

Hello everyone,

Thank you for having me here today. It's an honour to speak with so many bright students. While I don't speak German, I'll be speaking in English, not too difficult, to ensure you can all follow along.

My name is Esther Lewin, I'm from Melbourne, Australia and I'm the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors.

Just last week, I participated in the March of the Living in Poland, a program that brings people together to learn about the Holocaust and confront the roots of racism and hatred. We visited concentration camps like Auschwitz and Majdanek—sites that are vast, cold, and impossible to fully comprehend. They were built to systematically murder, eradicate an entire race. This year's program was especially meaningful as it marked the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Jewish prisoners. On Yom HaShoah the other week, Holocaust Memorial Day, I marched with thousands from over 50 countries on the 3-kilometre walk from Auschwitz to Birkenau, back then known as the "Death March" honouring those who perished, including my own relatives.

My grandparents on my mother's side were Ruti and Mordechai Gruber, both of them Holocaust survivors. Today I'll be telling you Ruti's story, but before I do, let me share a bit about myself. I'm 42 years old, married to my husband Simon and we have two beautiful children, Millie who is 10 and Noah who is 9. I grew up in a large city called Melbourne, in the southern part of Australia as a Modern Orthodox Jew. Though we kept certain Jewish laws, I can say that my family was like any other—we were active in society, both my parents worked, they also volunteered for community organisations. I played netball and tennis. We went to the snow mountains once a year to ski, our summers were by the beach or camping. I love playing the piano and doing arts and crafts, shopping, and reading music and girly magazines. Where I might have been a little different, was because we kept certain Jewish laws strictly. We ate kosher food which was following dietary restrictions, on Saturdays we never worked to observe our day of rest, the Shabbat and other Jewish festivals. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't perfect. I was rebellious and at times decided I didn't want to keep anything at all. But in general, my life was deeply shaped by our Jewish faith that was passed down by my grandparents, the faith in God that they had throughout the years of war, one of the reasons that they survived.

Even years later, what my grandparents went through back then, affected my life. Though they never really wanted to speak of that time, of what they went through, there were hints of it. We cooked together Romanian and Hungarian food, they didn't like me wasting my food, I'd have to eat everything off my plate. They would sing tunes on our Shabbat and festivals that they told me came from their own childhoods, back in

Romania. I was very close with my grandfather Mordechai, whom I called Zaida. He was very energetic, charismatic, and had a great sense of humour. But my relationship with my grandmother Ruti was more complicated. She was deaf in both ears, and was always sick with mental illness and physical illness, in and out of hospital constantly which I was told was a result of what happened to her during the Holocaust, but nobody could ever speak of that time, nobody knew any of the details – she never spoke of it. Though she lived near us, she often withdrew, unable to join family celebrations. As a child, I didn't understand.

I was nine years old when I first learned what the Holocaust was. My parents explained that Ruti's parents, Moshe Jakob and Sara Leah Mendelovits and five of her brothers and sisters, Chaim Hersh, Avram Leib and his wife Leah, Hana Feiga, Haya and her husband Froim and her brother Kalman were murdered by the Nazis - some in the gas chambers, their bodies burned in the crematoriums, some from sickness and starvation. Only Ruti, her brother Dov, his wife and son, and two sisters—Ella and Gittel—survived. As I grew older, I could see that Ruti held onto enormous pain and guilt. I had so many questions, but she wouldn't speak about it. The pain was too deep. We continued life knowing very little about her life.

That changed in 2020. During the Melbourne Covid lockdowns, as I'm sure you all went through as well, where we were stuck indoors working and homeschooling our two children, Millie and Noah. I felt an urgency, almost apocalyptic, and began building a family tree on my mother's side. While searching archives online, I found something incredible: two recorded testimonies from 2014, where Ruti and Mordechai had opened up on camera about their lives. We never knew about it! What they revealed was enlightening, heartbreaking—and at times, confusing. There were many gaps, their stories very broken. So, I began digging deeper, filling in the gaps with research. Their stories were too extraordinary to remain buried in a database. That's when I decided to write a book, to be published later this year.

So – you're probably asking, why did I come from Poland all the way here to Geislingen today? Because of what I discovered in that research—a forgotten chapter of Ruti's life that unfolded here. But first, let me take you back to the beginning.

