

Exile & Return

The Personal Story of
Ilona Engel Fuchs



Yom Hashoah
Holocaust Memorial Service

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at the Chapel Hill Kehillah

Sponsored by:
Generation to Generation: Triangle Area Sons and Daughters
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I want to thank the Yom Hashoah committee for inviting me to speak to you this evening. I understand that they asked me to speak tonight not just because I am a Holocaust survivor, but I was one of the few who returned after the Holocaust to my home town and continued to live there for many years afterwards, in the shadow of the Holocaust, before emigrating to America.

Let me start by describing my home town. Tokaj is a town of 5,000 people in eastern Hungary, world famous for wine. At the beginning of World War II, the town had about 6,000 people, with over 1,000 of these being Jews. Jews in Tokaj lived throughout the town; they were teachers, lawyers, shopkeepers. We all belonged to the one congregation in town, that was orthodox, that had a religious school, a yeshiva, and a mikvah. My family has lived in Tokaj for generations.

We all got along well with our non-Jewish neighbors. I regularly helped decorate our neighbor's Christmas tree, and our neighbors would bring us lots of flowers every year just before the Jewish holiday of Shavuot so that we could make flower crowns for the Torahs in the synagogue.

In the 1930s it went from bad to worse for Jews in Tokaj. The first major bad thing to happen to me personally was in 1935 when I finished high school and wanted to go to teacher's college. They accepted me, but they told me that when I was finished I would not be able to get a job because I was Jewish. So I went to train to become a dress designer and woman's tailor.

In 1937, my two oldest sisters managed to go to America, with the help of an uncle who was already in New Jersey.

The next bad thing to happen to my family was in 1938, when my parents lost our family home, due to the first Jewish Law. Our family moved into a rented apartment. With the start of the war, the Jewish men of military age were drafted into Munka szolgálat, the forced labor camps, including my fiancé, Andor Goldstein. He was drafted in 1941, a few weeks before we planned to get married.

Things got terrible in March of 1944, when the Germans came into Hungary. Of course Germany and Hungary were already on the same side in the war, but when German troops actually moved into the country, things quickly became very bad.

First there was an order that all Jews had to wear a yellow star. My sisters and I not only put the star on, but embroidered it on, because we were very proud to be Jewish and wanted the star to look beautiful.

Soon there was a law that all Jews must turn in their gold and silver jewelry to the town hall. Of course we did this, but I remember one part that was especially painful emotionally. I, like many girls at that time had a tiny pair of gold hoops put in my ears. The jeweler in town, Mr. Radvanski, had put them in when I was four years old. Now the same jeweler, Mr. Radvanski, twenty years later, in 1944 had to remove them from my ears. I remember Mr. Radvanski had tears in his eyes as he was removing my little gold hoops that I had been wearing in my ears since I was a little girl.

The *really* terrible day came the day after Passover, 1944.

In the morning a drummer came outside on the street corner. That is the way announcements were made then. A drummer would go from one street corner to the next, beat the drum and then make the official announcement. In this case he announced that Jews were not allowed to leave their houses.

Soon afterwards, the mayor's wife came over to try on new dress I was designing for her. I told her what the drummer said, that we Jews were not allowed to leave our houses, and she said she would talk to her husband, the mayor, about what was happening and if it was something serious, she would send the butler to tell us.

But she didn't have time to send the butler. Soon after she left, I looked out the window, and saw small groups of Jewish people walking by outside with policemen. Then a couple of minutes later a policeman knocked on our door. He was very polite. He said we had 15 minutes to gather some things, and was nice enough to say we should bring a warm shawl for "Mrs. Engel," my mother, who was already 65 years old.

My sister ran out to the barn and milked the cow, to have some milk to take with us.

We all went to the synagogue with the policeman. Can you imagine about a thousand people jammed in there? We didn't sleep the entire night, children were crying, but the milk came in handy; I cannot tell you how many children drank from our milk that night. Everyone was afraid; we didn't know what would happen. Perhaps they might blow us all up.

