



My name is Livia Fränkel.
I survived the Holocaust.
This is my story.

Livia's Story

Part 1 · My Childhood 1927–1939

The story is based on several interviews with Livia Fränkel.
Livia Fränkel has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

My Childhood 1927–1939

My Family

My name is Livia Fränkel. As a child I was called Livi Szmuk. I was born December 4, 1927, in a town called Sighet. The town is located in the Maramures region of Northern Transylvania (Romania).

In my family we were four people; me and my elder sister Hédi, and my father Ignatz, and my mother Frida.

My parents gave me a lot of love. When I think back I'm very grateful because I got a lot of love. I personally believe that it is easier to endure life's trials when you've got a safe base.

We were Jewish middleclass. My dad was an entrepreneur and owned a firm where they made packaging. Our economy was good. Me and my sister got everything we needed.

Our house was on the Hospital Street in Sighet. In 1938 we moved into a new and modern house on the Railway Street.



Photo: Private



This is a picture of my family. It shows my parents, Frida and Ignatz, and my elder sister Hédi. This picture was taken in 1936. I was 7 years old and my sister was 12.

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In this picture you see my sister Hédi and myself. I was maybe 3 years old and my sister was 7. In those days people did not have private cameras. When they wanted to eternalize the children they simply went to the photographer's. This time mum brought pyjamas. I'm sure she thought that we would look cute in them. I remember her changing my clothes and combing my hair. After that she put on the freshly ironed bows and ribbons.

You may see in the picture that I'm angry. The reason is that when we entered the photographer's I caught sight of a doll. I pounced at it, took it in my hand and held it hard. The photographer only had one doll. Of course my sister wanted to have it too. I remember that we started to fight. To mum it was embarrassing that we fought. So she tried to do justice. She decided that my sister could hold the doll, as she was the older. In the picture you can see my sister's triumphant face. To me of course this was terribly unfair. Mum tried to bribe me with an ugly dog and I didn't want it. I took the dog and threw it away. Then I stood there and looked really mad.

Note: After the war some of Livia's and Hédi's relatives went back to Sighet and many of them stayed in the family's house. The people found a lot of old photos in the attic and were wise enough to understand how much they meant to Livia and Hédi, and sent the photos to them.

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When this picture was taken I was 9 years old. I performed for charity as "flowergirl". It was a great success. I loved the theatre. I danced and acted. I gave this photo to my beloved uncle Alex. On the back it says:

*With a lot of love to my Alex and Helen from Livi.
At this performance I danced as a flowergirl. 1937
Sighet. Livi, 9 years old.*

Antisemitism

The first time I experienced harassments due to my descent was when I started primary school. The first or the second day some big and strong boys came up to me and threw some taunts in my face: “Stinking, gross Jew. What have you got to do among us decent people? You just poison the air and have to go back to your own country.” I got scared to death when I heard them and started to run. One of the boys came after me and tripped me. I fell and hurt my knee and it started to bleed.

I was quite desperate. I thought: “I don’t want to go to school. I will go home to my mum.” So I ran home. And mum, who sat at the kitchen table, caught sight of me. She got scared when I came in. I was weeping and my knee bled. I cried and she wondered why. Sobbing I told her about the incident and innocently I asked: “I don’t understand, why do they do this to me? I haven’t done anything. Why are they this mean?” Mum tried to explain that they were envious because I was better than them. It was true that I was a good student; I knew how to read and write already before I started school. Mum told me that envy could sometimes make someone teasing and bullying you. I could accept that. What about them not wanting me to be there but going back to my own country? Astonished I asked: “What is our country? I thought this was our country. We are born here and our forefathers, too. All the family and generations back are born here.” That was a very difficult question. Not even my wise mum could answer it.

Jews had no country of their own in those days. Romania was our country and still we were not accepted there.

Troubled Times in Europe

An important event took place around 1933; dad bought our first radio. That was a big thing in our life. My sister and I found it amazing that we could tune in foreign countries and listen to music from Berlin, Paris and London.

For our parents the radio was important but for quite another reason. A lot of things happened in Europe and they wanted to know what was going on. They wanted to listen to the news also from other countries not only from Romania.

1933 it was very turbulent in Europe. It was also the year when Hitler gained power.



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Text: Ewa Wymark | Translation from the Swedish original: Elisabeth Sannar

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Part 2 · Life Changes 1939–1944

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Life Changes 1939–1944

The Outbreak of War in 1939

1st of September was a Friday. It was a very beautiful late summer's day and I was just outside the house hopscotching with my friends. After a while I felt hungry. I said to my friend: "Wait a moment, I will come back soon. I will just go in and have a snack." When I came in I stopped at the kitchen door as I saw mum sit at the table. She was listening to the radio and was deeply concentrated. I saw her crying. Big tears fell along her cheeks. I got absolutely terrified: "But mummy dear, why do you cry? What has happened?" Then mum told me the war had broken out.

