Olga Winkler

Wartime Experience: Immigrated to the US

My name is Olga Fendrich Winkler, and by the grace of God, I survived. I was born on August 28, 1926 It all began in the mid-1930's when Adolph Hitler came to power. My mother, Helen Fendrich, my father, Louis Fendrich and five children lived in Satoraljaujhely, Hungary, a city of perhaps 25,000, in a very anti-Semitic country. Elizabeth was the oldest, born in 1923; Michael in 1925; I in 1926; Theodore in 1930; and Gabriella in 1934.

My mother was a dress designer and owned her own shop. Young women helped her sew clothes for the wives of high government officials. The then mayor of the city kept sending messages via his wife to my mother to begin thinking seriously about immigrating, because if Hitler came to power in Germany, the Jews would suffer everywhere. My mother kept repeating these messages to my father who said, "Yes, I know the Hungarians don't like the Jews, but my family has lived here for many generations. I am a citizen, and I don't want to leave my country."

As time passed, we kept listening to the Hitler speeches on the radio and began to see selected Hungarians moving towards more and more violence towards the Jews in our city. There was a Hassidic section where the men of the family were taken first to camps and then disappeared. Many of their homes were burned out.

After a few years, my father realized that we had to begin inquiring about leaving. He had a half-brother who lived in Cleveland, Ohio to whom he had written. He told him we had to leave, and soon! In 1938, in the month of September, one visa arrived, and, of course, it was my father who was slated to go to America, so he could secure visas for the rest of the family.

He was in the wine business in Hungary and did a great deal of traveling in Europe selling his wine. When he was ready to leave, no one suspected that he was not going on a business trip, but rather was leaving for America. He also had two business partners, who were his cousins, who continued to operate the business and only our immediate family knew that he had left for America. My father arrived in Cleveland and took a job washing dishes. He started to visit officials to try to obtain American visas for the rest of his family. He encountered a great deal of red tape and rejections to his requests for getting six more visas for those of us he left behind.

In the meantime, things were getting worse in Europe and in our city. One day my brother, Theodore, came home and told my mother that a non-Jewish friend of the family took him off a truck that picked up Jewish children coming out of Hebrew school. This friend saved him from being kidnapped and said-to be sure to tell our mother. That was when she made plans to leave the city. Eight months after my father left, in April of 1939, a letter arrived from him stating that he was able to secure two American visas and it was to arrive shortly. My mother had the difficult decision of deciding who was going to America next.

By this time, we were being verbally attacked and called "Dirty Jews, why don't you get out of here? If not, we'll take care of you soon." My mother decided that we had to leave the city. She would go to America and take my 14-year-old brother, Michael, so they wouldn't take him to a labor camp, since they were already taking boys his age. Mother would go to work in the U.S. and help my father secure American visas for their remaining four children left behind.

The preparation for leaving the city where I was born and the country to which I felt I belonged, was probably the most traumatic experience of my life. As I reflect back to the night of our departure from the city of my birth, I felt as if we had done something wrong while knowing we were good citizens. As a child I loved my city. It was difficult to understand why we had to close the doors of our home in the middle of the night and leave knowing full well that if we stayed, we most likely would be killed or taken to a labor camp. I will always remember standing in the hail of our house feeling a sadness, knowing that this was forever and I would never again live in this house. We walked with nothing but the layers of clothes on our backs and a few small suitcases.

The train tickets were purchased by my mother late one afternoon while pretending she was out walking. It was a small enough city so that a lot of people knew my mother and by then, many of our neighbors most likely guessed that my father, who had been away for about eight months, would not be returning. My mother took Theodore and me to Fulek, Czechoslovakia, to stay with her brother, sister-in-law and their children until she could secure visas for her four children. Elizabeth, the oldest, and Gabriella, the youngest, had to stay in Pilis, Hungary, with mother's sister, brother-in-law, who was the local Rabbi, and two daughters.

Four months passed. Theodore and I were not happy at our aunt and uncle's house and wanted to join Elizabeth and Gabriella. We joined our sisters in Pills. By the time we arrived, their windows were boarded up because bricks were being thrown at their house. Also, everything that could be moved out of the synagogue, which was next door, was crammed into their little house where eight people lived. Food was in short supply and my uncle went out each night to his constituents for anything they could give him for the family. Even if a Jew had money, it was dangerous to go to the marketplace. Everyone in the little town knew my uncle. He would have been killed had he been caught. We went on in fear day after day. We were added burdens to our aunt and uncle. All of us eating, sleeping, and trying to bolster each other, while inside of each of us, the feeling of panic that we would never see our parents again.

