APRIL FOOL'S DAY

By Sharon Weisz

April Fool's Day, for most a day of pranks and bad jokes, was a serious holiday in my house while growing up. It commemorated the day in 1945 when 22-year-old Claire Schonfeld, along with other female prisoners, woke up under a canopy of trees to an earthquake-like vibration. Their Nazi captors, who had led them from the munitions factory in Lippstadt, Germany into the woods the night before, had fled, replaced by a long formation of trucks and tanks bearing red, white and blue flags. The American army was coming up the road. Mom would say that it was the first time in her life she had ever seen a Black man, and that the shocked, but very kind, soldiers handed out food, chocolate and even cigars, which, of course, made some of the emaciated women quite ill. This was liberation.

As a child, I remember waking up in the middle of the night to the sound of my mother crying. She never explained what had upset her, just like she never explained the scar in the middle of her forearm. I just always knew something bad had once happened to Mommy. I also knew not to ask.

Over many years, I would piece together the breadcrumbs of her story that began with "eat your vegetables, I had to eat potato peels" to fully understand the saga that started with a long train ride home from dressmaking school in Budapest to her hometown of Munkacs, Czechoslavakia, now Ukraine, in May, 1944, to the deportation of her entire family to the ghetto in her cousin's family's brick factory to the endless, terrifying train ride to that selection platform in Auschwitz that resulted in immediate death for dozens of her family members. She watched helplessly as her oldest sister Serene refused to leave their mother when she was sent in a different direction than she and her sister Hanna. She would never see them again.

Assigned to a barracks and a job working in the kitchens, she could sometimes steal potato peels to bring back to her starving relatives. By the end of that year, she didn't know where Hanna was, and in a fit of hopelessness, she headed for the electrified barbed wire fence, ending up in the infirmary for her trouble. On January 4, 1945, she

was transferred to the work camp in Lippstadt, under the auspices of Buchenwald concentration camp, just a few weeks before the death march from Auschwitz began.

While under the protection of the U.S. Army, Mom befriended an American army chaplain, who helped her find out that her sister Hanna was still alive after being liberated by the British army at Bergen Belsen. He agreed to take her there, where she found her sister barely alive. She kept in touch with that chaplain for many years afterwards. Mom and Hanna made it to Prague, and with the help of the Red Cross, my Great-Uncle Al was able to make contact with them and, subsequently, make arrangements for their emigration to the United States. Of dozens of family members, he was only able to locate and sponsor five who were still alive. It was no wonder that the first thing on which Mom spent her earnings as a dressmaker in New York was the painful removal of her souvenir from Auschwitz—her tattoo. She bore that burn scar for the rest of her life. That was liberation.

My Dad, Alex Weisz, the youngest of four, was raised in Romania to inherit the family farm. In 1938, his oldest brother Leslie received a letter from an old friend who had made a new life for himself in Nicaragua, urgently beckoning him and my Aunt Stefi to come there. It ended with the chilling words: *You must leave. Europe will burn*. Because Dad was a bachelor, they invited him to join them on this journey. My uncle Andrew was married with a child, so he stayed behind with their parents.

The three departed from Southampton, England on the *Queen Mary*, first disembarking in Punta Arenas, Costa Rica, then traveling to Nicaragua. The climate and the working conditions there were brutal, so they returned to the port to reembark the *Queen Mary* when she came back through the Panama Canal, bound for New York. On September 1, 1939, while on board the ship, Germany invaded Poland, and World War II began. The trio's U.S. entry visas were declared invalid, and they were detained on Ellis Island to await deportation back to Romania.

Unlike others, they had money and valuables and were able to apply for entry to Canada by promising to buy a farm to help the war effort there. On New Year's Day, 1940, my father, uncle and aunt entered Canada and bought the farm in Niagara Falls on the border between their new country and the one that had summarily rejected them.

They tried to sponsor the emigration of other relatives, but it was already too late. My grandparents, my aunt Anna and my uncle Andrew's family would perish in Auschwitz. Andrew with his second wife Margaret would eventually join his brothers, all becoming Canadian citizens.

How my parents met in New York City remains a mystery. They were 14 years apart in age, but they shared a common language (Hungarian), heritage and heartbreak. When their relationship became serious, Mom basically told Dad that she didn't survive Auschwitz to become a Canadian. When they married in 1949, they bought a farm in New Jersey, raising chickens and selling the eggs.

I was born in 1950 in Lakewood, New Jersey--now a burgeoning Jewish community--because our hometown of Toms River didn't have a hospital yet. My sister Robin was born two years later. Our rambling farmhouse was the social center of family life for our seemingly abundant collection of relatives from parts west and north, particularly when the nearby Jersey Shore was teeming with summer activity. Other weekends, we would make the two-hour drive to New York City, always arriving via the Westside Highway to pay homage to the MS Gripsholm, the Swedish-American luxury liner that had brought Mom to the United States after the war. If the great ship was in dock, she would retell the story as if it was a grand romantic tale.

The reality was harsher. Aunt Hanna's fragile emotional state resulted in frequent hospitalizations in mental institutions such as Bellevue, causing Mom to then reveal little pieces of information about their war experiences. After we all moved to Los Angeles, there were times when I too had to venture past the locked doors of Camarillo State Hospital and the psych ward at County USC to check on my aunt's welfare after one of her episodes.

Mom's own coping mechanism was to disappear, sometimes for only the length of a neighborhood double feature, but sometimes for days. Dad's idea of coping was to wait until I was in my 30's to even share his story because, while harrowing, he didn't think it was as horrible as Mom's. Liberation comes in many forms. This was basic survival.

One day, I heard about a seminar for children of Holocaust survivors, before the term Second Generation came into use, and I told Mom I planned to attend. She insisted that she pay the nominal fee because, after all, this was her "fault." Helen Epstein's *Children of the Holocaust*, published in 1979, gave me a better understanding of what I had experienced my entire life. Finally, there was a name for it, and I knew I wasn't alone.

In 1993, my sister and I took Mom on a "roots" trip to the places of her youth—Budapest, Vienna, Prague, Dad's hometown of Sarkoz and nearby Satu Mare and her hometown of Munkacs. She drew the line at visiting Auschwitz, so Robin and I did that on our own. Looking at our photos after, her only comment was that there had been no trees when she was there. The trip was fortuitous because four months later she had a massive stroke that left her paralyzed on the left side. Despite her limitations, she sat for an interview for Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation and finally told her story, leaving it behind for her grandchildren. This was liberation.

Inspired by her courage, I became an interviewer for the Shoah Foundation in an effort to feel connected to her past….and perhaps to connect the dots to my own experiences.