The generation of our parents had already experienced a war. My mum was a teenager when the First World War broke out. As a young soldier in fact dad was at the front and fought. Mum remembered how horrible war was. So she cried despairingly and said: "Now there's war in Germany but possibly we will get into it. What will happen to us? What will happen if war comes here and dad gets called up? Who will take care of us? Who will support us?"

Mum got desperate and I got frightened. Of course war was scary. So I sat down near mum and both of us sat crying. But after a while my thoughts started spinning in my head. I thought about Germany being far away and that war might not come here at all. So I dried my tears and went out and got on hopscotching with my friends.

Actually I forgot about the war pretty soon because everything stayed calm. We weren't so affected in the beginning. We still were rather secure in our "little duck pond". So I see it today. Of course we heard that the war went on and that the Nazis were persecuting the Jews. But somehow we didn't feel threatened. We thought it was scary, of course, but we felt that there was nothing we could do about it.



German troops are marching on the streets of Warsaw shortly after the invasion of Poland.

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Sighet is Returned to Hungary

1940 when Hitler refurnished the map of Europe without being stopped, it was decided that Transylvania and our town Sighet would belong to Hungary. For us that meant that we changed citizenship in a week. The Romanian authorities moved out and the Hungarians moved in. This happened in the autumn of 1940. School would begin and suddenly all education would be in Hungarian. Luckily this didn't affect my sister or me. We had no problems as we managed to read and write in both languages. But that was when our lives slowly started changing.

The Hungarians passed a lot of laws against Jews. The first I remembered was when it was decided that Jewish young people couldn't get on studying at university. They were barred from their studies. The bans also affected non-Jews. They might not shop in Jewish shops. It affected our lives quite a lot and our economy went down. Especially since dad's clientele diminished. I remember dad saying: "Okay, there is a war going on now so we have to claim less for ourselves. We will manage these times, too. We will bite the bullet. The main thing is that our family sticks together. As long as we are together we feel some safety." The whole family agreed with him. That's how it was.

Then fortunes were confiscated: Jews weren't allowed to have money in the bank and no riches, like jewellery, expensive carpets and so on. Then we weren't allowed any vehicles.

All my childhood I had longed for a bike, but it was that expensive. So at my birthday the year before at last I got my red bike. But I had to deliver it to the authorities because Jews couldn't own bicycles. No bikes, cars or carriages. Not many had cars but maybe they had a carriage, but you weren't allowed to have that, and not a radio either. We had to leave it with the authorities. And you couldn't subscribe to a newspaper.

During this period I would say that our lives changed. Everything went by and by, but we still tried to live our lives as normal as we could during the circumstances. And we waited for the war to be over.

Jews May not Continue Their Studies

Then something happened that hit me personally, quite hard. There was a new law. The Hungarians decided that

Jews could not attend the upper secondary level. That was the worst thing because I would just start there. My sister Hédi had just one year left till her exams. We had planned our future, what education we were going to get. It wasn't all that common with educated girls in those days but both mum and dad encouraged us. Suddenly it all stopped and upper secondary school wasn't possible. When secondary education was finished you couldn't do anything.

I remember crying. I was desperate, because in my life school and friends were most important. "What will happen if I can't go to school and get my education?" Our parents were as sad and desperate as we were. Also to them it was important that we got education and professions. Dad and mum considered what to do about the problem. There were private and independent schools. However, Sighet had no Jewish upper secondary school where we could go on studying. We would need to leave our town and move to some of the bigger ones. There were city centres in Transylvania where more Jews were living. They had Jewish upper secondary schools. It was fairly far away from Sighet. We couldn't commute but had to stay with a family. That would cost a lot of money and nowadays money was sparse.

"Jews weren't allowed to have money in the bank and no riches, like jewellery, expensive carpets ... No bikes, cars or carriages ... And you couldn't subscribe to a newspaper."



Cluj, where Hédi and Livia went to school. The photo was taken in the early 20th century.

© Yad Vashem

The issue with our education was important to our parents. I remember that mum and dad sat at the kitchen table a whole night long and discussed and counted and talked. In the morning when we woke up and came down they still sat there. Mum said: "Now we have arranged for you to be at school. We have fixed it." What the solution was I don't know. I didn't ask that much. But I was very happy and grateful that I could continue school. That meant that we went to school elsewhere, far from Sighet. We couldn't go back home at weekends, because travelling was expensive. It was rather painful to be away from home. This was the first time I was away for a longer time. I could come home on holiday at Easter, summer and Christmas to meet my parents.