The next morning, I told one of the policemen that I needed to go home and give back the dress and fabric to the mayor's wife. One of the policemen came with me and we met in our house with the mayor's butler and I gave the dress and material to him. Our next door neighbor, Mrs. Szabados, came over and asked if she could keep anything for me. I took off the engagement ring that I had been wearing for 3 years, that my fiancé had given me before he went into the labor camp. I gave my ring to Mrs. Szabados. Her daughter was going to get married soon, same as me. I told her that if I didn't come back, she should give the ring to her daughter.

Then the policeman who was with me asked me, "Ilonka, perhaps you need to buy something." I said, "maybe a small collapsible drinking cup." So he said "I will get a cup of coffee while you buy the cup and I will come and get you." So I went to buy the drinking cup and came out of the store and waited for him and he didn't come. Only then did I realize that maybe he was trying to give me a hint that I should disappear and hide while he wasn't watching me. But I couldn't do it. How could I leave my parents and my sisters in the synagogue? I didn't know what would happen to all of us, but I couldn't leave them. So I went to get the policeman in the coffee shop and we walked back to the synagogue.

They told us we would be staying in the synagogue for some time, so they took us to the different classrooms of the Jewish school, five or six families in a room. We stayed in the synagogue like this for several weeks. There was a kitchen set up in the yard, and somehow people from outside sent some food. I remember that the baker, Mr. Stojan, sent big

baskets of bread every day.

Then they told us we have to move to a ghetto in a nearby city, Sátoraljaújhely. We went there by a horse and wagon, and by railroad.

We were in the ghetto, until Erev Shavuos, 1944.

We were told that we would be transported to work in western Hungary. We were told to get on a train on a certain day. On the way to the station that day, I remember seeing my uncle, Schlayme Engel, who was a very religious man; they were beating him up. I guess he was trying not to go on the train because it was Erev Shavuos, the holiday would be starting soon and he did not want to be on the train on a holiday.

That was the last time I saw him.

We went to the train, but it was a cattle car. We were terribly crowded in it; we could hardly sit down. I remember that after a while my father started to daven with a couple of people because it was getting dark and Shavuos had started.

We arrived at Auschwitz in this cattle train very early in the morning on the first day of Shavuos. The music was playing, and there were German soldiers and people in striped clothing who were Jewish. Everything was "heraus, heraus", everyone needed to drop their bags and we walked in a long line. I could see in front of me, a man I later learned was Mengele, who said to people "Left" and "Right" . My mother was in front of me, and because it was chilly I want to put the shawl on her and started to kiss her and say goodbye, but Mengele said "Brauchen nicht grüßen, Abend werden zusammen stellen," which means, "don't say goodbye, you will see her tonight".

But, I never saw my parents ever again.

Then with the SS we walked, and we saw, on the other side of the fence, people without hair and some of them with long gowns, some with short things, and we were thinking this must be people in a mental institution.

Then we arrived in a building and they said, take off all your clothes, just keep your shoes and eyeglasses. And the SS people shaved us while we were naked, shaved all our hair, and our underarms and hair below. Then Rush, Rush, Rush into another room where there were showers. We didn't know at that time whether it would be gas or water. Then Rush, Rush again, and we came out and they give us a schmate, a rag, to put on and we were among the women we had seen before, thinking they were retarded people in a mental institution.

Then they took us to barracks, our barrack was 19. This was Auschwitz C lager, which I later learned was a "megsemisitö" lager, a place for people they didn't know if they wanted to keep alive. So we didn't get a number tattooed on our arm because we were not worth it, because each day they inspected us and took some of us to the gas chamber. Every day, in the middle of the night, we'd get "heraus, heraus! a Cé lapel!" It was so cold that we stood next to each other to warm ourselves. By noon it was so hot, when we were standing in a line, my older sister almost fainted at times in the hot sun. We (my younger sister and

I) needed to hold her up, so that when the SS came and counted us, they would not take her away.

We went to work every day. We pulled vegetables from the ground or moved patches of grass to cover bunkers. They wanted us to sing all the time. We made up words to a popular song, Lily Marlene, that we could sing while we were working. The Triangle Jewish Chorale has learned this song, and will now sing it for you.