Ruti's early life sounded, at first, like any other Jewish child growing up in Europe. She was born in 1931 in Sighet, a small town in northern Romania, in the Maramureş County of Northern Transylvania. Her family was traditionally observant with the Jewish laws. Her father, Moshe Jakob Mendelovits, was a renowned musician who played in a band and he and his wife, Sara Leah, managed a well known orchestra.

The Mendelovits home was busy - Ruti was the youngest of nine children. She was especially close with her brother Kalman and sister Ella, the others were already older doing their own things. She walked or rode her bike to government school each day,

helped care for animals behind their home in the farm they had, and often played with both Jewish and non-Jewish friends. Religious life and the dream of moving to the Land of Israel one day were central to her family. Her mother taught her to sew, paint, and knit, while her father taught her to play the piano.

Despite Hitler becoming Chancellor of Germany in 1933 and war breaking out in 1939, Ruti's town in Sighet remained relatively untouched. That changed in 1940, when the town was annexed by Hungary, aligning it with the Nazis. Antisemitic violence grew, there were massacres around the country, but Ruti, being young, didn't remember feeling it personally until 1943. With the restrictions on Jews and the hatred for Jews rising, her non-Jewish friends began to pull away. In 1944, things drastically worsened. As her family prepared for Passover, new laws forced Jews to close synagogues, abandon businesses, and stay inside.

Then, on the seventh day of Passover, Hungarian Nazis arrived in Sighet. They pounded on the door of her home and forced the family to the street, telling them they could take just one suitcase each before being forced into the Sighet ghetto—a few fenced-in streets, overcrowded, with little food where they lived for a few weeks. The conditions were horrible, unhygienic and relentless starvation. They did nothing all day but roam or sit, confused as to what was happening to them. Ruti turned 13 in that ghetto. There was no celebration.

Soon, Hungarian Gendarmes stormed the ghetto again. With chaos, beatings, and gunfire, they marched families to the train station. Ruti's grandmother, frail and 83 years old, refused to board the train and the Hungarian's didn't hesitate to argue with her – they shot her right in front of them. With no time to mourn her, the family, devastated, had no choice but to board the cattle cars. They didn't know where they were being taken.

The train was hell. No space to sit or lie down. One bucket as the toilet for too many of them. No windows. No food, no water. Many died. Rumours swirled in the cart about a "death camp" and a "work camp" for those who were young and healthy, that they'd likely be chosen. But Ruti, she was 13, not old enough to be considered useful. So, there, a decision was made for her by her parents – she took the identity of a 16-year-old girl who was dead, slumped in the corner of their cart. That decision saved her life.

When the train stopped, they had arrived at Auschwitz. Chaos reigned. Families were torn apart. Dr. Josef Mengele stood at the selection line, deciding who would live or die. Left or Right. Ruti's sisters were sent one way to the camp, she remained with her mother, sent the other way. Ruti clung to her mother, made to shuffle in the line that was headed for the gas chambers, until an SS guard shouted at Ruti.

"Move away, go to the camp!" Confused and too afraid to leave her mother, so didn't move. She was shouted at again, and this time she obeyed. That moment—the moment

she was torn from her mother's side—haunted her forever. She later recalled only one word: "Hashem"—God. What did that mean?

She found her sisters briefly. Together, the five of them stood together as their heads were shaved, they were deloused, and given rags and used shoes to wear. At that moment, she was separated from her sisters, led to her block where she'd sleep.

There, in a cold, overcrowded barrack, she found herself among strangers, all speaking different languages. She found others who spoke Hungarian and Yiddish, she huddled with them. Those who had already been in the camp a few weeks explained how to survive: stay clean, stay alert, obey. Every day brought roll calls, selections, fear. There was nothing to do during the day, they just hung around the grounds. They were given barely any food. And so over the weeks, she grew weaker, more skinny, her throat scratched and raw from swallowing small amounts of dry bread. But worse than hunger was fear.

One day, she was selected. This time, she was told she would "shower". It was a euphemism for the gas chambers. Somehow, as she stood in that line about to undress, she ran away, she escaped.

From this recording she did, this was the first time we were hearing about it. Before this, we all thought Ruti remained in Auschwitz until its liquidation which was January 1945. But then Ruti explained what happened to her in July 1944. Another selection. Yet, this time she was selected with 700 Hungarian women that were transferred on a train to Geislingen, a subcamp of Natzweiler-Struthof. That's why I'm here today.