I understood my parents had sacrificed a lot to do manage this arrangement. So I decided to become number one in my class. I wanted to prove to my parents that I appreciated their sacrifice. That's how it turned out. I didn't care about anything but school. I studied hard and it went well.

The law was passed in 1942, and that is when I started to live away far from home. In the autumn of 1943 I came home for Christmas and the New Year. The Russians advanced all the time. Sighet is on the border. Rumours said that Russians weren't far from the town. We expected that they would pass the border, as that would mean that war was over for us. Dad said to me: "Now the Russians are so near. When they pass the border, Sighet may become a battleground. It will be very chaotic and our family must not be split. So you will not go back to school after Christmas but stay at home. The most important thing is for the family to stay together." I thought that was okay. I had brought my schoolbooks and I could sit at home studying.

"The Last Evening With My Friends"

We were a group of Jewish girls and boys who were friends and stuck together. We hadn't seen each other that autumn as we stayed in different towns. When we met at the vacation we decided to celebrate the New Year 1943/44. We were convinced that the new year would be positive and good for all. We were going to wait for the New Year at one of my friends. Her parents weren't home. Us girls decided to make some nice food. The boys brought the drinks and also the latest jazz records to make everybody dance. We were happy and I remember that every one, sitting there, twelve of us six girls and six boys got to tell his or her plans for the future. We were teenagers then. Fifteen years old. We told what we were going to do when the war was over. Which university we would go on studying at, and what subject and what profession we wanted. Everyone got to tell that.

We were convinced that next new year 1944-1945 we would be free and meet again, so that all of us could tell what had happened. But as you understand the next new year wasn't like that. New Years Eve 1943/44 was the last evening with my friends. So, I tend to remember this night.

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Part 3 · Confined to the Ghetto 1944

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Confined to the Ghetto 1944

Everything in a Backpack

A new year began and we sat at home and waited for the Russians to come. In March 1944 when I saw German soldier in the streets of Sighet for the first time I got seriously afraid for our lives.

When the authorities had something to tell they did like in the Middle Ages. They sent a herald out into the streets and he banged the drum. The sound of the drum was heard in the houses, even indoors. Then everybody went out and listened, as we understood that it was important.

The first time we heard the herald and the drum after the occupation we went out to hear the message. I remember that the herald stood in the corner of the street. He said that the authorities in the town had decided that the Jewish inhabitants from the next day had to carry the six-pointed yellow Star of David. It had to be sewn onto the outerwear over the heart on the left side. All Jewish citizens had to do that, even children, except those under six years. We looked at each other wondering; we didn't understand what this would mean. Dad said: "Well, this is not too bad. We're not ashamed of being Jewish. The main thing is that the family may stick together. We are safe as long as we may stay together. We felt that he was right. So we went inside to cut and sew. Then we put on that star.



The picture shows a street in the former ghetto area of Sighet.

The Family is Forced to Move into the Ghetto

I believe people tend to accept changes as long as they come gradually. We thought that putting on the star was all right as long as it didn't get worse. But then it did. About fourteen days later we heard the herald again, and we went out to listen. The herald said that the authorities had decided that all the Jews in Sighet had to be evacuated. They said that a ghetto would be put up in the outskirts of the town. In the ghetto area everyone who weren't Jewish had to move out, and all the Jews of Sighet, about 10 000 people, had to assemble in the ghetto.

The evacuation would take place one street after the other. Our street was one of the first. When we heard the message of the herald we hardly knew what to think. We were totally shocked. Did we have to leave our beautiful home? Leave everything and move out?

We had to pack and prepare in 24 hours. Everyone had enough of his own thoughts. My biggest trouble was that I had both a dog and a cat. I was very fond of animals. So, what would I do with my pets? I couldn't bring them to the ghetto, as it would be too crowded. Feverishly I thought about what to do. Then I got an idea. We had a next-door neighbour to our right. She was a Romanian lady and she had always been nice to me, she used to give me candy in the street. I took courage, decided that I would ask her and rang her bell. I cried desperately and asked if the lady would please take care of my pets till I came back again. I said I was sure we would be back in one or two weeks. Surely this madness couldn't last. The lady felt sorry for me. She patted me and said: "Don't cry my friend, I will take care of your dog. I can't take the cat as I have got one myself. But I will feed it. You will be back soon. Then you'll get your pets back. I'll take care of them." Then it felt a bit better. At least I had managed to do this.

I went home and started to pack. I considered the schoolbooks important. And I wanted to bring some poetry and some novels. And a diary ... some photos ... important things and some clothes.

