I moved to a furnished

studio apartment in Manhattan. Because of legal restrictions on the Roosevelt Island building, I was not able to sell the apartment for over 40 years. I should have listened to my attorney.

My parents in New York.

With my first car. I loved that car!



In New York holding my camera.

Photographing ice cream is incredibly difficult.

I worked with advertising agencies, hotel chains, and package designers. I did billboards and cookbooks and covers for fancy magazines.

MY FAMILY

Once again, my cousin Judy introduced me to a woman who would become my wife. Gail came to my studio, we had a glass of wine, we talked. I took her home and that was it. I was always very friendly with my clients; I would sometimes invite them to my house on Long Beach Island. One weekend I invited a couple, but then I thought, "I am alone, they are a couple, maybe that is awkward." So I called Gail and said, "I have a little house down in Long Beach Island, how would you like to come for the weekend and be a hostess? I'll take care of the cooking and everything." She said yes. We drove down together, and that was it! By the time we got there we were a couple and we have stayed that way. Gail and I dated for seven years before we got married. Our wedding was in Marco Island, Florida, on January 3,1996. We had a nice dinner with friends, then went to bed. At two o'clock in the morning Gail woke me saying, "I am very sick. Take me to the hospital." We spent our wedding night in the hospital. I tell her that on my wedding night I almost became a widower. Gail was fine.

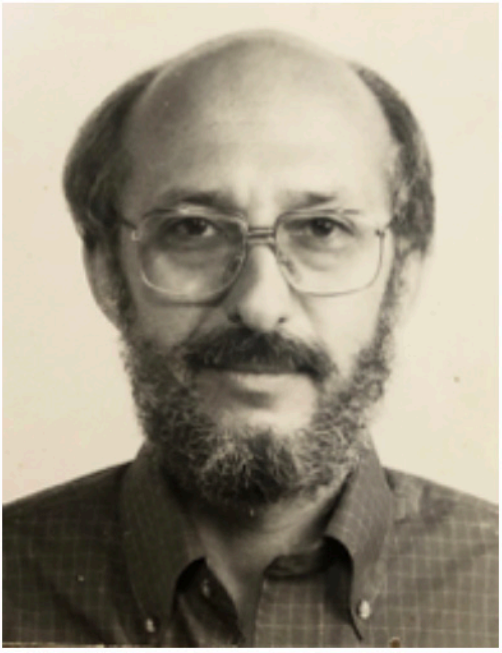
Gail and I eventually moved into the Roosevelt Island apartment. My mother was still living in the apartment across the street. I would take her to the theater, to shows. I would take her and Gail's mother to the beach house every once in a while. My mother would come over every night and have dinner with Gail and me. One day she got lost walking over. We noticed she had the beginnings of dementia. The dementia started getting bad; soon it was

impossible. We moved her to a nursing home in Connecticut, very close to my brother's house. She was well taken care of there, she was comfortable. My brother and I would visit her, but after a while I don't know if she knew who we were. She passed away there.

I wanted to retire and start a business on Long Beach Island. My house there was too small to live in full time. It was just a weekend house, so we decided to find a lot and build a bigger house. We built a magnificent house; I had a kitchen that was incredible. In the winter Long Beach Island emptied out — it was just the seagulls, the fishermen, and us. I loved it, but Gail found it too quiet, too cold, too lonely. So, I retired, we sold the house, and moved to Florida. We now live near Gail's sons Oren and Jason Port and their families. Oren and his wife, Jill, have three children: Drew, Aubrey, and Sammy. Jason and his wife, Lisi, have three children: Stephen, Michael, and Jonathan. I think of those children as my own.

With my wife, Gail.

My wife and wonderful grandchildren! Mikey, Jonathan, Stevie, Gail, Sammy, Drew, Aubrey.



My brother, Dr. Rudolph Sellei, and me.
Even though Rudy and I went through everything together, as we put our memories together, we sometimes argue, "It happened this way." "No, it happened that way." It was a long time ago and we were very young.

MY LIFE TODAY

Although I am retired, I still have my passion for photography. It is in the creation — to look at a picture and say I did it and I know what I did to achieve it. When I worked professionally I worked with film and lots of equipment. Now, I will sit at my computer and work for hours using programs to manipulate a photo to my liking. The technique is very different, but the end result is the same. I love working with the computer; it is fascinating. There is new stuff coming out every day. I am constantly learning. I look at other photographers' work and at tutorials online. As I follow the tutorials I say to myself, "That is a good idea! I can try that!" I never thought of myself as a good student, my brother was the good student, but I guess I am a good student of something that interests me. It surprises me that at this age I am still learning and finding I can do things I never thought I could do.

