

Congress of the United States House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Reform
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Nat Shaffir

The Year was 1942
The Country was Romania
The Town was Buchum

My father established a dairy farm in Buchum in 1924. For 18 years he and my mother worked the farm, lived in peace and in harmony with the local gentile farmers. My two sisters and I were born on that farm. I went to kindergarten, and then started first grade.

One of our neighbors was the priest of the town. This priest came to our house once a week to ask my father for a donation to the church and for dairy products for some of his congregants who could not otherwise afford them. During these 18 years, my father *never once* refused his weekly requests. One day in November 1942, the same priest showed up at the house. However, this time he came with an armed police officer and two Iron Guard soldiers with weapons. Since this had never happened before, we all went out to see what was going on. When we came close to the priest, the priest turned to the police officer, pointing at us and said *estee jidans*. “These are Jews.” We were turned over to the authorities by a priest. The same priest who had asked and received help from my father every week for 18 years.

The police officer told my father that we had four hours to vacate the farm. He had orders to relocate us to an area in the nearby big city of Iasi. The policeman also told us that we could take any valuables that we could load onto a one-horse wagon. My father told him, “Look, I knew you since you were born. I know your family well. Can’t you do something to forget this order?” His reply was a firm “No.”

My mother tried to reason with him. She said, “This is our home, our children were born here, and this is the only home we know.” When she realized that there was no way that she could convince him to change his mind, she started crying. She already knew where we were going, because a year earlier, in 1941, a ghetto was

established on the outskirts of the big city of Iasi. We went into the house and started to pack. The first thing we took was all the cash we had in the house, my mother's jewelry, a bible, a few prayer books, blankets, pillows, some pots and pans, and other cooking and eating utensils.

After the four hours expired, the police officer told us that it was time to leave. We were escorted by the police officer and the two Iron Guard soldiers to the ghetto in Iasi. Once we arrived at the ghetto, we were turned over to the ghetto police authority. We were given one room in a house that already housed four other families. We were told to unpack our belongings and come back to the ghetto police office for orientation.

There were many other Jews that arrived in the ghetto that day. After we unpacked, we went back to the police office and received the terrible news and rules as to what we could or could not do while we were their "guests" in the ghetto. Just for the record, we did not wish to be their guests. All five of us lived in one room. In that room, all we had were two beds. Nothing else. No closets, no table, no chairs, no stove. Just empty space. My mother and my two sisters slept together in one bed and my father and I slept in the other one. We stored all our clothes and all the other belongings underneath the beds.

Each morning, every person between the ages of 18 and 50 were taken to work details at different places in the city and then returned in the evening. My father's job was to sweep the streets in the summer every day and shovel snow in the winter. He also cleaned the farmers market area every Thursday. My mother's job was as an orderly at the hospital. She had to scrub floors, clean toilets and any other manual work she was told to do. One day she was scrubbing the floors in the children's ward and heard one child wheezing and immediately realized that the child couldn't breathe. She called out for the doctors. The doctors came and rushed him to the emergency room, operated on him and his life was saved, thanks to my mother. It so happened that this child was the child of the police chief of Iasi. Her actions later helped us in a very important way.

While in the Ghetto, we received ration cards for bread and kerosene. Each person received a $\frac{1}{4}$ of a loaf of bread every two days. Since we were five people, we received $1\frac{1}{4}$ loaves of bread every two days. We also received five liters (1.3 gallons) of kerosene each week. This was used for cooking and heating our room.

To receive these rations, we had to leave the ghetto and line up at the bakery and the kerosene station.

We also received five yellow stars with the word *JIDAN* (“Jew”) written on it that we had to wear on our left breast pocket at all times. I was six years old at the time. Since I had an older sister, (she was eight) my father sent her out to get our bread rations, until one day when he found out that some of the local hooligans were picking on Jewish girls. From that day on, he sent me to get the bread rations. It’s important to note that the same hooligans who picked on the Jewish girls, were also picking on Jewish boys.