My poor mum, she had to manage it all. There was no limit concerning the amount of things we could bring. However, we had no vehicle so we could just bring what we were able to carry. To mum this was important, because we were going to live there. So she had to think about bringing bed linen, utensils and food.

I remember us staying up all night. We had some knapsacks. We also made sacks to carry on our backs. We filled them with all sorts of things. The next morning we looked like pack donkeys. Then there were some gendarmes, i.e. police or soldiers that came to accompany us.

I remember the last hours in our beautiful house. We brought everything out, and then we shut the door for the last time. We were not supposed to lock the door. We just shut it, as German soldiers were going to move into our nice house. Then we left. And I didn't want to turn around. I didn't want to look at it one last time. I just couldn't do that. I walked away and said to myself: "We will soon be home again, very soon." The optimism didn't leave me. Not even then.

Life in the Ghetto

We were among the first to come to the ghetto area. So we were lucky; we got a room of our own. Families that came later when it started to get crowded in the ghetto sometimes had to share a room with others. But we got a room of our own.

The room wasn't big. There were only three beds, four chairs, a table and a stove. Three beds weren't enough. How would this turn out? We were four. My sister and I looked at mum and wondered: "Where will the fourth one sleep?" Mum looked up and answered: "The two of you have to share one bed." "We can't share a bed. That's impossible", we said and started to quarrel. Hédi said that I kicked her and I said that she snored. We argued till mum intervened: "Do you know what, this isn't the time to quarrel. Stop arguing! Start cleaning. This place is dirty! I'm not going to start unpacking till you have got all in order. Then my sister and I started to scrub and sweep the floor. It was a couple of hours till mum accepted the result. I remember the first night. It wasn't that easy to share a bed. But then we got used to it.

The days went by and the ghetto filled up. A lot of people arrived. We accepted this life. We thought that we could live that way too. There was food. Hygienically it was not the best. But we thought that this would be all right too.

We were prepared to stay in the ghetto for some time. The older girls like my sister and her friends set up schools to take care of the younger children. They tried to keep up the morale and make everyday life work. I had some friends who didn't live far away. We met quite a lot. We talked and hoped for the war to be over. We heard canons. People said that the Russians were near. But that was only wishful thinking. In reality they were far away.

Running Out of Money

Before we left our home we had some money left and some belongings. Most of it was left to the authorities. But mum found out, just like me when I thought about the Romanian lady – mum thought about a young officer's wife. She lived at the other side. Mum decided to go to that lady and leave the money we had left and some valuables we had at home. She went over to her and asked her to keep the things till we came back. And she thankfully received everything.

When a couple of weeks had passed in the ghetto and we had no money my sister who always was able said: "I sneak out. I report for work tomorrow." Every day groups left the ghetto and went into the town to work. Hédi said: "I will report, sneak away and call at Mrs Fekete. I will ask for some of our money."

In the evening Hédi came back very subdued. We all waited eagerly to hear how much money she had got. "Well, what happened?" we asked. "Well", Hédi said, "I called and there she was, Mrs Fekete. She looked at me as if I was a ghost. She asked me what I wanted. I told her that I just wanted to have the money that mum had left here. Then she asked me what I was talking about 'what money?' she said, 'what are you talking about?' I told her that our mum had left some money with her before we were forced to leave. Then she accused me for making up stories and said that she would call the police if I didn't leave at once. So I left."

Mrs Fekete kept the money and all. After the war when my uncle returned he met her and asked to have at least our candlesticks back. Mrs Fekete denied it all and said that she hadn't got anything from us.

The Transport from the Ghetto

After four weeks all Jews were assembled and the gates were closed. None could leave and none could enter. After six weeks we heard the sinister sound of the herald, the drummer. This time he was inside the ghetto. We all went out, scared to death. Every time the herald came they wanted to take something away from us. Now we had nothing left. Just life. I remember thinking: "Will they take our lives now? Or what is it all about?"

The herald stood at the corner of the streets and proclaimed that the ghetto was going to be emptied. All people had to be transported. We had to be ready at six o'clock the next morning. Everybody ran to ask the drummer: "Where are we going?" we asked him. He had no idea. He said he only obeyed orders. We started asking each other what this would mean.

This was May 1944 and people said to each other: "The Hungarians are at the front and surely they haven't had time to sow. The Jews will probably be transported to the country. It is likely that we will be taken away to farm." Others said: "How stupid can you be? Don't you see that they will murder all of us?" Of course that was also a possibility considering the rumours. But there were no evidences. Depending on your orientation you were optimist or pessimist and accepted one of the answers. Hope is the last thing you give up, and we didn't want to imagine the worst.



Railway tracks close to the former ghetto of Sighet.

