A LUCKY CHILD

A Memoir of Surviving Auschwitz as a Young Boy

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Dedicated to the memory of my parents, Mundek and Gerda Buergenthal, whose love, strength of character and integrity inspired this book
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Preface

This book should probably have been written many years ago when the events I describe were still fresh in my mind. But my other life intervened — the life I have lived since I arrived in the United States in 1951, life filled with educational, professional and family responsibilities that left little time for the past. It may be also that, without realizing it, I needed the distance of more than half a century to record my earlier life, for it allowed me to look at my childhood experiences with greater detachment and without dwelling on many details that are not really central to the story I now believe important to tell. That story, after all, continues to have a lasting impact on the person I have become.

Of course, I always knew that some day I would tell my story. I had to tell it to my children and then to my grandchildren. I believe it important for them to know what it was like to be a child in the Holocaust and to have survived the concentration camps. My children had heard snippets of my story at the dinner table and family gatherings, but it was never the whole story. It is, after all, not a story that lends itself to such occasional telling. But it is a story that must be told and passed on, particularly in a family that was for all practical purposes wiped out in the Holocaust. Only thus can the link between the past and the future be reestablished for our family. For example, I never really managed to tell my children, in its proper context, how my parents behaved during the war and the strength of character they displayed at a time when other people under similar circumstances lost their moral compass. The story of their courage and integrity enriches the history of our family, and it must not be allowed to be buried with me.

I also wanted to recount my story to a wider audience, not because I think that my early life was all that noteworthy in the greater scheme of things, but because I have long
believed that the Holocaust cannot be fully understood unless we look at it through the eyes of those who lived through it. To speak of the Holocaust in terms of numbers—six million—which is the way it is usually done, is unintentionally to dehumanize the victims and to trivialize the profoundly human tragedy it was. The numbers transform the victims into a fungible mass of nameless, soulless bodies rather than the individual human beings they were. Each of us who lived through the Holocaust has a personal story worth telling, if only because it puts a human face on the experience. Like all tragedies, the Holocaust produced its heroes and villains, ordinary human beings who never lost their humanity and those who, to save themselves or for a mere piece of bread, helped send others to the gas chambers. It is also the story of some Germans who, in the midst of the carnage, did not lose their humanity.

For me, the individual story of each Holocaust survivor is a valuable addition to the history of the Holocaust. It deepens our understanding of this cataclysmic event that destroyed forever not only European Jewry as such, but also its unique culture and character. That is why I tried to write my story as I remember living it as the child I was, not as an old man reflecting on that life. The latter approach would have deprived the story of its character as the contemporaneous personal testimony of one child-survivor of the Holocaust.

This book contains my recollections of events that took place more than six decades ago. These recollections, I am sure, are colored by the tricks that the passage of time and old age play on memory: forgotten or inaccurate names of people mentioned in the book; muddled facts and dates of events that took place either earlier or later than recounted; and references to events that did not happen quite as I describe them or that I believe I witnessed, but may only have heard about. Because I did not write this book earlier, I could no longer consult those who were with me in the camps and compare my recollections of specific events with theirs, and that I regret I very much. Most of all I regret that I could not discuss the details with my mother. Also, despite my best efforts, I
have found it difficult, if not impossible, particularly in the book’s first two chapters, to
distinguish clearly between some events I actually remember witnessing and those I was
told about by my parents or overheard them discuss. All I can say is that as I wrote about
them, I seemed to remember them clearly as first-hand experiences.

Although the chapters of this book are organized in chronological order, I have not
necessarily recounted the individual events or episodes in that same order within the
chapters. After all these years, I can recall particular events or episodes, frequently very
clearly, but not exactly when they occurred. To the child I was, dates or time had no
significance. As I try to recall that period of my life, I realize that I did not think in terms
of days, months or even years, as I would today. I grew up in the camps, I knew no other
life, and my sole objective was to stay alive, from hour to hour, from day to day. That was
my mindset. I measured time only in terms of the hours we had to wait to receive our next
meal or the days remaining before Dr. Mengele would most likely mount another of his
deadly selections. Thus, for example, when starting to write this book, I had no idea when
in 1944 I arrived in Auschwitz. I obtained that information only after consulting the
Auschwitz archives. The Internet provided me with the date of my liberation from
Sachsenhausen and that of the liquidation of the Ghetto of Kielce. This is the extent of my
research for the book; the rest of the story I tell is based on my own recollections.

