

1- The 80th Anniversary of the Liberation at Geislingen. Michael S. Simon

Good evening. It is an honor to tell the story of my mother, Hildegard L Simon, nee Lustig, on the anniversary of the liberation of the slave labor camp at Geislingen.

I feel especially humbled to represent the survivors and families, and I hope that my story will touch on the experiences of all the women who worked here as slave laborers.

For me, an important date is **May 27, 1944**, the day my mother, at age sixteen, stepped off a cattle car with her family onto the platform at Auschwitz-Birkenau. That day began a trajectory of the most unimaginable horror, however through her strength and resilience, Hilde showed us how she could carry the weight of that horror and never lose her capacity for love and for hope.

Hilde was born in Vienna on April 11, 1928 (1). Living with her mother, father, brother, grandparents, and aunt, she had a wonderful childhood (2). Trips to the mountains, Jewish school, magazines at her father's newsstand, friends and other relatives, all precious memories (3). In the summer, she loved traveling to visit her father's family in Nagykanizsa, Hungary.

Times changed. It is now late in the 1930's. With her ears glued to the door, she heard the hushed voices of her parents discussing news coming out about the Nazis and the threatened invasion. Hilde recounted how she was too young to read the newspaper but still felt tension in the air.

On March 13, 1938, the Anschluss or **annexation of Austria** occurred. Hilde stood at her father's newsstand and saw German soldiers march by, and heard Hitler speaking, likely the declaration of the annexation delivered from Vienna's Helden Platz Square. As the days went on, she watched soldiers force older Jewish men to clean the streets. Her parents had to wear badges labeling them as foreigners.

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Two weeks later, Hilde's parents had decided to leave the country. Hilde's grandparents accompanied the family to the station and said their goodbyes as their children and grandchildren boarded a 4 am train to Hungary. Imagine what it was like for Hilde's family, early in the morning, in Nazi ruled Vienna, to leave their grandparents behind.

The train ride was without incident until German soldiers came on board at a small station, demanding to know if anyone had a gun. As Hilde recounted, "We didn't have a gun, why would we have a gun?" At that moment, her 8-year-old brother piped up, "I have a gun". As it turns out it was a toy water gun, but the soldiers forced the family from the train, made them remove their clothing, and searched them for weapons. In Hilde's words, "For me, at that time, this was the most humiliating thing that ever happened to me, because you know, I was just a little girl."

The family boarded the next train. When they arrived in Nagykanizsa, Hilde's uncle met them and took them to her grandmother's house. In Nagykanizsa, the family ran a fine tailoring business and had already lived in town for over a century.

For the next five years, this city was a refuge for Hilde's family (4), though they never overcame leaving Hilde's other grandparents in Vienna.

There was also her mother's cough, starting sometime after arriving in Nagykanizsa. On March 12, 1941, when Hilde was not yet thirteen her mother, my grandmother, died of tuberculosis (5).

During this period, her grandparents from Vienna were relocated to Poland. Her maternal uncle and his family in Prague were deported to Theresienstadt and, two days later, sent to Poland (6). They were all killed early in 1942.

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Hilde often spoke about Erzebet, one of her closest friends who was Catholic. Hilde said that she did not have a problem with anyone's religion, the important thing was whether they were good people (7).

Yet in her testimony, Hilde described the town's deep anti-Semitism - and remembered men displaying their hatred by wearing green ties, and children chasing her home from school shouting "Dirty Jew." Hilde said in those circumstances, it was crucial to keep walking proudly, head held high.

The Germans occupied Nagykanizsa in March 1944. Yellow stars were mandated, and by April 26, all 1,800 Jewish individuals were relocated to a designated ghetto (8).

Hilde remembered sharing orange marmalade with her grandmother on their last morning at home, something she could never bring herself to eat again (9).

Hilde's family was transported by cattle car to Auschwitz, arriving May 27, 1944 (10).

Upon arrival, Hilde walked with her grandmother and great-aunt to ask a tall, handsome soldier what would happen to them. She later learned that the soldier was Josef Mengele. Her younger brother, grandmother, and great-aunt were sent immediately to the gas chambers.

