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Going to the Budapest ghetto

Early in the morning our walk began. We were not allowed on the footpath, just the road. Jews were not allowed to walk on the footpath at that time. My sister and I each had a shoulder bag that was open on top and made of woven straw. A girl in front of me took some biscuits in a scarf. After a while the biscuits started to drop from one corner. Before they hit the ground, I caught them and put each one in my bag. I wore a rucksack as well and carried two little cases, one of which became too heavy. When a cyclist with a big basket in front came along and said he would carry our luggage ahead for us, I gave it up. Sadly my diary, which I wrote in every day, was in the luggage.

We walked the entire day. It was dark when we arrived in the ghetto. But our luggage did not arrive.

We were taken to the market hall. In the big hall there was a large crate with steps leading up to it. We were ordered to put all our valuables in it. I dropped in my gold chain and my coral necklace which I always wore, as red would ward off the evil eye ... but I wouldn't throw in the thin little ring my grandmother had taken off her finger and placed on mine when she was on her deathbed in 1941. My father's mother was buried in the cemetery in Dunaszerdahely.

Those children who had relatives in the ghetto could leave to find them. The rest of us were told to go upstairs. I will never forget the kindness of a little old Jewish lady who gave a bread roll to my sister because she looked terribly frail. When we got upstairs I found

a few coins in my pocket that I threw out the window. It was obvious that keeping the coins would risk our lives as we had already been forced to hand over our valuable possessions. We would be killed if we hung onto anything of value. I didn't realise that Jews in the ghetto would probably find the coins I threw away. Someone must have been happy the next morning to find money on the street. I wasn't willing to risk my life for the coins, but my grandmother's ring was a different story. The ring was thin, and all the stones had fallen out of it. The ring had no value to anyone but me, and I had permission from my school to wear it. I held onto it for dear life.



Outside the market building in the Jewish ghetto.
Above is the room where Dita stayed (Klauzál tér 11, Budapest 1072, Hungary).

I knew we were in grave danger. I was constantly alert to it. This was just something inside me. You had to have luck too, but this was just my instinct. I was responsible for the life of my sister. That was ingrained in me. No matter what happened, I knew that I had to look after her and make sure that she survived. This was not a burden for me.

Some of the older kids had raided the kitchen before we left the

hospital and shared tins of meat. I wouldn't allow my sister to have any, and of course I didn't touch it either, because it wasn't kosher. The next morning, I awoke to a dreadful sight. Everyone had been sick. Those cans of meat needed to be cooked before eating. Soon two sisters who had been with us in the hospital came in. The previous night they had been trying to find their relatives without knowing their address, but they were unsuccessful. A lady came up to them and asked where they were from. (After the war, Sarah told us she had seen two girls out after curfew with water running from, their eyes and noses. No one else was willing to help them.) When they told her where they were from, she asked about my sister and me. She suggested they go back to the market and bring us to her, to the soup kitchen in the ghetto. In the meantime, she would locate their relatives. However, the rules changed the next morning and we were not allowed to leave. We stood in a corner downstairs and waited for our chance. When the guards' attention was diverted, we escaped from the building.

We made our way to the address the girls had given us. It was lunchtime. The meeting was to be in a soup kitchen for old people. We asked for soup but were thrown out. We flattened ourselves against the walls of the open corridor. Imagine, we had to wait till 3 pm for our meeting with the lady, who we later realised was my father's friend Sarah Stern who had placed us in the hospital. We were freezing. We could smell the soup. I was breaking the biscuits I had with me into crumbs. My sister licked her finger and dipped it in the crumbs. The crumbs lasted longer that way.

We waited there, destitute, cold and hungry, outside the crowded soup kitchen; from inside, the aroma of the warm food that we had been denied wafted tantalisingly towards us. 'I am not hungry. I am not hungry,' I repeated to myself. Then I recognised a man walking past us and I caught his sleeve in sudden desperation. 'Mister, I know you.' He looked down at me and asked who I was. 'I am Nandor Deutsch's daughter and this is my sister.'

Wordlessly he lifted my sister up, and I and the other two girls

followed him into the soup kitchen. He was the man who was in my father's squadron, whom I had seen just once at the Jewish Communal Centre. He sat us at a table, brought us all spicy cabbage soup, and gave us two Kaiser rolls each. I couldn't finish my soup on an empty stomach because it was sharp and spicy. I wouldn't eat both rolls. I had to save one.

He waited with us until 3 pm. He knew Sarah, too. When she saw us, she gave the two girls their relatives' address. She then took my sister and me into a room and told us we must sleep. We were sitting on the bed, and I was leading my sister in prayer when the door burst open and an angry man came in.

'They can't stay in my place ...' he began, but stopped when he saw us praying.

Sarah and Mr Herskowitz, unbeknown to us, had devised a plan to smuggle us out of the ghetto.