When Ruti arrived in Geislingen, they saw quickly the conditions were very different to Auschwitz. was different. Each woman had her own bed in a bunk tower, each was given a towel, a blanket and their own cup. The Kapos were all females. They came into their block and told them they were to be taken to shower. Ruti froze, terrified it was another lie. She had been there before, and this time she refused to move. A Kapo named Pauli, sensing her fear, gave her a bath instead. Ruti was one of the youngest, and Pauli showed her rare kindness.

Given a striped dress, with no undergarments and a pair of wooden clogs for their feet, the women were told they were there to work at the WMF factory, producing munitions, gun parts, for the Reich. Conditions were still brutal, but better than Auschwitz. But the factory shifts were relentless—12 hours, day or night. Every day the women marched through the streets to the factory. Sometimes German residents felt bad for them, threw them scraps of food from their houses, but the Kapos threatened beatings if anyone picked it up. As the war waged on, there wasn't much food. Hunger set in, quickly. One day, Ruti found a scrap of food and was caught. The Kapo dragged her outside in the snow and made to stand in the courtyard. She demanded her age. "Sixteen," Ruti said, still using her false identity. "Then you'll get sixteen of these," the Kapo said, striking Ruti

with the butt of her gun—16 blows to the ears until Ruti collapsed. Her ears became infected and she lost her hearing permanently.

Despite this, she survived. How? With such conditions? The women saw themselves like a sisterhood – they looked out for each other—sharing scraps of food, huddling together for warmth. Ruti still believed in God, that she was kept alive for a reason, that she had to keep going to survive. Faith, friendship, and hope kept Ruti going.

In March 1945, Allied bombing damaged transport to the WMF factory, they didn't have supplies coming in. So, with no work, Geislingen was liquidated in April, and the women were sent to Allach, a women's subcamp of Dachau concentration camp. From there, they were forced onto trains again by Himmler's orders. This time, they were to work on fortifications and be used as human shields in a town in Tyrol. But with the war coming to an end, the women were on the train that circled aimlessly – back and forth, back and forth for days, not stopping, with no food or water, until April 30th, when the train stopped, and Ruti and the others on the train were liberated by American soldiers.

After weeks in Displaced Persons camps, Ruti reunited with her sister Ella at Bergen-Belsen. They returned to Sighet, hoping to find family. Their home had been taken over by Romanians. Eventually, they found Dov and Gizella, finding out weeks later that the rest of her family had been murdered.

Ruti couldn't stay in Romania. She was just 14 years old, and her sisters slightly older, they wanted to remain and get married. For nearly 2 years, she moved from one DP camp to another before arriving in Israel in 1947 by boat. She was just 16. Taken in by a Pioneer home in Haifa, a city in Israel, she learned new skills like reading and writing in Hebrew, made new friends and built a new life. She met Mordechai, another survivor, they married in 1951 and they had my mother, Sara, in 1953.

But Ruti never truly healed. The trauma of what she saw, heard, felt, losing everything – all of it - haunted her. She spent time in mental institutions, and eventually, in 1960, the family moved to Australia. There, while they found a strong Jewish community and a new home, the scars never left Ruti. Growing up with her, I adored her, but I never fully understood her.

Today, after all the research and writing my book, I understand a bit more. Ruti's story lives in me—and in my children. Her trauma was passed down to me, yes, but so was her strength. I have found myself in many challenging situations where I've asked myself – "What would Ruti do? Can I overcome this?" Asking myself that question made me realise that I inherited her strength and faith to overcome anything difficult.

I look at all of you in front of me. It's a beautiful sight to see a group of strong students with the eagerness to learn all things about the world. Know that your school years aren't just about gaining knowledge, developing skills, and learn how to think critically

and work with others. This is the time where you develop an understanding of yourself to get ready to contribute meaningfully to society, your community and the world.

Though that dark time of our history was 80 years ago, the world today isn't perfect. But if you learn from Ruti's story, we can be courageous, resilient and hopeful as you find the ways to shape the future. In her memory, let us be the generation that says "no" to hatred, racism, and division, and instead, chooses love, compassion, tolerance and understanding. We can be the voice for those who don't have one. The world is waiting for us to take action. Let us rise to the challenge and ensure that "never again" truly means never again.

Thank you.