

To the people of Geislingen from the Child of a Survivor

On the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz January 27, 2021

(This letter was published with less and different pictures in Geislinger Zeitung, Jan 27, 2021)

Today I write to you with mixed emotions. I am happy to have the opportunity to write to you, the people of Geislingen, and to hear about the wonderful work that your community is doing to better understand and remember sad times from the past. I am the son of a courageous woman, who worked as a slave laborer in the former munitions factory in your city. Against all odds, this woman survived to become my mother. At the same time, I am sad because of the memories of everything that my mother, Hildegard Simon nee Lustig, had to live through as a young girl and teenager. Hilde had happy memories of her childhood, growing up with her extended family including her mother, father, brother, grandparents, aunts and uncles.



left: Standing are Hilde's maternal grandparents Pinkus Herlinger and Rosa Herlinger nee Rechnitzer, and in between them are Hildegard and her brother Viktor. In the window from the left are Hilde's uncle, Karl Goldstern (he later married Paulina), Hilde's aunt, Paulina Herlinger in the middle, and her mother Margaretha Lustig nee Herlinger, on the right.

right:
Hilde and her brother Viktor at their father's newsstand, at Rotenturmstrasse, Vienna.



Hilde's former life, recounted as if from a fairy tale, vanished as if at the drop of a hat, never to return. For the rest of her life, Hilde was left with deep and dark memories, some of which had their origins in your city, a topic which she preferred to avoid discussing with her children. My sister and I grew up in the shadow of her experiences. We learned from a very young age that there was a time when Hilde had barely enough to eat, and that it was almost a crime for us to waste even a crumb of food. While Hilde's nightmares were lived out for her in real life, for us the children, our nightmares were born out of Hilde's memories.

The truth is that Hilde and her family faced tremendous pressure and trauma long before she reached the gates of Geislingen. On March 25, 1938, her family fled her birth place

of Vienna for her father's home town of Nagykanizsa, Hungary, just 3 weeks after the Anschluss, leaving behind her grandparents Rosa and Pinkus. On the train ride to Hungary, the family was stopped at the Austro-Hungarian border when her brother responded to a question about whether the family was carrying any guns. When Hilde's brother said "I have a water gun," all four family members were taken and strip searched.

On March 4, 1941, while Hilde and her family were in Hungary, Pinkus and Rosa were deported from Vienna to Modliborzyce, Poland. The ghetto in Modliborzyce was liquidated on October 8, 1942. Older people were usually killed on the spot, and the rest were expelled to the Krasnik ghetto and from there to the Belzec death camp in November. Meanwhile, on March 14, 1941, Hilde's mother Grete, died after a long bout of tuberculosis.



Hilde with her mother Margaretha Lusztig nee Herlinger; her father, Istvan Lusztig; and her brother Viktor Lusztig.

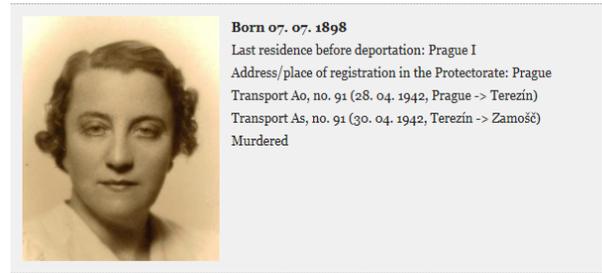
Also during this period, Hilde's Uncle Robert and his family were desperately trying to get passports out of Prague. Robert, his wife Annie, and daughter Renee were deported to Theresienstadt on April 28, 1942, only days after receiving the needed papers. Two days later, Robert and his family were transported to Zamosc, Poland where only 20 passengers on the transit would survive.