Had I written this book in the mid 1950s, when I made a first attempt to tell part of my
story by publishing an account of the Auschwitz Death March in a college literary
magazine, this memoir would have conveyed a greater sense of immediacy to the events I
describe. At that time, unencumbered by the mellowing impact that passage of time has on
memory, particularly painful memories, I could still clearly recall my fear of dying, the
hunger I experienced, the sense of loss and insecurity that gripped me on being separated
from my parents, and my reactions to the horrors I witnessed. The passage of time and the
life I have lived since the Holocaust have dulled those feelings and emotions. I regret that
as the author of this book, for I am sure that the reader would have been interested in that part of the story as well. But I am convinced that if these feelings and emotions had stayed with me all these years, I might have found it difficult to overcome my Holocaust past without serious psychological scars. It may have been my salvation that these memories faded away over time.

My Holocaust experience has had a very substantial impact on the human being I have become, on my life as an international law professor, human rights lawyer and international judge. It might seem obvious that my past would draw me to human rights and to international law, whether or not I knew it at the time. In any event, it equipped me to be a better human rights lawyer, if only because I understood, not only intellectually but also emotionally, what it is like to be a victim of human rights violations. I could, after all, feel it in my bones.
CHAPTER I

FROM LUBOCHNA TO POLAND

It was January 1945. Our open railroad cars offered little protection against the cold, the wind and the snow so typical of the harsh winters of Eastern Europe. We were crossing Czechoslovakia on our way from Auschwitz in Poland, to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany. As our train approached a bridge spanning the railroad tracks, I saw people waving from the bridge and then, suddenly, loaves of bread came raining down on us. The bread kept coming as we passed under one or two more bridges. Except for snow, I had eaten nothing since we had boarded the train at the end of a three-day forced march out of Auschwitz, only a few days ahead of the advancing Soviet troops. The bread probably saved my life and that of many others who were with me on what came to be known as the Auschwitz Death Transport.

At the time, it did not occur to me to connect the bread from the bridges with Czechoslovakia, the country of my birth. That came years after the war, usually on those occasions when, for one reason or another, I was asked to present a birth certificate. Since I did not have one, I would be required to provide an affidavit, attesting — “on information and belief” — that I was born in Lubochna, Czechoslovakia, on May 11, 1934. Whenever I signed one of these documents, I would invariably have a flash-back to those bridges in Czechoslovakia.
Not long after the Communist regime collapsed in Czechoslovakia, I finally managed to obtain my birth certificate. It confirmed what I had claimed in my many affidavits and provided the impetus for a visit by my wife Peggy and me to Lubochna, she out of curiosity to see where I was born and I in order to connect with that one piece of land on earth where I first opened my eyes.

We reached Lubochna, a small resort town in the lower Tatra Mountains in today's Slovakia, after driving from Bratislava, its capital, for a few hours on winding roads alongside noisy brooks and meandering rivers. Without having planned it, we arrived in Lubochna in May 1991, almost 57 years to the day of my birth there. A beautifully sunny day greeted us as we drove into this small town surrounded by inviting, mellow mountains which distinguish the lower Tatras from the harsher high Tatra Mountains.

Now I understood why my father had dreamed of one day coming back to Lubochna and why my mother had loved it here. It seemed such an idyllic place. As Peggy and I walked through the town in the hope of finding what used to be my parents' hotel, I realized that but for the official-looking piece of paper which forever linked me to Lubochna, nothing else did. We never found the hotel — I later learned that it had been demolished some time in the 1960s. Although my visit confirmed to me that Lubochna was truly the beautiful place my parents frequently talked about, I realized with considerable sadness that for my family and me this town represented little more than an historical footnote in a story that began here with the joy brought on by the birth of a child, a joy that gradually gave way to what eventually turned out to be a very different tale.
My father, Mundek Bürgenthal, had moved to Lubochna from Germany shortly before Hitler came to power in 1933. Together with a friend, Erich Godal, an anti-Nazi political cartoonist working for a major Berlin daily, they decided to open a small hotel in Lubochna, where Godal owned some property. The political situation in Germany was becoming ever more perilous for Jews and for those who opposed Hitler and the ideology of his Nazi party. My father and Godal apparently also believed that Germany’s enthusiasm for Hitler would wane in a few years and that they would then be able to return to Berlin. In the meantime, the proximity of Czechoslovakia to Germany would allow them to follow developments there more closely and enable them to provide temporary refuge to any of their friends who might have to leave Germany in a hurry.

My father was born in 1901 in Galicia, a region of Poland that belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the First World War. German and Polish were the languages in which he received his primary and much of his secondary school education. His parents lived in a village on a farm that belonged to a wealthy Polish landowner whose extensive agricultural estate was administered by my paternal grandfather, an unusual occupation for a Jew at that time in that part of the world. The Polish landowner had been my grandfather’s commanding officer in the Austrian army and took him into his service when both returned to private life. Eventually he put my grandfather in charge of his many farms.

