



## Esther Basch

Esther was born on May 28, 1928, the only child of Rabbi Moises and Fanny Roth. While Esther's country of birth was Czechoslovakia, the same town of Szolosh was Hungarian when Esther's mother was born there. In fact, it was once again Hungary by the time Esther was 9 or 10 years old. Today, that same town is Vinograd, Ukraine.

The Germans entered the town in early 1944 and, within a few months, Esther and her parents were forced to leave their home and move into the ghetto, a four-square block area located across the street. People were "fed" bread or watery soup once a day and Esther remembers starving. Occasionally, when they could, some Christian neighbors would throw bread over the fence when the guards weren't looking. They remained in the ghetto for six weeks.

On May 23, 1944, Esther, her parents, and others forcibly held in the ghetto were loaded onto a train bound for Auschwitz. They were told that their destination was "a better place." Esther recalls there being about 100 people in her car, standing like sardines, with no food or water available the entire time. On arrival on May 28, which was Esther's sixteenth birthday, half the people were dead.

Once off the train, her father was sent in one direction; she and her mother to another. She was then forcibly separated from her mother, age 50, who was sent to the left; Esther, to the right. She never saw either parent again. During Esther's 3 ½ months in Auschwitz she befriended a girl who was selected for a work assignment. Esther remained in a group that was being reviewed by Josef Mengele, known as the Angel of Death. Just at that time, a heavy metal door fell down and Esther snuck behind it to follow her friend; had she not done so, she would have become part of Mengele's experiments. Instead she was sent to work at an ammunitions factory in Germany.

Esther recalls another occasion when she and Mengele crossed paths. She, along with the others, was in formation when Mengele appeared to make his selection. He held out his silver cane and pointed to those girls he wanted. She thought he was pointing at her and stepped out of line. Forcefully pushing his cane into Esther's belly button, Mengele pushed Esther back into line. Instead, he chose her best friend from grade school. To this day, Esther has nightmares about Mengele and can still feel the pain in her belly button.

In April of 1945, Esther was sent to work at another ammunitions factory, Salswedel, a sub-camp of Neuengamme, located deep in Germany. However, in order to get there, she and others had to take part in a death march, walking for four or five days further into Germany. Upon arrival, she found 3000 women there, including her best friend, whom the kapos had told her was killed.

Three days later, on April 14, 1945, American soldiers came to the gate and shot the lock open. (The Nazis had locked the women in prior to fleeing.) The Americans yelled, "You are free, you are free," but the women didn't understand what was being said. They just saw more men in uniforms and were afraid until a Jewish soldier was able to explain. They were brought to the German area of the camp which held beds and had medicine and food.

After three months, the women were put on trucks and taken to a port where they boarded a ship bound for Prague, then a train to Budapest, where they illegally entered a kibbutz. The leader was Joe, a 21 year old who took charge of 60 children, of whom Esther was one. The plan was for Joe to take them to Palestine, but enroute they went to a Displaced Person (DP) camp in Germany for six months. Esther recalls being served bacon and didn't want to take it, but Joe, further back in the line, said "Take some for me." Since he was the great nephew of the Sapinker Rabbi, Esther figured it was alright to take. Besides, it was the only food being offered. While in the DP camp, which Esther sometimes referred to as a kibbutz, she, now 17, and Joe were married. U.N. and American troops provided Esther and Joe with jackets and gave Esther white cloth to make a wedding blouse. They said a couple should look good on their wedding day. A narrow gold wedding band was provided by the U.N. troops. They were the first in the compound to be married.

Esther soon found herself pregnant so she and Joe were among the first to get to leave. They, with others, were sent by train to France and then boarded a ship bound for Palestine. They were within sight of Haifa when the British intervened and sent the ship to Cyprus. While they were well-fed in the DP camp, they still found themselves behind barbed wire.

They remained there for three months before being in the first group of 100 whom the British admitted to Palestine. It was December, 1946. Three weeks later, Joe and Esther's daughter, Rachel, a Sabra, was born. The family lived in a suburb of Tel Aviv and in May of 1948, Joe held his infant daughter on his shoulders as he and Esther walked into the city to celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut. The next day, Joe entered the war.

Joe had three brothers, all in Israel. One brother worked on a project involving the bomb and died of radioactivity. Joe's father, who lived in the U.S.,

struggled with the loss of a child and urged Joe and his brothers to emigrate. Unable to get a visa, Joe, Esther, and baby Rachel moved to Canada, living in Windsor, Ontario for six years.

Esther said living in North America was a big adjustment, but she did it for Joe's dad. While in Canada, Franny was born in 1953 and Mark 15 months later. In 1958 the family moved to Brooklyn where they owned and operated a movie theatre in Trump City, near Brighton Beach. Son Paul was born in 1963. Today, Esther has eight grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Esther sums up her experience by saying, "I cannot forget but I can forgive because if I don't forgive, then I suffer, and I suffered enough."

Fast forward to 2007 when Esther's long-standing dream was finally brought to fruition. Thanks to daughter Rachel's perseverance, Max Lieber, a member of the 84th Infantry that liberated Esther's camp, was contacted and came from his home in New Mexico to Phoenix to greet Esther and receive her heartfelt thanks for, literally, saving her life. The two embraced and cried for ten minutes. The moment was not lost on Esther's family, all of whom were there for the "reunion." Had it not been for those U.S. troops, none of them would have been born.