Finally, after months and months, my sister Elizabeth and I were called to Budapest to sign some papers and were informed that four visas were sent to us from America. We were told that a ship was leaving for America in two weeks. My sister was told that it was not an American ship but it would be flying an American flag. My sister turned to me and said, "What should we do?" I said, "You are the oldest, so you have to make that decision." She decided we were not going. I don't remember when or how, but we were told that a mine had hit that very ship and everyone on it had been killed.

About a month after this incident, we were notified by Cunard Lines that an Italian ship was leaving Genoa in two weeks and it would be advisable for us to take it. By then the situation for the Jews had become desperate. There was no food, no heat and it was December and bitter freezing cold. My aunt found some old flannel material and sewed dresses that would make us look like peasant children. We would then blend in and look like the other children in the countryside during our travels to the ship through Hungary and Yugoslavia to Italy.

A few days before we were planning to leave, my brother Theodore came down with Scarlet Fever and in those days, there was no penicillin or other antibiotics. Theodore had a fever of 105. My uncle contacted the Jewish doctor in town and he came very late at night so as not to be seen by anyone. The doctor gave us some medicine and told us to leave and take my sick brother, because the Jews of the town were being taken to unknown places, beaten, and burned out of their homes.

The next day we left. I have no recollection of walking to the train station this time. What I do remember is being on the train, with a Yugoslav guard, fully dressed in his plumed hat, with a bayonet at the end of his gun, opening our meager suitcases. I was petrified and sat perfectly still while he questioned my sister and went through our belongings with his bayonet. After what seemed like an endless journey, we arrived in Genoa, Italy. My sister checked us into a hotel where I had to tend to my sick brother.

Hours later, my sister returned to the hotel and told us the following: "I went to the ship's office to check us in and while they were examining our papers, they found that all of us are minors and could not board the ship unless we have a guardian." My sister stood on the gangplank and spoke to everyone boarding saying, "We need a guardian for four children, we will not bother you, we need no money." Just as my sister thought that we might never get out of Europe, a young couple agreed. We had little time to get ourselves and our bags and rush back to the ship to meet the couple and get on board, but we made it!

It was a bitter cold voyage which lasted twelve days. We nursed my brother back to health before we were to dock at Ellis Island, New York. There was so much ice in the ocean that year that the ship could not come in close enough and we were taken off on to small boats. The result was that the usual medical examination was almost overlooked in order to expedite our departure. Everyone was relieved.

There were four things we did not know until much later. First of all, our ship, the Conte Di Savoia, was the last ship to leave Italy with passengers. Secondly, the first ship that we did not take was hit by a mine and sank. Third of all, my mother said to an immigration officer in Cleveland, Ohio, "If I do not get four visas now, my children will die in Europe." She threatened to jump off his balcony. She got the visas! And fourth of all, two weeks after we arrived in New York, on February 12, 1940, my mother tried to contact her sister and family in Europe, with no success. From all indications, over fifty family members were either in camps or dead.

What cannot be covered in a few short pages: The anguish, the suffering, the trauma, much of which can never be erased - can only be completed by describing our adjustments to life in America. All the children completed their education in Cleveland, and secured employment. They married, raised families, and became integrated into society.

I married Oliver Burton Winkler, a native of Cleveland, Ohio, in 1946. Our son, Dennis Owen, was born in Cleveland in 1949. My husband was a Jewish Communal Worker who headed Jewish Federations in a number of cities in the United States. For over twenty-five years I also worked in Jewish Community Centers and Jewish Family Service agencies. I presently reside in Northern California, having moved here after my husband's death in 1987. I have a daughter-in-law, Heidi, I have two granddaughters, Stacey and Emma, and a step-grandson, Camilo.

What must be noted is that my parents as well as their children never stopped remembering the families from both sides who perished in the Holocaust, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Only four cousins survived, all from one family who were from Czechoslovakia.

Even with the "good life", there is seldom a day that goes by that for one reason or another something reminds me of who I am, what I experienced and how close I came to becoming one of the millions who did not make it. I know that I can never forget. I must also continue to share my experiences so that others remember as well.