



My name is Susanna Christensen.
I survived the Holocaust.
This is my story.

Susanna's Story

Part 1 • My Childhood 1933–1944

The text is based on several interviews with Susanna Christensen.
Susanna Christensen has read and approved the text.

ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

My Childhood 1933–1944

My Family

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Susanna as a little girl in Hungary.

My name is Susanna Christensen. I come from a small town in southeast Hungary, called Makó. My parents Erszébet (Elizabeth) and József Lukács met when they were fairly old. They married in 1932 and one year later I was born. As a girl I was called Lukács Zsuzsanna. In Hungary people put the surname first.

My parents owned a small grocery store at Makó. It was situated in a street called Sirkert Utca. The building's gable faced the street and there was the shop. In an adjacent room facing the yard there was a small kitchen. We spent practically all time in the shop and the small kitchen.

Father rented a room further down the same street for us to sleep in. Our family was poor. We lived very frugally and owned no modernities like a radio or a telephone, though father had a newspaper during the war. In those days all newspapers in Hungary were censored. What was written was often biased. He had to read between the lines and guess what really took place in Europe.

My father was a really able fiddler. That was a bright spot in our lives. He had an acquaintance, a shoemaker, who belonged to an independent church. Sometimes this man visited us and they played together. These were lucky gatherings.

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Erszébet Lukács born in 1898.



As my parents were fairly old when I was born I was their greatest happiness and gift in life. This picture of myself was taken when I was less than one year old in 1933.



József Lukács born in 1892.

In School

My father was an atheist. He didn't believe in God. He argued that it was better for Jews to be assimilated and that we wouldn't be subject to persecutions if we lived more like others. Most Jews lived in the town centre and our shop was in the outskirts. Therefore I had no Jewish friends as a child before I started school, so I played with those who lived around me. Mostly that was all right. But when we fell out and the other children got mad they called me *büddös zsidó*. That's Hungarian and means something like "stinking Jew". Everybody knew that we were Jews in spite of my parents not wanting it to show.

When it was time to start school my father chose to enter me in the Catholic school that was situated near to the shop. Maybe he did so because he wanted me to assimilate and because the Jewish school was far away in the town centre. But I didn't stay at the Catholic school for a very long time. It so happened that my parents always picked me up and left me, and one day on our way home I stopped outside a church. I told mother that you cross yourself there and showed her how to do it. Then mother got enough. She persuaded my father to let me start the Jewish school the day after.

The Jewish children had already attended school for a month when I started. It made me feel a little off. Everyone also knew that we were poor and that my father was an atheist.

Father was handicapped and walked with a stick. He needed my help to buy goods for the shop. I used to take things on a cart that I shoved in front of me. At least once he chose to go to the town centre on a Saturday. I protested as I was afraid that someone would see me, but that didn't help. Afterwards the others bullied me for having worked in the Sabbath.

As a matter of fact the teacher was an orthodox Jew and didn't like me. Still I managed well in school, as my father was very strict. He didn't allow me to go out playing until I knew my homework by heart. That meant that I was first in my class for the four years.

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Text and cover photo: Ewa Wymark

Translation from the Swedish original: Elisabeth Sannar

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Susanna's Story

Part 2 • Life Changes 1944

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Life Changes 1944

An Antisemitic teacher

I attended the Jewish school for four years. Then I and another girl, called Erzsi, were selected for higher education. This school was called middle school or citizen school. Not everybody could attend. Just two seats were reserved for Jews. We who had done best got those seats.

As there was a war going on in Europe the autumn term 1943 started in October. Spring term 1944 ended already in April. That was a short school year.

At the school the headmaster, most of the teachers and the students were okay. But there was a teacher of our mother tongue who hated us just because we were Jews. She decided that we were to write essays on Saturdays. That was okay with me as no one in our family kept Jewish traditions. But Erzsi, who came from an orthodox Jewish home refused to write in the Sabbath. When the teacher saw that she went to her desk and got hold of her hand, pressed the pen into her palm, held her hand and forced her to move her hand back and forth over the paper. I sat diagonally opposite and saw how Erzsi sat there totally passive while her tears just flowed. It felt really awkward.

Also, in spring term, the mother tongue teacher told everybody in class where the German troops stood. Then she added: "Soon they are here and then we are rid of the Jews." She repeated this every lesson. In that way it was a difficult term for Erzsi and me.

The Jews Lose Their Rights and are Forced to Live in a Ghetto

Even before the Germans occupied Hungary the authorities withdrew our and other Jews' rights. Father wasn't allowed to sell certain kinds of goods. Earlier on he used to sell all kinds of things, Wine, spices, flour, butter and other kinds of food beside perishables like milk and meat. But due to the new laws there was finally not so much left that he was allowed to sell. When we were forced to move to the ghetto he closed the shop.

When spring came we heard that all Jews at Makó had to move to the ghetto. One of them consisted of some streets in the town centre. Many of the Jews in the town already lived there. Then the Jewish old people's home also became a ghetto in the outskirts of the town.

"...in spring term, the mother tongue teacher told everybody in class where the German troops stood. Then she added: 'Soon they are here and then we are rid of the Jews.' She repeated this every lesson."



Map of Hungary 1944. Every star marks the location of a ghetto.

© The map has been created from an original at U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

My parents didn't agree on where to go. Mother wanted us to live in the town centre. Father was more practical. He wanted us to rent a room in the old people's home. It turned out that there was a free one and it would be a lot cheaper to live there. At last father got it his way. I think that hurt my mother's soul.