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Hotel in Budapest: hiding in the mouth of the lion

Mr Herskowitz used to bring in flour from the Gestapo that was baked into rolls in the ghetto. After we slept, they put us into an empty flour sack and he drove his truck straight back to SS headquarters, which was then in the Gellert Hotel. Somehow it was arranged that families (the mothers and children of forced labour workers) could hide in one of the rooms in that building. The large room we



The Gellert Hotel

were hiding in had no windows. It was on the mezzanine floor and we could never walk outside it because we would be seen from the lobby. My sister and I were the only children without a mother to cook and care for us. There were as many people as mattresses on the ground.

In the morning they brought us a cup of black coffee. On the saucer was a wedge of carrot and a piece of green pepper or kohlrabi. If Mr Herskowitz could, he would come some mornings and bring us two Kaiser rolls. He

would see that we had our coffee. What he didn't know, and I never told him, was that this was the only food provided. I never thought to ask him for more food parcels for us while we were in hiding; I was just grateful for his help. The fathers would bring food to their families and mothers cooked it on a small camping stove. We could smell the food cooking, which made us even more hungry.

There was a bucket of clean water and another bucket used as a toilet. I wasn't very popular one night when I mistook one for the other.

My sister's eyes were getting bigger and bigger, and I was getting desperate because I had nothing to give her to eat. One day I decided to look through our meagre possessions and see if there was something I could barter. There wasn't anything of use, so I started to shake everything. Imagine my amazement when I shook my school report book and two hundred *pengös* fell out. In our previous hiding place, when my mother sent these documents I didn't bother to open my report book because I knew what it contained. What luck! Had I known about the money I would have thrown it in the crate in the ghetto with the rest of the valuables that we had to give up.

Every day a man came into the room with a tray of freshly baked vanilla slices. My sister didn't like cakes, only vanilla slices. Imagine the agony of smelling them on an empty stomach. Well, from then on, we lived on vanilla slices every day.

Some of the mothers spoke to me about my period. I was a tall, well-developed girl and they wanted to help me. I didn't understand then what they were talking about. My period had not come as a result of the prolonged fever.

A traumatic occurrence was that someone discovered I had lice in my hair. While we were in the ghetto I had been put in charge of cutting the hair of children who had lice. I think that's when I caught mine.

My hair was like a family heirloom. I had a luxuriant, bountiful head of dark, shiny hair down to my hips, worn in two braids. My mother never let me wear my hair unbraided for fear I would

be given the evil eye. This superstition came about because people thought that if you were praised for a good-looking feature, that something bad would happen. I promised my father I would not cut my hair until I was eighteen years old.

Then, in one unceremonious moment, my braids were snipped off. I kept both braids, not realising the lice happily lived on in them.

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The art business

After I stopped working for Tom Silver, I sold art from our house in Balaclava Road. I had my private customers and good dealers that I worked with. About four times a year I advertised an 'Open House'. My son Rob came with his big dog because he didn't like me being in the house by myself. He observed what I was doing and took a liking to it.

Eventually when he lost his job as an accountant, he proposed that we should start an art gallery together. I suggested Toorak Road, South Yarra, as there were two galleries there already and it's good to have a Gallery Precinct. We walked up and down but could not find a vacant shop. Between the two galleries there was a run-down furniture shop with a card saying 'This is a not-for-profit business'. We walked in and I asked the young man hidden under the staircase whether this was a joke or whether they really were not-for-profit. He said his boss would gladly give up the lease, so I went to High Street, Armadale, where he had another shop. I was told that he really wanted out of the Toorak Road venue. However, when the man found out what I was going to use the shop for, he wanted additional key money for the premises. I went to the agent, George Kravat, and told him of the hitch. He said, 'Leave it to me,' and that he would smooth it over. My neighbour in Ivanyi Gallery came to welcome me, saying he would not be happy to have competition but I was an exception and he was happy to have me just from my reputation.

We painted and carpeted the premises within a week, and with my stock we opened the Gould Gallery at 270 Toorak Road, South Yarra. On opening night, all my customers attended. One of them used to buy one painting at a time, but this time he bought two to encourage me. We had an antique partners' desk above which we placed an Italian painting that we didn't intend to sell as we were selling only Australian art. Someone gave me such a generous offer that we even sold that painting. What a great start!

What was not so easy was that the house in Balaclava Road did not sell at auction. My bank manager was away for six months and the offer I had at the bank was for me to pay off the house within three years. Of course that was impossible. In those days banks were not interested in lending money to women on their own.

With that offer I went to the main branch in Toorak Road, South Yarra, and confronted the manager there. When that manager also would not change the offer, I became angry and said we had been with this bank since 1948 and this would not have happened in my father's time. He asked who my father was. When I said Mr Deutsch, he tore the paper in half and said that he was a legend in our bank. Although he only met him once, my father was an inspiration to the banker who promised to start afresh. With the new arrangement, it was still a large amount to pay per month but, I felt, not impossible.