Jméno *Herlinger*
 Křestní jméno *Robert*
 Data narození *10. III. 1899*
 Místo narození *Wala*
 Povolání *učedník k. o. k.*
 Bydliště *Muka T. Michalská 4*
 Družička státní příslušnost *Československá*
 Rodiče *Josef Herlinger a Marie Herlingerová*
 Manžel-ka *Anna Herlingerová*

Popis osoby:
 Postava *vysoký*
 Tvar obličeje *okrouhlý*
 Barva očí *modrá*
 Barva vlasů *prosvětlivé č.*
 Ústa *slabá*
 Nos *malý*
 Zvl. znamení *žádné*

Doklady:
 1. Domovský list č. 2134/40 z 28. 11. 1940 Turaňská ul. 10
 2. Osobní list č. 104/1940 z 12. 11. 1940 Michalská 11
 3. List č. 8050/1413/40 z 27. 11. 1940 → 21. 1. 1941 Michalská 11
 4. Důvěrná příloha k listu č. 8050/1413/40 z 27. 11. 1940
 5. Průkaz o povol. z. 2. 24. XI. 1940 P. T. B.

Hilde's uncle Robert Herlinger in Praga



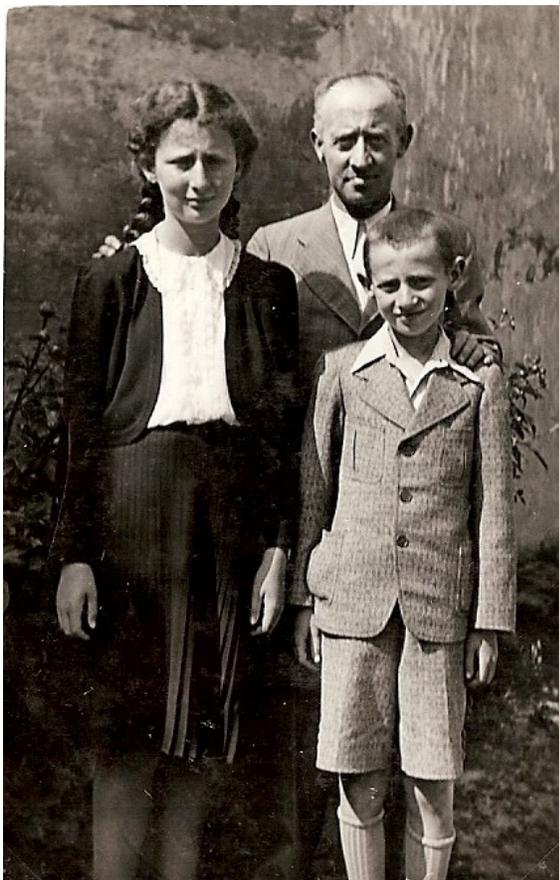
Born 07. 07. 1898
 Last residence before deportation: Prague I
 Address/place of registration in the Protectorate: Prague
 Transport Ao, no. 91 (28. 04. 1942, Prague -> Terezín)
 Transport As, no. 91 (30. 04. 1942, Terezín -> Zamošć)
 Murdered

Hilde's Aunt Amy Herlinger nee Ohl in Praga



Born 04. 10. 1926
 Last residence before deportation: Prague I
 Address/place of registration in the Protectorate: Prague I, Michalská 11
 Transport Ao, no. 93 (28. 04. 1942, Prague -> Terezín)
 Transport As, no. 93 (30. 04. 1942, Terezín -> Zamošć)
 Murdered

Hilde's cousin Renee Herlinger, age 16, Praga



Meanwhile, Hilde, her father Ishtvan, and her brother Viktor, lived an uneasy life in Hungary, facing more restrictions when the Germans entered on March 19, 1944. Nagykanizsa was one of the first places in Hungary to become judenrein, a place where Jews were now excluded or cleansed from the rest of society. Hilde, Ishtvan, Viktor, her maternal aunt and paternal grandmother Fanny were deported together to Auschwitz by cattle car on May 17, 1944, arriving on May 24th. Her paternal Aunt Mariska and Uncle Dezo were transported a few days earlier. It was truly a stroke of luck that in July of 1944, Hilde was chosen to work in Germany and was taken with 700 other Hungarian Jewish women to an unknown destination. The rest of Hilde's family were not so lucky. No one else from her family made it out of Auschwitz alive.