© Eva Wymark, 2013

That night I don't think anybody slept. Everyone packed his or her bag. It couldn't weigh more than 15 kilos. I didn't want to carry much so I brought no schoolbooks. I brought some clothes and photos of my boyfriend. Rumours said we'd have to walk far and march. I thought a pair of strong shoes would be good. It turned out that they were usable.

In the morning, at six o'clock, we stood outside the house. We were among the first to go. We stood there with our bags. Hungarian *gendarmes* arrived to take us off; they were something in-between policeman and soldiers. The gates of the ghettos opened and people poured out. It was a very beautiful early summer morning. We passed through town, waking up, and walked through a park. The sky was blue. The trees were green. It blossomed and the birds sang.

I got an ugly feeling that this was the last time I walked these streets. So, I started to say good-bye. We also passed my old school. Then we arrived at the railway station. There the group stopped.

There were lots of the SS and Hungarian Nazis. They helped each other. There were cattle cars waiting for us. On the outside it said: "Intended for ten horses." They counted on 80 Jews being loaded into the wagon. The Germans and Hungarians helped each other to press us in. When this was over we got four buckets, two for feces and two for water. Then they shut the door and it was locked with a giant padlock. I remember the metal click from the padlock. It felt like a mousetrap, as there was no way out.

When all the people had got on board the train started with a jerk. I was commissioned to check which direction the train took, if we went into the country that could mean farming. I stood on a bag to be able to reach the hatch to look out. I would check the names of the stations. Day one we were still in Hungary. We felt a bit hopeful. Day two, when it dawned, horridly I noticed that we were in Poland. Then I lost all hope.

Day three the situation was unbearable. The buckets with feces were full. We had no water. The thirst tormented us. I can't describe how horrible it was to be thirsty and not have water. It's a lot worse than hunger. That passes after a while. But thirst gets worse. After a while you feel mad if you don't get water.

The train stopped at the stations. I put out my head. There were always people staring at us. I appealed to people outside the wagon, saying: "Please, get us some water?" But people just stood there staring, some pretended not to hear. They could have brought some water and given us on our way to death. Nothing would have happened to them. But they lacked courage. On the third day we started praying to God to end the journey. The situation in the wagon was so unbearable. Even death would feel like a release.

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Part 4 · In Different Camps 1944–1945

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In Different Camps 1944–1945

Arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau

On the third day the train stopped. There was a lot of noise outside. We got that this was the end station. I was going to check where we'd come. I looked out through the hatchet and saw Polish squiggly letters. I spelled to something like Oświęcim, Auschwitz in German. I had never heard that name before. It told me nothing. But I said to the others that we had arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

We waited for them to open the doors, for us to get some fresh air and water. Eventually the doors were opened. An unidentifiable stench reached us. That was no fresh air. Some men dressed in striped clothes came up. They were prisoners. They were going to collect our bags. I held mine hard. I had my last belongings there. But he would absolutely take it. He calmed me down by saying: "I'll personally deliver it to your home tomorrow, to where you will live. I have to collect the bags. That is my order." So, I let him take it.

When we jumped to the platform I heard sudden commands: "Men in this group and women in this group." I understood that I was going to be separated from my dad. So I turned around quickly. I wanted to say good-bye to my father, but it happened so quickly. Everything was chaotic. When I turned around the group of men was already gone. I could not hug my father one last time. Women were left, women and children. The men were already gone.

The SS ordered us to line up five and five and wait. There were lots of people and everything was chaotic. We stood there, mum in the middle and me and my sister on each side. I knew that something happened at the front, but we didn't know what. It was in the middle of the night and big searchlights lighted the area.

We could see that something happened at the front, but we had to wait. We stood there my mum, my sister and myself. I don't think we talked. We were deep in our own thoughts. I remember, though it's 65 years ago. In that moment I was sure I wasn't going to see daylight. This was my last moment on earth. Of course they would murder us. But then I got curious. How were they going to do it. We were so many. I thought that the Germans couldn't shoot us all. That wouldn't look good. The Germans were orderly. How they did it, I wasn't imaginative enough to picture. I had accepted my destiny, and just wished for it not to hurt. And I hoped it would be over quickly. After all I couldn't do anything about it, and none would miss me anyhow as it was war and people died.



Women at the ramp in Auschwitz-Birkenau, May 1944.

© Yad Vashem

Forced in Different Directions

It took a few hours before it was our turn. We came up to an SS man. It was an SS officer with riding crop and boots who stood with his dog. Later we got to know that it was the notorious Dr Mengele who selected. He first stared at mum in the middle. He looked at her and showed "to the left" with his thumb. He looked carefully at my sister and showed "to the right".

