

## THE CENTRAL GHETTO AND THE CHRISTMAS NIGHTMARE

WE ARRIVED at Klauzal Square, within an area known as Zone Seven, or the Central Ghetto—now a ghost town. None of us knew that thousands of Jews had been interned in this area. It was a fenced-in area, completely filled with abandoned apartment buildings. Some of the apartments were damaged from the bombing whereas others were still intact. We saw no people. Dr. Kanizsai instructed us to try and stay together as a group. No living arrangements had been made for any of us.

Dr. Kanizsai went in search of an apartment for us children to sleep in for the night. It was an impossible task. All the apartments had been stripped completely—no furniture, heaters, blankets—absolutely nothing. I had to sleep on the concrete floor. The bathrooms were located outside the building. The stench of the ghetto was atrocious. Worst of all, we had no food or water. I was hungry, tired, and cold. That night, I almost froze to death.

By the next day, I was starving. Everyone spent the day searching for food. That night seemed colder than ever. Through the night, my body shivered and my stomach growled. Dr. Kanizsai continued searching for food.

The following day, I noticed some laborers had come to our area and had set up a table. The Arrow Cross Party had decided to provide us with a bit of something. Everyone rushed to the table, pushing one another to get there first. Dr. Kanizsai called order to the group, instructing everyone to form a line. I received my first cup of extremely bitter black coffee. The coffee was made from barley, not coffee beans. But that didn't matter because the heat from the coffee warmed my hands and my insides. The coffee made me hungrier.

I wished that I had never complained about the bland food from the Red Cross.

After we had our bitter coffee, Dr. Kanizsai informed us that we could no longer stay in the apartment building. More people were expected to enter the ghetto. We sought out shelter again in another abandoned apartment building. We still had no blankets, sheets, or heaters. I searched the building for whatever I could find. Jancsi, the fifth-grade student, and I stumbled on a blanket at the same moment. Jancsi was bigger than I was. I fought him for the blanket. Even though I was in third grade, I was very strong from all my farm work. I held out and won, ending up with one blanket and many cuts and bruises. I would have shared the blanket, but it was small.

That night, I laid my prize on the cold concrete floor, lying on one half and folding the other half over my body. Settled inside the blanket, I reflected on my fight with Jancsi. I now realized the meaning of survival. We were all on our own, and I might have to fight with other Jewish people to make it through, like I had done for the blanket.

Several more days passed, and I was desperate for food and heat. My nerves were on end, my stomach was growling, and my skin burned from the bitter cold. Finally, Dr. Kanizsai found us a permanent place on the cross streets of Wessélenyi Street and Akácfa Street. He was able to get a bit of food, which was really nothing. We did have some water in our apartment though. We took up residency throughout the building in different rooms and on different floors. I was assigned sleeping quarters on the second floor. Dr. Kanizsai and another counselor ordered me to start cleaning the second floor, room by room. The floor was covered with human feces, and we had no hot water with which to clean it up. I had to use cold water, which cleaned the floor but didn't get rid of the smell. When I was done, the counselor brought me lunch. He told Dr. Kanizsai to give me a pat on the back because I had worked very hard. He also suggested that I be given an extra ration of food for my efforts.

A couple days later, the bomb siren went off. Dr. Kanizsai rounded us up, instructing us to head down to the basement. In the

basement, I could feel the violent shaking. It was scary. We were now in the dark because the building had lost its electricity. Once it was safe to come out of the basement, we could see the destruction. The bomb had destroyed the fourth, third, and second floors of the building. We had been saved by going to the basement in more ways than one. While down there, we discovered beds and blankets. Dr. Kanizsai assigned us to separate quarters in the basement. I was relieved and could now rest.

We still had no heat and little food. I began using my previously earned money to buy bread from Christians. One loaf of bread cost one hundred and twenty pengős. I hid some of my money under my mattress, which got stolen. The money for bread lasted for approximately one month.

During these months of November and December 1944, Budapest was in a state of lawlessness. Gangs of Arrow Cross officers roamed the streets, shooting anyone or anything in sight. Everyone was cold and starving, including many of the military men. Food, water, and heat were luxury items. A kilo of bread was worth eighty pengő on the black market. Christian inhabitants sold their goods to the people of the ghetto. My daily breakfast consisted of bitter black coffee. We had no real breakfast, lunch, or dinner. I had to search for food, eating primarily sugar beets and potatoes and, sometimes, animal feed. I even ate old food from the garbage cans and leftovers from the Arrow Cross officers. I constantly reminisced about my earlier days when I had been a picky eater. I vowed to myself that, if I survived, I would eat anything that was offered to me.