Hilde and her brother Viktor and father Ishtvan in Nagykanizsa, Hungary

All of these events must have been on Hilde's mind on her first midnight shift in the munitions factory in Geislingen, where her finger got caught up in a machine used to make weapons. What did Hilde know about making weapons? At the time she was only 15. As a young child, I was always curious about why my mother had a deformed finger. She only told me later as an adult, how a soldier doctor, or maybe someone that was not really a doctor, never really fixed her broken finger. For some reason, the "doctor" thought that it was best, or maybe easiest, to cut off the injured section, without the use of anesthesia. She was left in agonizing pain, which she later told me that she had to keep quiet for the fear of calling unnecessary attention to herself. Sometimes I wonder why the WMF factory where my mother worked is still standing in Geislingen and able to proudly produce kitchenware for happy families. Meanwhile, Hilde and the other inmates had to work long, grueling hours, sometimes starting in the middle of the night, under brutal conditions, with no compensation, and some paying the ultimate price of their lives. An early memory of mine was when I was four years old, as WMF was flourishing in the post-war period, my mother was hospitalized for depression, a memory that I had long repressed. Hilde later told me that at the time of her hospitalization, that she could not stop thinking about her family and everything that she had gone through.



After nearly one year of slave labor at the munitions factory in Geislingen, my mother was liberated by American troops on May 1, 1945. Hilde moved to America and met my father, Richard B. Simon, in 1952. After a short courtship, Hilde and Richard married. They had a happy marriage and she was a wonderful mother and proud member of our Jewish Community in Chicago, Illinois.

Hilde at Naturalization in the US, August 19, 1952

As her son however, I was aware of her bitter memories and developed a better understanding of her experiences through her Shoah Foundation testimony and talks to grade school children. Hilde always carried these memories deep inside, and sometimes, particularly during times of stress, her memories came close to the surface. War is gruesome for everyone, with innumerable victims on both sides of the conflict and particularly horrible for all those who lost their lives. It was also horrible for all of those who were enslaved in the thousands of death camps and work camps across Europe. It is unimaginable how a human being can be forced to live as a slave laborer, or to reside in a concentration camp, every moment wondering where the next blow was coming from, sometimes knee deep in mud as Hilde recounted from her time in Auschwitz. I cannot imagine how it would be, always wondering whether you would live to see the next day, or ever see your family and friends again. It was brutal for the inmates, but also a continued legacy for many survivors who never fully recovered from their tortured past,

and who in some fashion were forced to live with their memories. It was also profoundly difficult for the children of Holocaust survivors. We grew up with the memories of our survivor parents, and inherited their legacy of the Holocaust.

I also believe that we need to also consider the impact on children, grandchildren and family members of the camp guards, soldiers and former Nazis. We need to consider the family members of the legions of people that ran the munitions factory, the concentration camps, and the entire Nazi enterprise. While I understand that not everyone in Geislingen is a descendant of a camp guard, or others who ran the munitions factory, I imagine that it must be difficult to know that some of the former residents of your community, fathers, mothers, grandparents, uncles, aunts and neighbors were responsible for forcing people to work under brutal conditions, or worse may have been responsible for their victim's deaths.

I am aware that in recent years, it has become known in Geislingen that a slave labor camp existed in your own town. That must have been a shock to many of you to find out about the horrible things that happened before you were born, right there in the place where you live with your families, where you send your children to school and where your children play with their friends. At the same time, I am happy and grateful with how your community is dealing with and confronting the past. My son and I visited Geislingen in January 2013, before the recent development of the memorial at the factory and at the site of the camp. It is a testament to the good people of Geislingen that you are taking the time and opportunity to learn about the history of the camp, to properly respond to it and to teach your children that such a thing should never happen again.

What can be learned from the events before and during the Holocaust, and how can we move forward, now some 76 years from the liberation of Geislingen? Of greatest importance to me is that your city is remembering the past, teaching the history in schools, telling the stories, and honoring the victims. Another important question is how do we as people, both descendants of survivors and descendants of camp guards, Jews, Germans, as well as innocent bystanders, all of us, come together, understand each other and find common ground as human beings? In my mind, this is the only way that we can close the circle on the horrible injustice that took away so many lives, and deprived so many of the love and companionship of their families. Perhaps this is a question that I have been thinking about for most of my adult life, and the reason why I wanted to write to you, the people of Geislingen, and to share my mother's story.

Michael Simon