Then he looked at me and I should also go to the right. Mum didn't want to let go. She pleaded to the SS man: "These are my daughters. Let them accompany me." She pulled us her way. "No", he said very determined. "Young people walk. Older people go by truck. You will meet tomorrow. Walk away now, we can't stay here the whole night." "Can you give me some water?" mum said. "No", he said and pushed her. "You'll get water when you arrive. We can't stay here all night. Hurry on."

So mum had to let go. Her last words were: "Take care of each other, girls." That was the last thing she told us.

Just like the German said, older people went by truck, small children, too. They went somewhere by truck... And I never knew if mum had her glass of water before she died.

We how were left in the group were young girls between 15 and 35. We were ordered to walk in a different direction. We walked and walked and then went into a barrack. It was a large barrack, filled with men and women in striped clothes, prisoners. We were ordered to undress completely. Inside there were men, too, but that didn't seem to matter.

We took of our clothes and put them in a pile. But we could keep our shoes. I held my black boots. When I understood that I wouldn't get my clothes back I just had two things left: my toothbrush and my silver chain. I didn't want to give them up. I held the toothbrush in one hand and the silver chain in the other. I hid them in my shoes, as I could keep them.

We stood there naked and had to sit down on stools. Then the men came up to us. To every woman sitting on the stool a man came up and shaved her hair. Horrified I saw my beautiful black curls fall on the floor. It was so humiliating. They took away the last of our human dignity. I sat there, lifted my eyes and looked at my friends. They all looked the same, naked bodies with shaven heads. I didn't see my sister in the group. So desperately I called her name till she caught sight of me. She came up to me, held my hand and didn't let it go.

Afterwards we were pushed into the cold showers. Then they threw some prisoner's clothes at us: grey clothes and briefs. We were going to wear these and the shoes. Then we proceeded into the camp.



Women that have been selected for work are lined up in Auschwitz-Birkenau, May 1944.

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The First Day in Camp

The day after we had arrived I was surprised to be alive. Then I remembered that the German had said that mum would arrive. I thought: "Now I'm going to be able for once. I'll get to know when mum will arrive." Because that was what we thought. I took my cousin Sussie's hand and wanted to find that out. Our superiors were Polish Jewesses who had already been there for some years. They were higher in rank. I went up to one of them and asked: "When will our mums arrive?" She looked at me as if I was mad and pulled me to the window. She pointed at a chimney with black smoke and said: "Can you see that chimney?" "Yes", I said. "What about it?" I thought they burnt the waste there. "In there your parents and siblings burn. You will never see them again. This is no resting place. It's an extermination camp."

I heard the words. But I didn't think I understood what they meant. I stood there, petrified. Then I went straight to my sister. And I told her what I'd heard word by word and I added: "But it isn't true, is it? She was just mean and fabricated to get revenge for all her time here? It can't be true. This isn't the Middle Ages. We live in the 20th century. Surely they don't burn people?" I said to my sister. My sister who always was very forward had already got to know the truth. That was the first she did. She knew very well what kind of place this was. She wanted to keep my faith up, so she hugged me and said: "No that's not true. They just lie to you."

Transfer to a Slave Labour Camp

One day we heard that they needed 200 women to go somewhere. Hédi started to pat my and my cousin Sussie's cheeks to make us look rosy. Those who looked healthy were chosen. So we were very lucky, for that day we managed to get on the transport. We had no idea what would wait for us, but logically it could just get better. It was a train journey in wagons, but this one all that unbearable.

We weren't that many and we even got food along the way. The journey took three days. When we arrived to our great surprise we discovered that we were in Hamburg. We got off the train and were transported in buses or trucks. We arrived at a camp that would be our home for the near future. There we were accommodated.

Something fantastic happened when we came in. The whole room consisted of bunk beds. Fairly narrow ones. We found out that they couldn't hold eight persons as in Auschwitz but three. I remember Hédi and myself quickly grasping one bed. We both thought that there could be two in that bed near a window. But then German guards came asking: "What are you doing? You're having one bed each, of course." It was almost unbelievable. We changed two or three times before we ended in Hamburg-Eidelstedt.

We were in Hamburg-Eidelstedt the longest time. Our work was mainly to build homes. That was the end of the war and Hamburg was bombed day and night. The inhabitants had lost their homes. The city, or the authorities saw to it that provisional houses were built. That's what we did. Barracks were built from large cement tiles. We had to carry and drag. It was ... a job we hardly coped with. But we did it. For as long as we coped we would live. We knew that. Food was sparse. It was rainy and cold.

Every night the air alarm was heard. The city was bombed and the bombs fell around us. We could also have been hit by a bomb, but we were lucky. You could say that we were lucky all the time. We managed this period, too. And that year went by.