For the first nine months business was good ... and then the 1980s crash came. Suddenly, not a soul walked into the gallery. There was not enough income to pay the electricity, let alone the rent. I went to a wholesale dealer I knew who sold china ornaments. They gave me some pieces on appro (meaning I didn't have to pay until I sold the pieces). We put the pieces in the window and at least we made small sales. My lovely neighbour Andrew Ivanyi would come and commiserate with me. He would say, 'I have twenty years of stock behind me but it must be terrible for you.'

Some months before, with my art dealer friends Bernie and Clarette Freedman, we bought two Norman Lindsay watercolour paintings from Sydney. They were marked for sale in our gallery for

\$10,000 each. As things stood now, we couldn't sell them at \$100. In Australia, when one customer stops buying, all others follow suit.

One day I received a letter from the Freedmans. They said that, as they were dealing from home, they had no expenses. They felt for us, knowing how dire our position must have been. And they offered to buy the two paintings at our cost price. I sat with the letter at the desk, unable to move with tears flowing down.

Rob looked over my shoulder and said, 'That must be our last resort, Mum,' he said. 'Think what else we could do.'

I decided to sell my diamond ring. But the dealer we had bought it from was not interested. Then I went to an auctioneer who said, 'As a matter of fact, I think I have a buyer for it, and what's more I will put a cubic zircon into the nice setting.' The sale of the diamond saw us through until business improved again. And improve it certainly did.

Rob and I worked well together. The gallery was open seven days a week. Our lives revolved around the business, we had beautiful loyal customers, and more and more artists gave us their work to sell. We looked after them well – they were our bread and butter. Our customers felt that we would stand by them and the works we sold. On purchasing a painting, the customer paid a deposit and had three months to pay the painting off. Some of our clients bought paintings before furniture. They had a passion for art.

Just once, when we had a print exhibition upstairs, our neighbour who was in real estate came and I walked with him upstairs. He really liked the work. 'Yes, I will have it,' he said.

'Which one?' I asked.

'The lot.'

What a thrill and what excitement!

A momentous exhibition that we held was of the artist John Glover (1767–1849). It was difficult to put together a large exhibition of someone long dead, but the catalogue was well received throughout Australia. I had a wonderful client from my working days and he continued to buy paintings as well as limited edition

art books. He wanted me to buy him the postcards of the painter J.A. Turner who painted at the turn of last century. That was easier said than done. There were forty-six printed cards. I had to buy small lots whenever they came up. I decided to collect a set for myself, as there were many duplicates, but the rare ones were quite expensive. I could never complete the sets. My client was short one card and I am short two. Still, they are a wonderful history of life in those days.

I had another lovely client who worked as an insurance broker at the Australian Wool Board. Those were the days when Australia lived off the sheep's back. They did well and encouraged the arts. The Wool Board held exhibitions of sculptures of sheep. My client, buying in his own capacity, liked drawings of sheep by Hans Heysen. Whenever I could get a good one I would take it to him and, as well as a sale, we would have a lovely conversation.

The nicest art dealer of the time was Charlie Jones of Ballarat. He and his wife would come to the Melbourne art auctions, but first they came to see what I had to sell. In the days when I worked from home, I would prepare lunch for them. Charlie was a diabetic. My father also had type-two diabetes and had taught me what he could eat so I knew what to prepare for them. We had similar tastes in art and we shared the motto of 'Honesty is the best policy' in life. Sadly, he has now passed away at a good age. His son and grandson took over the business and kept it in his honour as C.V. Jones, with his portrait painted on the delivery van. He would be pleased and proud to know that the family purchased the property and that they treat me with great affection.

One of my good customers always sat down for a chat at the desk with me. One day while his wife was looking around, we spoke about honesty. I told him that my father always said that you only take one thing with you when you die, and that's your good name. The customer jumped up excitedly and called his wife over.

'Didn't I tell you Dita reminded me of someone?' he asked her.

It turns out that when he was a young boy working on a building site, he always hung around my father. He told me that he learnt

everything by listening to Mr Deutsch. He proceeded to tell me all his observations and memories, down to having to bring my father biscuits for his diabetes. We became like a family.

His wife noticed that I had a chronic cough. She told me that my cough could be cured and sent me to an outer suburbs clinic to a natural healing centre where a man she knew worked. I was directed to a room with a *mezuzah* on the door. When I entered, the practitioner told me that he used to go to school with Rob. The herbal drops he prescribed totally cured me. I was ever so grateful. I invited him to visit me in the gallery, as he was interested in art. He came and reconnected with Rob. I got a big surprise when he invited me to his fiftieth birthday celebrations. At the party, I couldn't recognise him as he was dressed as a woman and sitting at the bar. What a surprise! I know that he appreciated that I was not judgemental of people in general and suspect he was not embarrassed to share with me his transition to a gay lifestyle. I felt privileged that he trusted me with his life as a gay man.



Ground floor of the Gellert Hotel, showing the mezzanine level above the reception lobby where Dita and Liz hid



Dita Gould