



Maria, age 11, 1935.
Collection of Maria Frank Abrams

Maria Frank Abrams

But in the 1930s, as Hungary became increasingly antisemitic, her experiences as a teenager were sharply different. When the Nazis invaded in 1944, they forced her family into a ghetto and then deported them to Auschwitz.

Born into a large and prosperous Hungarian family, Maria spent her childhood summers at a country villa and enjoyed social activities with Jewish and non-Jewish friends.

Early Years

Frank Family, 1928—Iren, Ede, and Maria.
Collection of Maria Frank Abrams

Maria Frank was born July 21, 1925, in Debrecen, Hungary.

"My great-grandfather, Abraham, one of three Jews to be granted permission in 1860 to stay in Debrecen, was one of the founders of the most beautiful synagogue in the city."

Maria's father, Ede, ran a clothing store. Maria had no siblings, but she had a large family of aunts, uncles, and cousins. She was closest to her cousin Vera.

The extended family was well-to-do, educated, fully assimilated into Hungarian culture, and even celebrated Christmas.

When Maria was six, her beloved Aunt Lilly gave her colored pencils and encouraged her to develop her artistic talent.



Maria, dressed for a dance, 1937.
Collection of Maria Frank Abrams

Maria and several Jewish friends attended the Protestant Dóczy Gimnázium (grades 5–12), where they had a lively social life. Due to the tolerant attitudes of the time, Maria and her Jewish friends were excused from Christian religious instruction to study with a rabbi.

Hungarian Antisemitism and Nazi Germany



Maria and her closest friends, 1940. From left: Maria, Pali, Vera Federman, Tibi, and Éva.
Collection of Maria Frank Abrams

Hungary, like Germany, became increasingly antisemitic in the 1930s.

"When I was 14, our lives began to change. In 1938, the government passed the first of many laws severely restricting the liberties of Jews. We were reluctant to accept the true meaning of these laws, that we were not considered Hungarians. I guess we lived in a dream."

Ede Frank was forced to give up ownership of his store, and he transferred it to a non-Jewish friend. The government forced young Hungarian Jews—teenagers—to join labor battalions. Maria's friend Pali, pictured here, died in 1942 in one such battalion.

"Even boys from mixed marriages, or those who had been baptized, were taken into forced labor. They were used for the most dangerous services, like clearing mine fields, and were so badly mistreated that hardly any of them came back."



The Camps

Jews from Subcarpathian Rus await selection on the ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau.
Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Maria, her family, and the Jews of Debrecen were forced to move into the ghetto in May. After about a month of worsening conditions, they were all sent to Auschwitz. Deportations of the 12,000 Jews in Debrecen began in June 1944.

"We were forced into the third transport. There were about 86 people in one cattle car. After three days and nights, we arrived at Auschwitz. It was July 1, 1944. People talk about the noise, but I remember the silence."

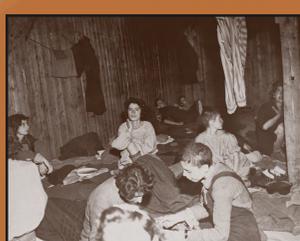
An SS officer separated Maria from her mother and pushed her to the right, her mother to the left.



Maria's journey from Debrecen to the camps.
Holocaust Center Graphic

"We had to take all our clothes off and leave them in a pile. I was so shocked and numb. Then we were each given a cotton dress and we put our shoes on. By that time I found Vera."

Maria was in Auschwitz-Birkenau. She got scarlet fever in August 1944 and in a twist of fate was put into hospital barracks, rather than killed. She recovered after six weeks. "Much later I met a woman, and she said a week after I left, all the patients were gassed."



Women survivors suffering from typhus in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.
Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

From Auschwitz, Maria and hundreds of other women were deported in boxcars. After a three-day journey, they arrived in Bergen-Belsen, a concentration camp in northern Germany. "They gave us shoes, and mine were so small they caused wounds which did not heal for half a year. By then I was always hungry and I would eat anything." The women slept in cramped conditions under huge tents usually used for army equipment.

One day Maria was selected to go to Magdeburg, a work camp in central Germany. "There were about 1,000 Jewish workers there—and others, criminals, thieves. Lice everywhere. We worked for 12 to 14 hours a day, standing; we had no socks."

In the first two months of 1945, 752 tons of bombs dropped by the Allied forces fell on Magdeburg. Then in early April, Maria and about 300 fellow prisoners were locked into their barracks.

"On April 11, the doors opened. German civilian guards came and herded us out." Under a bombardment of long-range weapons, they ran and ran until finally the guards gathered the few that were left into a barn. The next morning, the Germans were gone. "We were 19 Hungarian women and we marched on together."

After the War

Maria made her way to Dresden and then Prague, and eventually reunited with her cousin Vera in Budapest.

Much had been lost. Most of her friends and family had been murdered. Two of Maria's close friends, pictured above, did survive: her cousin Tibi lives in Sweden, and friend Eva in Budapest.

For more than a year, Maria and Vera worked in Germany. They applied for scholarships to study in the United States. "In December 1947, we finally got visas and went to the University of Washington. We did not know where it was—we thought it was Washington, D.C."

"My dream came true when I entered the School of Art." Maria received her BA and MA degrees. In her long career in Seattle, she designed sets and costumes for operas and had shows in Kobe, Japan; Budapest, Hungary; and throughout the United States.

Maria met and married Sydney Abrams in 1948. Their son, Edward, is a civil rights lawyer in Israel.



Vera and Maria at Lake Chelan, Washington, 1948.
Courtesy of Vera Federman

"People talk about the noise, but I remember the silence."

CAMPS

Funding for this exhibit provided by Washington State.

Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center • www.wsherc.org