In July 1944, Hilde was transported to Geislingen to work at the WMF factory. To increase arms production, the company detained and forced over nine hundred Hungarian Jewish women, otherwise destined for death, to work.

Imagine Hilde, who is only sixteen, never having worked in a factory, assigned to her first shift at midnight. Exhausted from worry, Hilde fell asleep. While sleeping, her finger accidentally slipped into the machine, and she was injured. A soldier walking by saw what had happened,

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and took her to a doctor, who, rather than stitching her wound, crudely sawed off the injured part. So as not to draw attention, Hilde only allowed herself to cry at night when she was alone.

Later in Geislingen, Hilde recalled how her barrack Kapo, a former convict, suddenly lifted an innocent girl who was standing in line, and threw her, for no apparent reason into a pit, to her death. This was Hilde's most haunting memory.

Unbeknownst to her, in January 1945, her father, my grandfather, collapsed and died in a field in Auschwitz.

In April 1945, as the Americans advanced, Hilde and others were transported by train toward Munich and then marched to the Allach concentration camp (11). When the Americans neared, German soldiers fled while firing back, forcing the inmates to run for their lives.

At liberation, May 1, 1945, Hilde remembered seeing Munich up in flames. As she testified, "I don't like seeing anyone hurt, but at that moment, Munich burning was the most beautiful sight."

After the war, Hilde returned to Nagykanizsa where her friend Erzsebet had saved the family photographs.

After a year in Hungary, Hilde was smuggled past Russian soldiers into Austria with help from two aunts who had already escaped. In 1947, after a year in a displaced persons camp in Germany, she sailed to America (12).

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Hilde settled in Chicago (13), where she met my father, Richard B. Simon (14). Imagine their wedding date, May 27, 1951, exactly 7 years after Hilde arrived at Auschwitz. This was the only available date for several reasons. My mother knew what date it was but kept it to herself and put that thought aside deciding, "that's what God wants." She later reminisced, "I figured I would make a good meaning out of it."

Hilde established a fulfilling life in Chicago, encompassing a dedication to her family and friends, active participation in synagogue activities, as well as engagement in bowling and ceramics. She shared her story in schools and was interviewed by the USC Shoah Foundation (15).

Hilde gave birth to my sister Frances in 1953, and to me in 1957 (16). She later welcomed two grandchildren, Rachel, and Jeremy (17). Richard preceded her in death in 1988, and Hilde passed away on June 6, 1998, at the age of sixty-nine. As a sign of her continuing legacy, we recently marked the first birthday of Hannah Mahoney, her great-granddaughter named after her, using the "H" from Hilde, and the second name for her other grandmother (18).

My mother's experiences had an important impact on my upbringing. For one, I do my best to waste no food at meals.

A significant factor in my decision to pursue a career in oncology was the experience of assisting my mother in managing her fear and anguish.

Now, I fear that global warming will bring on another type of holocaust. In my retirement, I am committed to doing my best to help fight against environmental devastation and climate change.

I also wanted to learn more about my mother's experiences (19). In 2013, my son and I took a journey to walk in Hilde's footsteps including visits to Austria, Hungary, and Germany where we visited Geislingen and the site of the camp and factory (20). Later, my wife and I dedicated stolpersteine (stumbling stones) to the memory of the family in Vienna (21).

In conclusion, the path of friendship and historical understanding is a constructive way forward for both the survivor families and the people of Geislingen.

Unfortunately, in Germany, the US and elsewhere, we face a scourge of denial, intolerance and hatred.

I hope moving forward, that you remember and hear the voice of my mother, Hildegard, - as she used to say, "I respect everyone's religion, everyone's belief, I always did." Throughout her life, Hilde never lost hope and saw the good in everyone.

I believe that your motto "remembering-honoring-reconciling" is the legacy that my mother Hilde and all the survivors would have wanted to leave you with.

This picture is in memory of my sister Frances Ungar nee Simon, who died on March 22, 2015, and who was the real family historian (22).

Thank you for your warm welcome, the opportunity to speak today, and for sharing this momentous day of remembrance (23).