In December was my birthday. Just a month before New Year's Eve. We were out working and I thought, almost with tears in my eyes: "This was my birthday and nobody would celebrate it with me." I think Hédi said "Happy birthday!" But that was in the morning. Probably there weren't going to be any gifts. But when we returned from work in the evening and after supper my friends were whispering. After a while they said: "Let's go into another room." And on one of the beds lay my birthday presents. From Hédi I got a portion of bread. Someone else gave buns and marmalade, and someone a shoestring. You see, I still had my black boots but until then I had no shoestrings. Everyone contributed to the birthday party as best they could. I couldn't believe my eyes. How fantastic, a whole ration of bread! I wasn't able to eat it as everyone stared at me. So I insisted on dividing it so that everyone could get a bite. It was a terrific birthday.

Celebrating New Year's Eve

In New Year's night 1944/45 we came home from work, tired and disheartened. Someone said: "It's New Year's Eve." "Let's celebrate", someone else said. We entered one of the rooms and sat on the beds. There were eight of us. Four up and four down. We told each other about previous New Year's Eves that we remembered. We talked about the food we had then and if we ever would get enough to eat. Someone sighed and said: "Next New Year's Eve maybe we're not alive." Then Hédi said: "What do you mean by not being alive. Of course we are." "Will we be free then?" "Yes, of course", Hédi said. "When will we be free?" Sussie asked. "The 15th of April", Hédi said. "The 15th of April? How will you know?" "I don't know, but 15th of April we will be liberated." "I don't think so", Sussie said. "Well, we can make a bet." Hédi said. If Sussie was right, if we were still prisoners, then Hédi had to pay Sussie. The betting was about a piece of bread, the most precious thing we owned. But what Sussie would pay Hédi that answered to the bread we didn't know. "Let's see when we get free."



The city of Hamburg after the bombings.

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My name is Livia Fränkel.
I survived the Holocaust.
This is my story.

Livia's Story

Part 5 · Liberated 1945

The story is based on several interviews with Livia Fränkel.
Livia Fränkel has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

Liberated 1945

To Bergen-Belsen

That year went by. In the spring the allied forced their way into Germany. We knew that the Germans were going to lose the war. The question was whether we were going to be alive and experience that.

When the allied approached Hamburg they decided that our labour camp was going to be shut down and we were going to be taken elsewhere. Rumours said that they would not let us live through liberation but murder us. They assembled us and we were taken away.

We went through another train journey where we didn't know our destination. At night the train stopped. Noises and gunfire were heard in the woods. Even today I don't know what happened. We thought they were going to shoot us, but no. I don't know why they shot. What happened during the night frightened us.

Eventually we arrived at a location. We didn't know where we were. We got off the train and walked some distance before we reached a camp. There was barbed wire round about and it was very strange. There were heaps of corpses wherever we looked. The inmates of the camp still alive, looked more dead than alive. We asked what kind of place this was. Then we got to know that this was the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. Our next rationale question was: "Is there any gas chamber here?" We got that there was no gas chamber, no jobs and no food either.

That there was no gas chamber sounded reassuring. That there weren't any jobs didn't matter. But if there were no food how would we manage? We entered and were accommodated in a barrack. We got our bunks and there we sat or lay down and nothing more took place. Indeed there wasn't any food. And none cared about us. We could spend the time as we liked. No work, no food.

The days went by and we got no food. But we found water. If we hadn't we wouldn't have survived. Thanks to finding a loo somewhere with water, we managed. We lay there very dazed in our bunks and we very nearly starved to death.



Women and children in Bergen-Belsen after the Liberation, April 1945.

The Camp is Liberated

Fourteen days after having arrived at Bergen-Belsen, someone asked: "What date is it today?" I think Hédi answered: "15th of April." "I am awfully sorry. I seem to have lost the bet." So she turned to Sussie and said: "I can't give you any bread. Maybe we'll get some, so I can pay my debt." "Well", Sussie said. "It doesn't matter. Some bread can't help us now."

We hadn't got food any longer. We lay in our bunks quite dazed and waited. After a while one of our friends came in and said cautiously: "I have seen foreign soldiers in the camp. I think they are British." No one believed her. I was sure she was hallucinating. She was almost unconscious from the starvation and probably delirious. I didn't believe her. But she insisted: "The soldiers wear other uniforms."

I just lay there, infirm. But after a while I thought: "I have to check what I see." I tried to get to the window. I managed to walk to the window and then I saw soldiers wearing green uniforms. They weren't German soldiers. I looked more closely and thought: "What if she's right?" I went out to be sure that I didn't dream and that they were British.

British troops liberated Bergen-Belsen the 15th of April 1945. How Hédi could know that in January, no one knows even today. It was absolutely amazing, that she was clairvoyant, is what we say.