Kivül a block előtt Az ablak alatt Cél appelt állunk A szabad ég allatt Reszketve várjuk a németet Hogy számoljon meg bennünket Hogy hányan szöktek meg Hogy hányan szöktek meg.	Outside in front of the block Under the window We stand: C Appell Under the free sky Frightened we await the Germans To count us To know how many escaped To know how many escaped.
És hogyha hiányzik Két három gyerek Azt mondja a német Térdepeljete! Térdepelünk mi szivosan Essőben, sárban és fagyban (hóban) Es mindig mondjuk ám A térdünk jaj de fáj.	And if two or three kids Are missing The German says Kneel down! We kneel down stubbornly In the rain, the mud, and ice (snow) And always we say Oh, how our knees are hurting.
De hogy ha a gong szól Istenem de jó! Vár mireánk bent A meleg takaró Eszünk, iszunk És aluszunk Növesszük kopasz hajunk És boldogok vagyunk	But if the gong sounds Oh, my God, how good! Inside is waiting for us The warm blanket. We eat and drink And sleep We grow our bald hair And we're happy

That was the song that we sang when we were working at Auschwitz.

They selected us many times, naturally naked, and with our arms up in the air. The most important thing for us three sisters was that we stay together. One time when they selected us, they wanted us to give our names, and we had heard before that we shouldn't give the same family name, so my youngest sister gave her boyfriend's name, Kohn; I used my fiancé's name, Goldstein, and my older sister used our maiden name, Engel.

Later they selected us again, we were lucky again to have the three sisters together. This time we got new clothes, even underpants, even armbands, to work in a factory in Magdeburg. The three of us worked on different machines. We didn't get food, hardly anything, but I got white gloves every day, because my work was to take a metal cube out of very hot chlorine water and put it in a machine to cut it. My obermeister, my supervisor,

was not SS; he said to me, be careful, because if you cut your hand, you know where you will end up.

We worked there in Magdeburg for many weeks. We were happy whenever the bombs came, because then we went to the cellar. Many other people were there also, not only us prisoners. When the bombs quieted down, they took us back to the barracks. One of the times, after the biggest bombing, I cannot tell you how surprised we were. Everything was burning, except our barrack and the men's barrack. The next morning, someone from the men's barrack knocked on our barrack and said we are free. The men had already broken into the place where the food was stored and brought us some carrots and other things. Later we all walked to the city, with a blanket on us. We saw our old supervisor in a group. We asked him, where is the Bahnhof, the railroad station. He said there is no railroad, it's best to go back to the barracks; at least there you can get something to eat. So we walked back to the barracks. But the next day, the SS arrived, with dogs, and "heraus, heraus," and we walked and walked until the Elba bridge. As we crossed the bridge, bombers came, and those who were still on the bridge were killed. We walked for many days.

One day we were walking and there was a fork in the road and somehow our older sister, Elizabeth, stopped to help one of the other prisoners, and some time later, we looked around and we did not see our sister with us. The SS and their dogs were with us so we couldn't stop or go back, so of course we were very upset. We were afraid we would never see our sister Elizabeth again. We walked with the SS, but a couple of days later, the SS disappeared. We kept walking, hiding in the forest.

Later we were in a small group, among them were two Belgian men, who were very nice to us, encouraging us to keep going. We walked and walked until a town Zelps, where everything was in smoke, but the windows had white sheets. We walked and walked until we saw American soldiers, and we knew we were safe. They took us to a schoolhouse where there were many people. By that time I was so sick, I collapsed. Next day, they asked people to stand in different rows, depending on what country they were from. These Belgian boys asked, why we don't stand with the French people? But we were hoping our father would come home, so we stood on the Hungarian side. This meant that we went under Russian control.

Because I was so sick I couldn't walk, so they took me, and my younger sister, to a clinic where the Russians treated wounded soldiers. When we arrived at this clinic, we saw someone we knew from Auschwitz who yelled out, "My goodness! Your older sister, Elizabeth, is only 3 kilometers from here and she has been crying, thinking that both of you got killed." So in this way, we were happy to find out that our sister Elizabeth was still alive.

In this clinic, every day I got injections, and they gave me a long yellow robe to wear. I cut off the bottom to make a babuska to cover my head. The Russian woman doctor who gave me the injections every day talked a little German, and asked me if I could sew, because there was going to be celebration and she needed a dress. So she took me in her room and gave me black klocké silk material, and I made a dress for her without a pattern, and she

said she never had such a beautiful dress in her life, and she gave me a gold ring. I later used that ring to get married.

