

Magda Altman Schaloum

Magda Altman Schaloum was 22 when the Nazis marched into Budapest and changed her city and her life. Through the following year, she and her family endured a journey through death camps and work camps. At war's end, only Magda and her sister were left.



Magda at age 19, 1944.
Collection of Magda Altman Schaloum

Growing up in Hungary

Magda Altman Schaloum was born on December 17, 1922, in Győr, Hungary, to parents Gyula, a locksmith, and Janka, a homemaker. When Magda was one-and-a-half, her mother died. Her father remarried a woman whom Magda came to love as her own mother.

The family kept kosher and celebrated all the Jewish holidays, though they lived in a non-Jewish neighborhood. Before the war, "Hungary was a very antisemitic country," Magda said, but she always had non-Jewish friends.

Magda was 17 when Jews in Hungary were forbidden to go to school. Not allowed to pursue her dream of becoming a kindergarten teacher, Magda went to live with an aunt in Budapest, learning to make umbrellas.

Magda with her birth mother, Janka, her older sister, Jolan, and father Gyula, c. 1923.
Collection of Magda Altman Schaloum



Jews forced to scrub the pavement as local residents look on.
Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Occupation

By March 19, 1944, when the Nazis invaded Hungary, 22-year-old Magda had returned to live in Felsőgalla to be with her parents and brother. She commuted daily 60km by train to her job in Budapest. Occupied Budapest looked drastically different than the city Magda had known. German soldiers took over Jewish businesses. The Hungarian SS, the Arrow Cross, were throughout the city and helped the Germans identify Jews.

On April 1, 1944, as Jews were made to wear the yellow Star of David, violence and discrimination escalated. One night in May 1944, Magda returned from work to find her family packed to leave. The next morning, they were taken to a small apartment to share a room with 10 other Jewish people. The newly planted vegetables and fruits in the family garden were never to be harvested; neighbors immediately looted the home.

On one occasion, Nazi soldiers ordered Magda, along with other Jewish women, to scrub the ground of the main city street. Magda recalls her humiliation as ordinary citizens watched on either sidewalk—laughing—as she kneeled with a bucket and a brush. Shortly thereafter, Magda and her family were sent to the synagogue to live under the watch of the Arrow Cross. There, they awaited deportation.

Deportation

A June 1944 train transport took Magda and her family to the vacant Komárom military fort. They waited in squalor and filth for 10 days. Then they were forced into cattle cars, each crammed with 120 people, to be sent to "work." Magda was pushed to a window. She saw her father carrying a package and yelled out, "Father!" As he tried to board, he was caught by the Hungarian SS. He told them he had food for his family. The SS men took the package and beat him severely. This was the last time Magda ever saw him.

Auschwitz

It was the 15th birthday of Magda's brother, Endre, June 21, 1944, when the train arrived at Auschwitz. It was the dead of night. When the cattle cars finally opened, the floodlights made it seem like day. Magda smelled the burning flesh of crematoriums, not knowing then what caused such an awful odor.

Immediately, the camp SS were yelling, separating women from the men, babies from their mothers, and the sick from the healthy. Dr. Josef Mengele, the so-called "Angel of Death," was standing on a podium. "We stood five in a row ... and Dr. Mengele, with a point of the finger, decided who will live and who will die," Magda remembered. Magda was sent to the right, her mother to the left. When she ran after her mother, she was told her mother was going to take a shower. Magda hugged and kissed her mother goodbye. She never saw her again.

Nazi guards herded Magda and the other prisoners into a building where they were stripped of clothing and possessions. Her head was shaved and she stood in a cold room among other frightened prisoners. Seeing a toilet bowl, they crouched to bring water to their lips. A guard caught them and beat them severely with a leather belt. That was the first of many beatings Magda received.

The women were forced to run under a cold shower and wait in a cold room for instructions. By this time, it was already morning. Finally, about midday, the women received a small pot of soup for 10 of them to share. "It was very hot and tasted salty and felt like sand between our teeth," recalled Magda. The women stood in tightly packed barracks, huddling body to body with only dirt under their feet. That morning Magda was required to rise early and stand in line to be counted. During the day, she worked in the fields, filling wheelbarrows with grass that was used to make the soup they were given daily.



Mapping Magda's experience.
Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center Graphic



Women working in Plaszow (Krakow) labor camp.
Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Plaszow, Augsburg, Mühlendorf, and Liberation

The SS guards conducted a "selection" 10 days after Magda's arrival at Auschwitz. Magda was deemed fit for hard labor and sent to Plaszow concentration camp, near Krakow. There Magda used a pick, shovel, and wheelbarrow to move dirt down a hill, only to move it up again the next day.

As the Russians approached Krakow, Magda and other prisoners were transported back to Auschwitz. This time, Magda received a tattoo on her left arm—A-17170.

One month after her return to Auschwitz, Magda was sent to a manufacturing plant in Augsburg, Germany, which had specially requested the labor of Hungarian women.

For eight months, Magda worked in the factory making parts for war planes. Magda remembered the kindness of the Wehrmacht officer in charge. He once said, on the factory floor, "If you will be liberated, I will be liberated with you. If you have to die, I will die with you." She suspected his kindness was also self-serving—the end of the war was near.

In April 1945, Magda was transported by cattle car to Mühlendorf, a sub-camp of Dachau. As Allied bombs fell, prisoners were trapped in the cattle car for days. A Wehrmacht officer defied orders to deliver the prisoners to a mass execution site. He also redirected the train to avoid bombings by Allied forces.

After days of waiting and listening to gunshots, on May 1, 1945, the Americans liberated the cattle cars. Magda Altman Schaloum stepped out into freedom.

Post-war

After Liberation, Allied troops resettled Magda to the all-Jewish Feldafing Displaced Persons' Camp, housed at a former Hitler Youth compound in southeastern Germany. She saw, "beautiful beds for the first time with checkered bedding and matching drapes," and was given her first full meal in months—hot stew.

Slowly, Magda began to recover and fell in love with another survivor named Izak. She spoke Hungarian and he spoke Greek, "but we both understood the word rendezvous." They married that year in Feldafing. Before immigrating to Seattle in 1951, they had two children, Henry and Lucia. Their son Jack was born in the United States.

Magda with her husband, Izak Schaloum.
Collection of Magda Altman Schaloum



Bearing Witness



Magda Altman Schaloum.
Collection of Magda Altman Schaloum

Magda's brother, father, and mother were murdered in the concentration camps. Magda's sister, Jolan, was the only other surviving member of her family. She survived with the help of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish philanthropist living in Budapest during the occupation, who saved tens of thousands of lives.

Magda's husband, Izak, never used to speak about his experiences in the Holocaust. When he had a stroke, Magda knew that she had the responsibility to tell the story not only of her family, but of her husband as well. She wants her testimony to bear witness for all those who lost their lives and all those who survived but are unable to speak.

Magda has six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

"I tell my story because I want you to know it really happened. I know it. I was there."

SURVIVOR



Funding for this exhibit provided by **CULTURE**
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