The Journey to Sweden

When we were liberated we didn't feel triumphant "now we are free". We were dazed. There was no food, nothing. Our first thought was: "How are we going to get fed?" The Brits who liberated the camp were shocked by what they saw. They handed out their own rations, which they had got at the front. It consisted of peas, pork and brown beans in tins. They handed this out. And we opened the tins and ate greedily, not thinking. That was the worst they could have done as everybody got violent dysentery. And people died "like flies". That went on for quite a while until one of the officers made some changes. Otherwise everybody would be lost.

Eventually they started a diet kitchen and a hospital. They took care of those most ill. First when we got that food, we started to recover.

The next question was: "What do we do now?" Hédi was very resolute on us not going back to Sighet. But where would we go? We didn't have any special place. Still we had no country. There was no Israel in 1945. But we knew we had a relative in America. We had a name and we knew she lived in Chicago. Would we contact her? Maybe she could arrange for us to get visas? That was our plans, to contact her and check if we could go to the US.

Then representatives from Sweden came. Sweden had escaped the war would contribute to the reconstruction of Europe as a gesture as they hadn't taken part in the war. They offered to take 10 000 survivors from the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. We were offered to stay in Sweden for six months to eat and rest. Then each and everyone would be sent back to there homelands.

One day three Swedes in Red Cross uniforms knocked on our door. It was called a Red Cross project, the Bernadotte transport. They asked us in German if we wanted to go to Sweden for six months. We thought that was a great suggestion. We had no plans for the future, Sussie, Hédi and I, so we accepted.

For the first time this year we were going by train and not in wagons. We travelled in a carriage from Bergen-Belsen. First we went to Lübeck. There we had to wait and were accommodated in a school. And there, lice were removed and we showered. We didn't keep any clothes. We couldn't bring anything of what we had from the camp.



One of the so called White Buses in original condition. The photo was taken in Stockholm 2008.

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The Beginning of a New Life

We waited two or three days, till a ship arrived from Sweden. It was a white commercial or cargo ship, rebuilt as a hospital ship. Here was a red cross on the side and it was called m/s Rönnskär. I remember that so well. The boat brought us to the south of Sweden, to Malmö.

We stayed in the Linné school that first summer of peace. All schools worked as provisional refugee camps. Refugees stayed in different schools and a doctor examined us. We got clothes and food.

We stayed there for three weeks. The school worked as quarantine too. We couldn't leave the location. A lot of horrible infectious diseases were spread. We must not infect the population. So we were looked into this school. We were like monkeys at the zoo to the people in southern Sweden. They were very curious and on Sundays they made outings to the Linné school. They stood outside the fence and tried to talk to us and threw us packages.

The first thing we did at the school was to eat and eat and eat. What we couldn't eat we hid under the pillow. We didn't know if we were going to get food the next day, too. Then we went to another location. But we didn't know what was going to happen. It turned out to be a very beautiful place in the west of Sweden. Probably an old B&B where they took care of refugees. There we had it very nicely. There was even a lake. I remember swimming there. I don't know if I had any swim costume, but it was summer and swimming was nice.

It was very nice, but we didn't stay for long. Then we went to Stockholm to a location for refugees on an island. We were welcomed there. And there it was like our life in Sweden started.

Livia meets her future husband

Livia's husband, Hans Fränkel, was born in a Jewish family in Wuppertal, Germany. In 1938 Hans was sent by the family to Denmark to work on a farm in order to prepare for emigration to the former British Mandate Palestine. (His mother was deported to Poland and most probably died in Auschwitz-Birkenau.)

Nazi Germany occupied Denmark in April 1940. Through a unique rescue action in the autumn of 1943 7 000 Jews were successfully brought to Sweden. Hans Fränkel was one of the young boys who volunteered to help out during the action. Shortly afterwards the deportation of Danish Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau began.

Later on Hans received a grant from the Danish government and studied to be an engineer.

"We met in September or October 1945," says Livia. "The Jewish Community in Stockholm had arranged a dance event for Jewish youth. I wore a red dress that evening. Hans was also there. When he saw me, he reportedly told his friend: 'Do you see that girl? She is the one I am going to marry.'" And so it turned out. The couple married in 1947.



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Livia in front of the former house of the Szmuk family at the Hospital Street in Sighet. The photo was taken in 2013.



Livia still lives in Stockholm. She has three children, six grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren. For many years Livia has been a dedicated volunteer to the work of the The Association of Holocaust Survivors in Sweden and often visits schools to tell her story.

*In 1992 Livia's sister,
Hédi Fried, published
the first book about
the sisters' experiences
during the Holocaust:
Fragments of a life.*

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