The nearest high school my father could attend was located in a town some distance away. Family lore has it that, to get to that school, my father was for a time boarded at the home of the flagman in charge of a strategically located railroad crossing. Trains going to and from that town would pass the crossing a few times a day. Since there was
no train station nearby, the flagman would slow the train down in the morning and again in the afternoon to enable my father to jump on and off. Less hazardous arrangements were later made for him to attend school.

After graduating from high school and a brief stint in the Polish army during the Russo-Polish war which began in 1919, my father enrolled in the law school of the University of Krakow. Before completing his studies, however, he left Poland and moved to Berlin. There he joined his older sister, who was married to a well-known Berlin couturier, and obtained a job with a private Jewish bank. He rose rapidly, becoming an officer of the bank at a relatively young age due to his success in helping manage the bank's investment portfolio. His position at the bank and his brother-in-law's social contacts enabled him to meet many writers, journalists and actors living in Berlin at the time. The rise of Hitler and the ever increasing attacks by his followers on Jews and anti-Nazi intellectuals, quite a number of whom were friends of my father, prompted him to leave Germany and settle in Lubochna.

Gerda Silbergleit, my mother, or Mutti to me, arrived at my father’s hotel in 1933. She came from Göttingen, the German university town where she was born and where her parents owned a shoe store. Not quite 21 years old at the time — she was born in 1912 — her parents had sent her to Lubochna in the hope that a vacation in Czechoslovakia would help her get over the non-Jewish boyfriend who wanted to marry her. They also thought that it would be good for their daughter to leave Göttingen for a while. There the harassment of Jews — and, in particular, of young Jewish women — by Nazi youths roaming the streets, was making life increasingly more unpleasant for her.
When making arrangements for my mother’s stay at the hotel, her parents asked that she be met at the German-Czech border. Instead of sending his driver, my father decided to drive alone to the border, where he gave her the impression that he was the hotel's chauffeur. She was quite embarrassed when at dinner she was seated at the table of the hotel’s owner, who turned out to be the driver she had quizzed about Mr. Bürgenthal, whom her mother had described as a very eligible bachelor. Years later, whenever I heard my mother tell this story, I wondered whether her visit to Lubochna had been arranged by her parents, in part at least with a possible marriage to my father in mind, and whether, if there was a such a plan, my father was in on it. Was it just a coincidence that his hotel was recommended to my grandparents by a friend who also knew my father well? I never did get the whole story, assuming there was more to it. To my mother, it was always love at first sight, and that was it!

My parents were engaged three days after they met at the German-Czech border. They were married a few weeks later, but not until first my maternal grandfather, Paul Silbergleit, and then my grandmother, Rosa Silbergleit née Blum, had traveled to Lubochna to pass judgment on the bridegroom. They were apparently somewhat taken aback by the rapidity of the engagement and the hasty marriage, but it was 1933 and there was little time for courting. I was born some eleven months later. By 1939 we were refugees on the run, only a few steps ahead of the Germans — a whole country, it seemed, had declared war on a family of three whose only crime was that they were Jews.

As I search my memory for some aspects of my brief life in Lubochna, I have a hard time separating what my parents told me from what I actually remember. My guess is that much of what I think I remember from that period I actually heard later from either my
father or mother. My mother frequently recalled that I served as her interpreter at the age of three or four when she went shopping in Slovakia. She spoke only German and the shopkeepers for the most part only Slovak. I could apparently get along in both languages. We spoke German at home when all three of us were together, and I must have picked up Slovak from my Slovak nannies.

My only clear recollection of life in Lubochna dates back to a day in late 1938 or early 1939, when my parents told me that we had to leave our hotel. As they began to pack our belongings, they appeared to be very much in a hurry. Years later I was told the Hlinka Guard, a Slovak fascist party supported by Nazi Germany that controlled Slovakia, claimed to have a court order declaring one of its front organizations the owners of our hotel (my parents had purchased Erich Godal's share in the hotel some years earlier). There was no way to successfully challenge this confiscation of our hotel. By that time, the Hlinka Guard and its followers controlled the courts, and their police threatened to expel us from the country if we resisted their takeover and failed to leave Lubochna immediately.