Eventually we made our way to Budapest, leaving our names on trees and walls wherever we went, in the hope that other survivors, friends or family, might be able to find us and know we were still alive.

In Budapest in Bethlen Square, where all the survivors arrived, we got some clothes, they took us to a place to eat and a place to sleep. The following day, I went to my fiancé's house, at Rakoczi Street 80. There I learned that my fiancé had not yet returned, but his mother was there. She was so nice, she went to sleep with her daughter-in-law to make room in her own apartment for my two sisters and me, since the three of us didn't want to separate again. We stayed there for several days. A cousin's husband fixed my few teeth; I had lost nearly all my teeth.

Then we went back to Tokaj. We moved into an empty house that belonged to Jews who had not returned. The next day I got my license back as a dress designer and dress-maker, and had two students.

Some people were nice to us and some were not so nice.

I got back a sewing machine, and some of our furniture, but we never got back any of our three cows.

From Tokaj more than 1,000 Jewish people were deported, but less than 100 came back.

My youngest sister's boyfriend came back and soon they got married. Their wedding was the first celebration in the Tokaj Jewish community after the war. The wedding group picture is on one of posters hanging on the walls here tonight. You can see dozens of people in this photo; every Jew in Tokaj was there.

At this time, November 1945, one of the other Jewish men who returned was Miksa Fuchs. He asked me to marry him. I told him that I had promised myself to wait for my fiancé for five years from 1941 when he went into the labor camps, and the five years would be over in January. If my fiancé didn't return by January, I would marry him.

Miksa Fuchs was seven years older than me. He had known me since I was a young girl, he was a very decent man and he was the only survivor from his family. January 1946 came and my fiancé still didn't return. I married Miksa Fuchs in February. We had a son, Henry, two years later, and a daughter, Marta, two years after that.

The tiny Jewish community of Tokaj started again. The synagogue was mostly destroyed during the war, but the men who returned cleaned up one room of it and we had Shabbos services there. They also cleaned up the small chapel and we had a small Hebrew school there every afternoon. They also cleaned up part of the mikvah, the ritual bath, and we had it open one afternoon a week for women, another afternoon a week for men.

But I always wanted to go to America, even before the war. After the war, we again tried to come, but we could never get a visa, even though my oldest sisters in America tried very hard to help.

Then in October 1956 there was a revolution in Hungary, and an opportunity to escape, which we did, in the middle of the night with our children, and my two sisters and their families. We spent several months in refugee camps in Austria, and we arrived in New Jersey in February of 1957.

We soon moved to Pasadena, California, where one of my oldest sisters lived. We raised our two children there, and lived happily there until 2000, when my dear husband Miksa, now called Morton, passed away. Then last year, I moved to Chapel Hill.

Let me end with a few thoughts about the Exile and Return, tonight's special theme. How could I return and live in the town from which I was deported, from which so many of my family were sent to the gas chambers?

Maybe I am unusual, but I do not blame most of the people in Tokaj; they didn't know, like we didn't know, that we were being sent to a concentration camp with gas chambers and ovens. Some people in town were very nice, others were not so nice, just like in any other town. But Tokaj was and still is my town, the town where I was born, where all my sisters and my parents were born, and I'm still very attached to it.

Over the past thirty years, I have returned to Tokaj several times. There are now only two Jews left, both of them my children's age. I used to know their parents well. In earlier years, I would visit with them.

The town, like towns and cities all over Europe, has taken new interest in the memory of its Jewish community. It has restored the synagogue and it is used for special programs and concerts. You can see photos of the restored synagogue, how beautiful it is, in the posters here tonight.

But it is not easy for me to go back, to remember my parents, my aunts and uncles, and cousins and dozens of girlfriends and boyfriends who used to live there and who did not come back from the camps. In a few years, there will hardly be anyone who even remembers them.

I am grateful to be sentenced to life, and to have a loving husband for 54 years, and have two wonderful children and four beautiful grandchildren. I hope to live a few more healthy years here in Chapel Hill with my new friends, in my new community.

Thank you for listening.