Many times, I would return home with a bloody face, having been beaten up. But that never hurt me as much as when these hooligans also took away my bread, which meant that for the next two days we had nothing to eat. When my mother realized the first time what had happened, she also understood that this could happen again. From that day on, my mother started rationing us from our own rations. The first day, she removed one slice of bread. The next time I got the rations, she removed another slice, until she accumulated an entire loaf of bread. Next time when these hooligans took away my bread, and it happened frequently, at least we had the reserve to survive on. There were other rations in the ghetto such as sugar and oil. But we never saw these products. Those in charge of the distribution sold these items on the black market. Obviously, there was no one we could complain to.

One day in June 1943, an order was posted in the ghetto that all men between the ages of 18 and 50 were to report to the ghetto square with extra clothing if they had any. The night before my father was to be assembled at the ghetto square, none of us were able to sleep. The next morning, before my father left the room, we all cried, hugged him, and kissed him. We did not know when or *if* we would ever see our father again. Just before he left the room, I asked him if I could walk with him to the assembly area. He agreed. We held hands as we were walking without saying a word to each other. When we got close the ghetto square, my father said to me. “Nat, it’s time for you to go back”. He turned around to face me, put both his hands on my shoulders and said five words to me that will stay with me for the rest of my life. He said: “Nat, take care of the girls.” I was seven at that time. You can’t imagine the weight and pressure these five words would put on a seven-year-

old boy. I could have said: "I'll try or I'll do my best." But I didn't. I said "I will take care of the girls, Papa, I will."

That day, my father was shipped to a forced labor camp.

The rest of my family who lived in Hungary, my grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins remained there until the Nazis invaded Hungary in March of 1944. Between April 15th and July 9th 1944, 440,000 Jews were deported to Auschwitz killing center and concentration camp. Among those 440,000 Jews were 33 members of my immediate family. The old and the very young ones, upon arrival, were immediately sent to the gas chambers and killed. The rest were shipped to different forced labor camps where most of them died of starvation. We don't even know where and when they died.

My grandfather and two of my uncles were together for about a year in Auschwitz. My grandfather died of starvation one month before he was liberated. My two uncles survived the liberation. They were 21 and 22 years old. Each one weighed 65 lbs. They looked like walking skeletons. When the Red Cross came into these camps and saw the conditions that these individuals were in, they put them on ships bound for Sweden to a sanatorium. One uncle did not make it to Sweden. He died on the ship and was buried at sea. My other uncle survived. He was in a hospital and sanatorium for four years gaining weight and getting better. He eventually moved to the United States.

So, from 33 members of my immediate family who were left in Hungary, only ONE survived!

We were liberated by the Russians in the early summer of 1944. All this time, for almost a year, we never heard from my father. We did not know if he was alive or dead. One day he just showed up. He had walked for days, hitched rides on Russian convoys, farmers' wagons and finally made it home.

The Romanian government changed from the Nazi-allied Iron Guard to a Communist regime. All the years that we were in the ghetto, we were not allowed to go to school. Now, under the Communist government, we were allowed to go back to school, but we were discriminated against because we were Jews. I remember that the top students in the class were invited to join the communist

youth group called the Pioneers. My younger sister and I were number one in our class, but yet were not allowed to join the Pioneers because we were Jews.

In 1947, about two years after the war was over, my father realized that there was no longer a future for Jews in Romania. We decided to leave for Palestine (now Israel) and filed for exit visas from Romania, but we were constantly denied our requests, until my mother was able to bribe the chief of police whose son she had saved while working in the hospital. She said to him. "I saved your child. Please save my children."

We received the exit visa in 1950 and immigrated to Israel where we lived for ten years. I served for three years in an Israeli elite combat unit. In 1961, I decided to leave home in Israel and immigrated to the United States where I have been living ever since. In 1970, I married and my wife and I have five children and twelve grandchildren. Each one of my children and grandchildren was named after one of my relatives who was murdered by the Nazis. My sisters did the same thing.