As a result, we could take only a few suitcases with us, leaving everything else, in addition to the hotel itself, to the new “owners.” But I wanted my car to come with us! It was a little red car with pedals. I was told I could not take it along, but that we would soon be back and that it would be waiting for me on our return. That car was my most treasured possession. I must have sensed that I would never see it again, for I went to the storeroom to look for it. There it was, propped up on its rear wheels, leaning against a post, surrounded by boxes and suitcases. It looked as sad as I felt. To this day, when I think back to that moment, I can still see my little red car.
After leaving Lubochna, we lived for a time in Zilina, also in Slovakia. At first, we stayed with friends who owned the Grand Hotel in that city. I remember the name because I had a wonderful time standing at its main entrance with one of the doormen and, as was then the custom, calling out “Grand Hotel!” to passersby. They would frequently engage me in conversation and, to my delight, sometimes even toss me a small coin.

From the hotel, we moved to a small apartment in Zilina. Here my mother and I were often alone. My father had found a job as a traveling salesman for a medical instrument company and spent a lot of time visiting customers in different parts of the country. My parents had apparently used most of their savings, including the money my mother had received from her parents as dowry, to enlarge the hotel and to buy out their former partner. Now the hotel was gone and with it the income they had depended on.

While we lived in Lubochna, Mutti had never had to cook. That was done by the hotel’s chef, a massive and intimidating Slovak matron, who let my father know in no uncertain terms that his young wife was not welcome in her kitchen. Now, in Zilina, things were different and I soon realized that my mother was not a very good cook. Once she roasted a chicken without cleaning its insides very well. When my father started to eat it, he ended up with a mouthful of corn, which must have been the remains of the chicken’s last meal. Of course, he spat it all out and they had a big fight, with my father screaming, “I thought they taught you something at that finishing school in Göttingen!” She counterattacked by reminding him of some long-forgotten incident for which he was supposedly to blame. And when he replied that that had nothing to do with her bad cooking, she accused him of changing the subject. I soon realized that she would always
win these arguments, while he would end up shaking his head in utter disbelief. At times she would also make me her co-conspirator when she did something she did not want my father to know. Once, when she realized that the kitchen rag she had been looking for had fallen into the pot in which she happened to be cooking, she swore me to secrecy and assured me that “Papa will not notice anything if we don’t tell.”

One day, while my father was out of town, the police came to our apartment and ordered my mother to pack our belongings and make sure that we would be ready to come with them within the hour. We were Jews and undesirable foreigners, we were told, and were being expelled from the country. My mother protested that we could not leave without my father, but to no avail. We were taken to the police station. Its building and courtyard were already filled with other foreigners. My mother recognized some of our friends among them. People were sitting on their suitcases, children were crying, and I sensed that everybody was very afraid, just as I was.

As soon as we arrived at the police station, my mother in her precise, clipped German demanded to see the chief of police or the person in charge. She made a tremendous amount of noise while waving a leather-bound document with a lot of stamps on it. After a few minutes, we were taken into an office. Here a heavyset man in uniform, who was not very friendly, asked in a threatening tone of voice what all the commotion was about and who she thought she was. My mother, who seemed very tall to me at that moment, but who measured slightly less than five feet, slammed her document on the man’s desk and barked at him in German: “We are Germans!” Pointing to the document on the desk, which she called her passport, she continued in that same tone: “We are supposed to be your allies! It is an outrage that you are treating us like common criminals.” She
immediately wanted to be taken to the German consul to protest this scandalous treatment, and she warned the police official that he and his superiors were going to be in very serious trouble from the German authorities for molesting Germans living peacefully in Slovakia. “Just you wait and see what will happen when my husband comes back and does not find us at home!”

After a whispered conversation with another man and some further inspection of the passport, the officer suddenly smiled at us, got up from behind his desk, grasped my mother’s hand, and in broken German apologized to her profusely. This was all a big mistake; of course they were not deporting Germans living in Slovakia, only foreign Jews and other undesirables who should not have been allowed into the country in the first place. He shook my mother’s hand again, saluted and ordered a policeman to escort us home.

Years later I learned that my mother’s “passport” was in fact a German driver’s license, which looked like a passport. Her German passport had been confiscated when she tried to renew it because, like other Jews living abroad, she had apparently been stripped of her German nationality. To this day, I wonder what she would have done had the police officer been able to read German and called her bluff. The last person she wanted to talk to at that moment was the German consul.

