

The Survivors

An essay

For Leslie and Eva Aigner, I am happy to call you my friends.

“For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and the living. Do not deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would not only be dangerous; but akin to killing them a second time.”

-Elie Wiesel

This is the true story of the special friendship that I have with two special people that my sister and I like to call Oma Eva and Papa Les. We share a history in a very special way.

My grandfather Laszlo was born in 1935 in Hungary and came to the US in 1956 as a refugee. He never spoke much about the events that happened between these two decades, but as his time grew shorter his stories became more frequent. Still, there are a lot of grey areas, and what we do know we found out through rigorous research and archival records.

We know that he was hidden thanks to my great grandmother, Rozsa's, sharp intuition. We knew that family members perished in death camps. But thanks to Leslie and Eva, we now know so much more. We can finally paint a picture of what life was like for my family during the Nazi and Russian occupations.

It started when I decided to ask the Aigner's if I could interview them for a school project, and over a series of Zoom calls, they shared with me their amazing legacy and stories of survival. I felt their pain when they described those who they had lost. I was overjoyed when they spoke of miracles. Here the darkest days of humanity were endured, and they persevered.

Imagine, for a moment, having your memories erased. All of your photos, records of your existence, birth certificates. All of the proof that you were ever even a human being, burned like a heap of garbage in the street.

Imagine having to return home to the country that exiled you, that sent you to certain death. The home that you grew up in, the home of so many childhood memories, now belongs to someone else. Everything left of your life here has been stolen. The synagogues you used to attend are in ruins, and they are not being rebuilt because there is no one to worship in them.

There is a housing shortage. So many buildings were destroyed, and even the habitable areas don't have running water or electricity. Hundreds of thousands of your fellow countrymen are missing; friends, mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers. Bad news and mourning are commonplace.

Eva must see me thinking about this. She says something I won't forget: "You know, Sydney... you can see that the human spirit is strong, and we can overcome a lot of things. We are a heck of a lot stronger than we think we are."

The Nazis failed in their mission. They wanted to destroy an entire people, they wanted to destroy any evidence that the Jewish people existed. The forces of good prevailed, and evil was banished. In the infamous Posen speeches of 1943, Heinrich Himmler describes the Jewish people as “vermin,” and “not worthy of life.” He swore that the Jewish people would be eliminated. By his accounts my grandfather and the Aigner's shouldn't be here. Their children, my mother, their grandchildren, myself. Shouldn't be here. But here we are, and Leslie and Eva are going to be great grandparents again, any day now.

There is not enough space on these pages to share the full, and truly harrowing, story given by these two courageous and beautiful people. Les himself stayed in Auschwitz, and endured three other internment camps before his liberation in April of 1945. “I often cried myself to sleep,” he says. “The four months that I was in Auschwitz I saw these chimneys, four chimneys, puking black smoke day and night. The smell of death was all around us.” His mother and 9-year-old sister Marika were among the woman and children taken here, to be gassed and cremated upon arrival.

Marika was just nine when her innocent life was stolen. I have a little sister of my own and we often look at her while she’s playing and wonder what she’ll be when she grows up. What would Marika have been, what could she have done? Would she have been a writer, a doctor, a traveler? What was so dangerous about Marika and millions of others that their lives had to be cut short?

I asked Les what he remembered about the German invasion. He replied: “Nazi’s didn’t HAVE to invade. The Hungarians just opened the border.” I heard something of this, but it was different

coming from him. I am of Hungarian heritage, this angered and embarrassed me. How can you just hand over human lives like they are meaningless?

Les' wife Eva was 7, and her sister was 15, when their mother Gizella was taken from them. Late one night, shortly after being left to fend for themselves, they were awoken and told that they were going on a march. The Arrow Cross started herding children towards the Danube river.

"They stopped us about a block from the river, they were taking people in groups of 75-80 and we heard the shots. My sister and I huddled under a blanket. It was freezing. Snow, ice, everything; we were scared to death. And this is where the miracle comes."

Their mother found them.

Gizella had jumped from the rolling train after it had stopped for water. A Wehrmacht soldier spotted her, aimed his gun, and ordered her to stop. "She knew many languages- Slovakian, Hungarian, German, and Yiddish, and this came in handy. She grabbed the knees of the soldier and says 'Please, let me go. My husband has already been killed, and I left two children behind. They will die if I can't get back to them.'"

Even more shocking than the story itself is the Wehrmacht officer's reply.

"This was a feeling man," said Eva.

“I have a wife and three children waiting for me at home,” he said to her. “I can’t openly help you, but I’m going to turn around towards the train with my gun. If you can run, run.” She did. It took her ten days on foot to reach Budapest. She snuck into the ghetto at night and was told that her children had been removed from the safe house and taken down to the river front to be shot. Gizella approached a guard and offered him the last thing she had- her wedding ring- to buy their lives. “She recognized our cries, out of 800 people.” says Eva. “Isn’t that a miracle?”

Indeed, it was.

The Aigners account has had a deep and lasting impact on me, so I asked them what I could do to fight human right violations, and what they want future generations to learn from their experiences. They were instrumental in passing a law in the state of Oregon requiring students to learn about the Holocaust, and unfortunately there is no such law in my home state of Washington. Holocaust education is “strongly encouraged, but not mandatory.” My mom and I have repeatedly written to Governor Jay Inslee, urging a mandate of this education. Holocaust denial is still rampant- and the very thing that made the Aigner’s start speaking about their story.

“Unfortunately, these things are still happening,” says Les. “People are being displaced because of their ethnicity, color, religion. We have to learn to accept our differences. Respect each other as human beings. It’s easier to love each other than to hate.”

“Sydney,” Says Eva, “you’re the next generation to step up. If we want Holocaust education to continue, it has to start with young people like you. Whenever you talk to a Holocaust survivor, you automatically become a witness. Carry on your grandfather’s history, educate, stand up for others, stand up for equality.”

“People will need it,” Les adds.

I assured them that I always would, and I intend to keep that promise.

My mom and I will forever be thankful to Les and Eva. They helped us fill in many grey and blank areas in our family story. The thing I’m most thankful to them for is their bravery. By having the strength to bear witness, they speak for the 6 million who can’t.

Dedicated to the memory of Gizella Spiegel, and her heroic act of love.

“A mother’s love for her children is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity, it dares in all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path.” -Agatha Christie

In memory of Moritz Spiegel, Marika Aigner, and Anna Aigner

In memory of the Dezsofi family:

Andor Dezsofi- survived Kauffering/Dachau

Istvan Dezsofi- Died May 2nd 1945, Buchenwald

Ilona Dezsofi- Died June 1945, Theresienstadt

Dorottya and Maryanna Dezsofi- twins, unknown.