Enduring from day to day, just trying to stay alive, I had plenty of time to reflect on the events and people in my life. I wondered what had happened to my school friend, Péter. Although I was unaware of his plight when he had gone home in May, I later learned that around this time period, he had been deported to a concentration camp in the Netherlands named Bergen-Belsen. Both he and his mother had been separated. In the camp, Péter met a teenage boy named Pavel. Pavel could see that Péter was signing frantically as he was searching to find his mother. Pavel was a hearing son of deaf Poles. Pavel saved

Péter's life by telling him not to sign. Pavel knew that if any Fascist guard saw Péter using sign language, Péter would surely be killed.

Weeks passed and I just wanted to die. All my prayers to God seemed to be in vain. The winter was freezing and deadly, and the health of the people worsened. I was fortunate to have received the immunizations from the Red Cross to protect me from the infectious environment. People were weak, sick, and lice-infested. Many had already died. The dead bodies had a putrid smell. As soon as the dead bodies were removed, new ones appeared. Sometimes the bodies would remain a couple of days. Whenever Dr. Kanizsai saw a dead body, he ordered the older children to lift it and take it away. I have no idea where they went, how they disposed of them, or whether or not the bodies were buried or cremated. I began to grow accustomed to the smell. Newcomers were sick to their stomachs when they first entered the ghetto. The only time the smell was wretched to me was when I reentered the ghetto after the Arrow Cross militants had me work in the snow outside the ghetto walls. Then the smell was heightened.

My guess is that more than half the people in the ghetto were ill. Typhus fever was rampant. The lice were out of control and were eating holes through the dying bodies that littered the streets. I tried staying lice-free by bathing in freezing water, but avoiding the lice was next to impossible. Lice eggs covered my jacket. Dr. Kanizsai told me to keep washing my body with cold water and to stay as busy as possible to remain healthy and alive.

I was ready to give up and submit myself to death when I learned that, suddenly and miraculously, food was being provided to anyone who was willing to work. I knew I needed food. Even though I could barely walk, I decided to work. My duty was to clean the streets and tidy up the sleeping quarters of the Arrow Cross officers. The Arrow Cross militants also gave me a variety of other tasks. For my hard work, they gave me a cup of broth (which was really warm water). I wasn't satisfied, but I was glad that I at least had two warm liquids a day. Keeping myself physically active was also important because it kept me from freezing.

The Russian troops began advancing aggressively and were almost on the Pest side of Budapest. The chaotic conditions prevailed among the people. It seemed as though everyone wanted to go into hiding, including soldiers and officers in the Hungarian army. They no longer wanted to obey their new government's orders. They, too, had no more access to water, electricity, and food. Everyone was tired and fed up, and they wanted the war to end.

But the bad conditions turned into a Christmas nightmare. On Christmas Eve, the siege of Budapest began. Eichmann knew that the Russian troops had almost completed surrounding the boundaries of Budapest and that his stronghold was in jeopardy. He set forth his final command to the Nazi troops, ordering them to kill all the Jews in the Central Ghetto before evacuating Budapest. Naturally, none of us knew what was going on. I was barely surviving. On this evening, gunmen broke into a children's home, which was run by the International Red Cross. They shot some of the children and forced others to the banks of the Danube River, throwing them in to freeze and drown.

The rampage wasn't over. On Christmas Day, the Fascists broke into another children's home and shot the children, killing all but the girls. The young Jewish girls were spared from death, but they were assaulted, raped, and then tattooed as whores. After the girls suffered through that treatment, they endured additional violence from the Arrow Cross militants and Nazi gangs.<sup>1</sup> No one was safe. For the next couple of weeks, looting, rape, and murder became commonplace. Food and heat were still not available. When I wasn't doing my duties, I tried to make myself invisible.

By January 11, 1945, a plan was in motion to get rid of all of us Jews in the ghetto. We were to be bombed to death. The Arrow Cross Party began planting the bombs. We could not have escaped, even if we had known what was happening. The many escape fantasies I had entertained since entering the ghetto could not help me now.

Rumors were being spread that the Russians were coming and that, outside the ghetto, wall-to-wall fighting was in progress. Some hearing people told me they saw a couple of Russians peeking in

through the ghetto fencing. I was trying to remain hopeful. For a solid week, I could see the fighting, the bullets flying through the air. I could feel the ground shaking tremendously.

On January 17, the Russians and Americans, independently, were fighting the Arrow Cross and Nazis soldiers on the outer perimeter of the ghetto area. They were closing in. The vibrations from the bombings become more frequent. At night, in the distance, I could see shots being fired that lit up the sky. I had no fear. I had no energy to be scared, and I figured that if a bomb came and I died, so what. I had lost interest in life. I was helpless—unable to move and without any freedom.