I continue to marvel at the courage, ingenuity and intelligence my mother demonstrated that day, character traits she was to reveal many times over in the future under even more difficult circumstances. Where did this young woman from a well-to-do, protective Jewish middle-class home with barely a secondary school education, derive the cunning
and almost reckless gall to assess and take advantage of the weakness of those posing a serious threat to her or her family, and come out the winner? As a child I assumed that it was only natural for my mother to always know what to do. But what was then “natural” has continued over the years to inspire my profound admiration and to puzzle me, not only because she repeatedly succeeded in beating the odds when confronting the Nazi killing machine, but because she seemed to pull off these successes at a moment’s notice with the speed of a magician. Where did that magic come from? Although I have tried, I have never quite been able to identify the intellectual and emotional source of my mother’s special gift. All I know is that she had it.

As soon as we had returned to our apartment from the police station, Mutti exclaimed, “We were lucky this time!” But then she added, “They will be back,” and began to look for my father’s handgun. He had acquired it in Lubochna to scare off foxes or other animals that sometimes tried to get into the chicken coop behind the hotel’s woodshed. When my mother found the gun, she told me that we had to throw it away secretly so that the police would not find it the next time they came. She handled the gun very gingerly, let it slide into a paper bag and told me not to touch it. The next day we walked to the river and threw the gun into the water from one of the bridges. I did not understand it, but felt very grownup to be participating in this highly secret operation. When my father returned, he was very angry to learn that my mother had thrown his gun away, but it was too late to do anything about it.

A few days later, my parents decided that Slovakia was no longer safe for us and that the time had come to leave. They expected the harassment of Jews, particularly foreign Jews, to become more severe in that part of Czechoslovakia. My father was also afraid
that he was on a Gestapo “Wanted” list, and if the police were to come back, they might arrest him and turn him over to the Germans. But where could we go? That was a question I heard my parents discuss over and over again in whispered tones, usually at night when I was supposed to be asleep. Eventually, they settled on Poland. It was the only country, they thought, we had a chance to be allowed to enter. There, moreover, my father would be able to obtain the visas that he had been promised by the British authorities in Czechoslovakia and that would allow us to travel to England as political refugees.

Soon we were on our way to Poland. It took us a while to get very far, however, since we were trapped in the no-man’s-land between Poland and Czechoslovakia. This strip of land measured some 50 yards from border post to border post. The borders were connected by a dirt road that cut through a field. On either side of the road ran a deep drainage ditch. The Polish border post was at one end of the road, the Czech at the other. As soon as we got to the Polish side of the border, the Polish guards would order us back to the Czech side. The Czechs, in turn, would not allow us to re-enter. And so it went for days. To me, the strip of road seemed much longer than it probably was because of the many times we had to move from one end to the other, carrying or pushing our suitcases while the border guards kept yelling at us not to show up again.

We must have been stateless and had no valid travel documents. My father must have lost his Polish nationality at some point, possibly because he may have acquired German nationality, which he would in turn have lost, just like my mother, when the Nazis denaturalized Jews living abroad. As stateless persons, once in no-man’s-land we had no right to enter Poland or to return to Czechoslovakia. Every day and every night my father
would wait for a change of shifts of the guards on the Polish side of the border. As soon as he saw new Polish guards there, he would march us up to the guard house and ask to be admitted, claiming that he was a Pole. But since he lacked the necessary papers to prove it, the guards would order us to return to the Czech side. Back and forth we went, day and night. We would sleep in the field adjacent to the road between the border posts or in one of the ditches. On rare occasions, we would be allowed to sleep in the waiting room of one of the guard houses. While we were cold most of the time, we were not hungry because the Czech or Polish farmers would sell us bread and sausages. But we were not going very far. I was tired and did not understand why nobody wanted to let us into their country.

A week or so after we had first arrived at the border, on a day when we had again been ordered by the Poles to return to the Czech side and just as we were dragging our belongings towards that side, we were met by heavily-armed German soldiers. It seems that Germany had in the meantime occupied Czechoslovakia, and here we were, in the clutches of the very people we were trying to escape. I could sense that my parents were very afraid. One of the Germans, who appeared to be in charge, wanted to know who we were and what we were doing in the middle of nowhere. My father, who suddenly spoke very poor German, answered that we were Poles, that we had been here for more than a week, and that the Poles would not allow us to return to our country. “We shall see about that,” snarled the German officer. With those words, he ordered two of his soldiers to come over and pick up our suitcases. I thought that they were going to do something terrible to us, because my mother suddenly grasped hand very tightly and stopped me from speaking. But the German soldiers merely walked us back to the Polish border.
Once there, they ordered the Polish border guards to let us pass. “These people are Poles!” yelled one the soldiers. “I order you to let them in. You had better not send them to our side again. Things are going to be different from now on!” My father translated what the German was saying and the Poles nodded obediently.

That is how we got into Poland. It must have been March of 1939, for that is when Germany marched into Czechoslovakia. I was almost five years old.