I never thought I would speak publicly about the Holocaust. For over seventy years I never spoke to anyone other than my brother about my experience in the Holocaust. Before I went on the March of the Living in 2017, I was not at all part of the Holocaust survivor community. Now I am. I definitely opened myself up to new people and new feelings. I found a kinship with people that have something in common with me.

On the March I met Peter Tarjan for the first time and discovered that we were both in Wallenberg safe houses in Budapest, and that we came to America on the same ship. When he spoke and when other survivors spoke, I understood where they were coming from. It was like being with old friends although I didn't even know them very well. It is very nice.

Now I speak to groups of students and teachers and participate in Holocaust education projects. Talking about my experience gives me a little purpose — I feel I might be doing something useful. I don't want the Holocaust to be forgotten, and I know if we don't speak out about it and teach about it, it will be. Perhaps this is my way of paying back — I'm not sure for what — maybe for surviving.

ABOUT THE WRITER

I began writing for Holocaust survivors in the 1990's when survivors I met on The March of the Living asked me for help writing about their feelings on returning to Poland for the first time. Later, survivors I interviewed for Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation asked me for help writing down all the things they did not speak about in their interview. Soon, other survivors began approaching me seeking help writing a book about their experiences in the Holocaust. I met with the survivors, recorded our numerous conversations, organized and wrote the stories in the survivors' own words, printed the books, and then handed the books to the survivors as my gift to them. The books were written solely for the survivors and their families; they were never intended for publication. They are being published now because my friends, Carol and Jaime Suchlicki, recognizing their historical value as first-person testimony, introduced me to Dr. Haim Shaked to discuss finding a wider audience for the books.

Thank you to Dr. Haim Shaked director of the Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies at the University of Miami for agreeing to publish the books and for your guidance and patience as we worked together on this project.

I am grateful to the March of the Living for introducing me to the world of Holocaust education and finding a role for me in it.

Thank you to the Shoah Foundation for choosing me to be an interviewer and for mentoring me through more than thirty interviews of Holocaust survivors. Your training led me to do the work I do today.

Thank you to the Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach for encouraging the docents at the memorial to work with me to write their memoirs. I appreciate your confidence in me and your respect for my work.

Thank you to the my dear Holocaust survivors for sharing your most painful as well as your most joyful memories with me. Thank you for answering questions that no one should ever have to ask or answer. Thank you for trusting me to write your memoirs accurately and respectfully. It has been my honor and pleasure to work with you.

—Bobbi Kaufman

"We heard stories about what the Nazis were doing to the Jews in Poland and Austria, but because Hungary was aligned with Germany we said, 'It can't happen here.' When the Nazis marched into Hungary in 1944 we said, 'It is okay as long as we do what they say. What more can they do?"

— Laszlo Selly

In 1944 Laszlo's family was forced into a designated Jewish house, known as a Yellow Star House, in the Budapest Ghetto. From their window, Laszlo watched thousands of Jews being marched down the street to the trains to Auschwitz. When Laszlo's father obtained a Raoul Wallenberg certificate of protection, the family moved to a so-called safe house. From there Laszlo listened to the screams as Jews were murdered on the banks of the Danube River.

After liberation, Laszlo and his twin brother completed their education in Hungary under intense communist indoctrination. The brothers escaped from Hungary during the 1956 Revolution and made their way to New York Laszlo where became a successful photographer, a profession he studied in Hungary.

There is a concept in Judaism of a positive commandment, something that is time dependent, something that must be done *now*. One must, accordingly, applaud this important effort by the Miller Center and Feldenkreis Program of the University of Miami to collect and publish Holocaust survivors' memoirs as there will soon—too soon—come a time when the last survivors will be no longer. Sadly, tragically, this testimony is not only urgent but timely because the world in which we live echoes their world and the quality of their witness. The very nature of their survival has much to teach today's generations. One must express gratitude for this project and in the sagacious words of Hillel say: "If not now, when?"

Dr. Michael Berenbaum
Professor of Jewish Studies
American Jewish University
Former President and CEO
Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation
(Now USC Shoah Foundation Institute)