

Angel on My Shoulder? The story of Miriam Schlezinger

I was born in Slovakia in 1927. At that time the Czech Republic consisted of four little separate states (Slovakia, Bohemia, Czech, and Podcarpadska Rus). I was born in the very small town of Poruba (in Slovakia), but when I was still very small my family moved to the somewhat bigger town of Poroskova (which was in Podcarpadska Rus). Poroskova was a mixed community, including quite a few Jewish families who tended to live in the same areas. The closest city was Ushorod. All my early memories are of Poroskova.



I grew up in a little single family home with my parents, Moishe and Malka. I was the third of nine children (6 girls and 3 boys). I was named Maryam, but everyone at that time called me Monci.

My father was a cobbler; my mother sewed clothes to trade for goods and services that we needed. I guess that we were very poor, but we were such a large bunch that did everything together, I didn't know enough to feel deprived. My parents were very religious but in a more modern way, so my father did not have payeses. I remember him as being a very proud man, and my mother as very pretty and always seeming to be pregnant.

My father went to the Jewish store in Poroskova once a week to get our supplies, and my mother always baked for the week that day. My two older sisters (Surah and Hannah) knew how to cook, sew and do household tasks, but most of what I was responsible for was taking care of my younger siblings. I have nice memories of spending Shabbas waling together in the countryside. There were so many of us that we could not afford to do things like movies or vacation trips.

My family spoke Yiddish at home, but I attended a Slovak public school. Later this became a Hungarian school, and I remember having to learn Hungarian. I also remember getting to leave classes on those days when the gentile kids were instructed by a priest. A cheder teacher came to our home to teach us children how to read Hebrew. I wasn't always very attentive. Around one or two years after the Hungarians took control we were expelled from school for good. I was about 13 or 14.

Around that time older kids from Poroskova started being deported to the camps, so my mother arranged for us three eldest girls to live with Gentile families in Ushorod. I have no idea how she managed to arrange this. I was with a gentile family for about a year, and I cleaned and took care of their children. After a time, they were fearful of keeping me any longer and said that I had to leave their home. Mother came to get me, and I somehow wound up in Hungary proper with another gentile family. This was in Niredhazo. The last time I saw my mother was when she took us to Niredhazo. I must have been there also about a year, but my memories of that time are not very clear.

I ended up in a Hungarian ghetto with my two older sisters. We must have been there about three months before the ghetto was liquidated in 1944. My thoughts and memories are hazy. I know that I never saw my parents or younger siblings again. I was never able to learn exactly what happened to them all. Someone later told me that they thought they had seen my father in Auschwitz, so I felt that was where they perished. I never felt that my beautiful mother could have lasted very long when she was with six small children.

When the ghetto was liquidated, my sisters and I were put on a railroad cattle car for three days and taken to Auschwitz concentration camp. My name became A10314. You can imagine what it must have been like for a sheltered young girl of 15 years to stand naked waiting to be shaved and de-loused. Yet I always felt that I must have had some kind of angel on my shoulder during those terrible times because so many times unexpected good luck saved my life.

I was still young and attractive, and I was assigned to be a “lofferern” (a runner/messenger). I had to carry messages for the officers and clean barracks. Sometimes the guard from that barracks left me a piece of bread under the mattress, and this helped keep me alive.

I remember standing naked, in lines five deep, during the roll calls and selections. My older sister, Surah, saved my life many times during these occasions by switching places with me in the line. We looked much alike; but she was heavier. This made her less likely to be selected for the gas chambers. During one roll call, I was standing with Surah and we saw our sister Hannah taken away on a stretcher, supposedly to be treated at the “hospital.” We never saw her again after that day.

Surah was always better than me at talking her way in and out of things. She was assigned to the kitchens, and sometimes she was able to sneak me a raw potato to eat. This also helped save my life.

I have trouble remembering exact dates and details. I think we got to Auschwitz in the spring, maybe March of 1944. We were there close to a year, about 10 months. I do know that it was winter when we were taken on what is now known as the Death March. The Allies were coming closer, and we were to be moved closer into Germany. It was snowing and so cold. We didn't have warm clothing, and our feet were wrapped in rags. My sister Surah kept pushing me to keep going. Finally, no matter what, I just couldn't go any further; and I lay down for what I thought would be my end. At that moment a woman guard came by and, instead of shooting me or leaving me to die in the snow, she put me in a truck for the rest of the trip to Buchenwald (again, the angel on my shoulder...).



We were at Buchenwald for two nights, and then put on a train for Bergen-Belsen. This train trip took such a long time; the train had to keep stopping because of the Allied bombs falling. There was no food sent with us on this train. I remember on some of the stops we were so hungry that we ate grass and roots. Some of the girls even ate worms. We ended up at Bergen-Belson where we were liberated by the British about three months later. The whole camp seemed to be ill with typhus. My sister had such a high fever; I still had my angel and wasn't one of the very sick ones.

After we were liberated, we were taken to another soldier barracks not far away. We finally had food and clothing. But people became sick from eating rich and regular foods. I recall that the whole barracks had to be quarantined because of sickness, and our heads had to be shaved because of lice.

Finally we were taken to Budapest, and again lived in a barracks. From there my sister and I were able to take a train back to Czechoslovakia to see if we could find any family left alive. I can't remember exactly how the trip was arranged; but I do know that our suitcases, with the new clothes and things we had been able to obtain, were stolen from us by Russian soldiers. We arrived back in Poruba, my birth place, with nothing.

In Poruba we found my mother's youngest sister, Bertha, who had survived in hiding. She was only 10 years older than me, and has recently passed away in Israel. From there Surah and I went to Poroskova hoping to find some trace of our family. Our little family home was still there, but no one in the family. The goy who used to help us out on Shabbas was living in the house, and told us that it had been given to her by the Russians. She knew nothing of our family and didn't want to let us in; but she did give Surah and me a challah cloth that had been embroidered by our mother.

We had no place else to go, so we returned to Aunt Bertha. From there we moved to a refugee settlement (an "internod"), Michalowitz, in Slovakia. There was a teacher there who spoke English, and we were in awe of that. Many people just didn't want to be alone anymore and married in the internod. My sister and I were still hoping to find family, and we went to Remenini where our mother's other sister, Reggi, had survived by hiding.

In Remenini I met a boy, David, who had been a partisan and was also looking for family. We were kind of sweet on each other; but one day David introduced me to his cousin, Joe, who was in Remenini looking for his family. I finally met my real angel.

Joe Schlezinger had been brought out of Czechoslovakia to the United States by a family member in 1938. He was 15 years old. The rest of the family was supposed to follow, but it was impossible to get them out in time. Joe proceeded to enlist in the American Army and ended up being stationed in the Europe he had been rescued from. When the war ended and he was discharged, Joe returned to Czechoslovakia to search for family. They were all lost; but Joe found me in Remenini!

In 1946 Joe asked me to marry him, and said he would bring me out to the United States. When he had to leave, I had to start working on getting my papers in order. It took close to a year. I moved to Prague to facilitate this process. During this time, I got a job in a factory to support myself. I remember being thrown across a room after sticking my finger in an electrical socket. After everything I had lived through, I didn't know what electricity was.

I came to Columbus, Ohio in 1947 as a fiancée. Joe had to deposit an amount of money equal to my return passage in case we didn't marry within three months after my arrival. I stayed with the aunt and uncle who had brought Joe to the United States until our marriage in the shul in Columbus on June 1, 1947.

At first I went to night school to learn English, and then I took a beauty school course. To get my certificate, I had to pass an exam in English. I did it and worked until our eldest daughter, Susan, was born in 1950. Our second daughter, Joy, was born in 1952. We bought our own home, and I devoted myself to raising my family. Joe went into the family scrap iron business and worked there for 41 years.

We left Columbus for Lake Worth, Florida in 1981 and enjoyed living in South Florida for 25 years. Our youngest daughter passed away in April of 2006, and then Joe passed away in June of the same year. I then moved to Tallahassee to be close to family.

My dear sister, Surah, married while we were still in Czechoslovakia. She became pregnant while Joe and I were trying to bring her and her family to the United States to join us, and died of pregnancy complications.

My message to anyone reading this is to be good to each other, enjoy the family that you have. It hurts so much when you don't have them. Love one another as much as you can.