Apart from the warden we were the only ones who weren't old and ill at the old people's home. The lady who we earlier rented the shop from brought us a food basket a couple of times. She came in the evening as she didn't dare to go to the ghetto as long as it was light. I don't remember when we moved there, but it was sometime in the spring of 1944. Then I was 11 years old.

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A zsidó neve: Lukács Lajos

Jelenlegi lakhelye: Vásárhelyi u. 37

Születési helye: Makó, év: 1933 hó: Febr. nap: 8.

Volt lakhelye: Madár Sándor u. 16

Bevonult: — Internált: _____

Susanna's father saved and kept several important documents during the family's time in the ghetto and camps. On this sheet, the text line "Jelenlegi lakhelye" is Susanna's street address in the ghetto. The family's previous home address in Makó is given just below.

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My name is Susanna Christensen.
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Susanna's Story

Part 3 • Confined to the Ghetto 1944

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ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

Confined to the Ghetto 1944

Life in the Ghetto, the Camp and in the Brickyard

When we lived in the ghetto I came a bit closer to my Jewish roots. The warden of the old people's home was in fact religious and father, mother and I were invited to celebrate the first evening of *Pesach* (the Jewish Easter) with his family. This meant much to me. At home we didn't keep any traditions at all.

The warden and his family had come to Hungary from Romania. Suddenly one day in the ghetto they disappeared. We didn't notice, we just found out that they were gone. Later we got to hear that all Jews who hadn't got a Hungarian citizenship had been deported first, before the rest of us.



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Hungarian Jews are forced to a ghetto by gendarmes.

On June 16, 1944, the *gendarmes* (military police) came to the old people's home. They banged our door forcefully and screamed that we had to pack and bring food for three days. Mother started boiling eggs immediately as boiled eggs would keep well in the summer heat. Then we collected some beddings, clothes and cookware.

We were brought by trucks to Szeged, the second largest city in Hungary. There we were placed in a camp at the outskirts of the city. The site was called Újszeged, which means "New Szeged". It was like a suburb. Everywhere there were two-person tents. As we were afraid to be robbed we put all we had brought in such a tent. Then we slept on the ground outside.

The gendarmes ordered us to leave all valuables: jewelry, and money but pens also. They threatened us and told us that if we didn't obey they would shoot one in ten of us. We had to obey and didn't dare anything else. Later it turned out that father still kept a small pencil. Using it he wrote a diary in a pocket calendar the whole time we stayed in the camp.

We had been placed in the camp waiting for a position at a brickyard in Szeged. All Jews in our county were gathered there. After a couple of days we were taken there too.

At the brickyard we had a roof over our heads but no walls around, so it was totally open at the sides. I don't know how many we were in all, but there was a whole sea of people. From my town only there must have been 2 000 Jews. At night we arranged beds out of straw and slept tightly together.

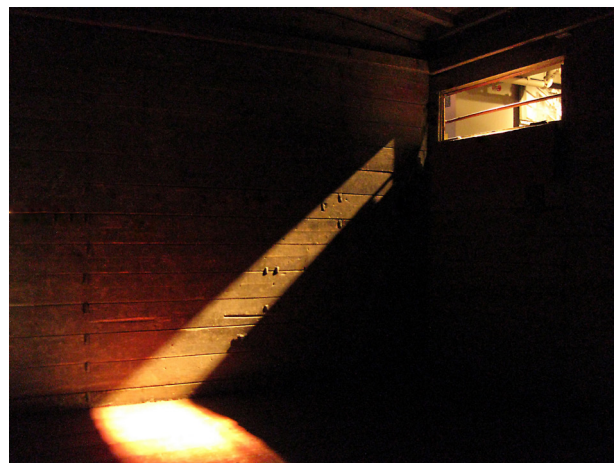
The Transport from the Brickyard

All of us staying at the brick manufacturers were divided into three groups. All in our family were among the names in the second group. My old aunt Hanna was there too, but she was probably among those who were transported in the first group. I never saw her again.

I don't remember how we were transported from the brick manufacturers to the trains, but I how it looked and how it felt when we were loaded into the cattle cars. The train was very long. In our cattle car we were 68 persons and it was very crowded. People sat along the walls or tightly packed on the benches in the middle of the cattle car. Mother, father and I sat along the wall nearest to the sliding door. All through the journey I sat in my mother's knee. There wasn't room for me anywhere else. There was another child in the same cattle car but she sat further away.

"To get some fresh air I leaned towards the sliding door and tried to breathe through the slots there."

The journey took four days. Just once during all that time the doors were opened and we could leave the cattle car and get some fresh air. We also got some buckets of water and a couple of buckets where we could accomplish our needs. The situation was indescribable. We were so tightly packed that we couldn't move. The air was very muggy. As we were so many and there only was two openings in the cattle car the oxygen almost expired. To get some fresh air I leaned towards the sliding door and tried to breathe through the slots there.



Cattle cars like this one were used for transporting Jews to concentration camps.

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Part 4 • In Different Camps 1944–1945

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ETERNAL ECHOES

Teach and Learn About the Holocaust

In Different Camps 1944–1945

Forced Labour in Austria

The train stopped many times at different stations. It just stood there, without moving. Those who looked out through the tiny openings in the cattle car told that they had seen names of stations, showing that we moved northwards. When we arrived at Kosice, then at the border with Czechoslovakia it came to a stop. Later we heard rumours that the railway probably was bombed, which was why we couldn't get on. In any case the train changed direction and started going southwest. We passed Budapest and then went into Austria and went through Vienna. At last we arrived at a collection camp at a site called Strasshof.



Jews in a Hungarian forced labor battalion.

It was completely dark when we arrived and everywhere people were swarming. I don't know how many we were, but a lot of people arrived on that train. Father, mother and myself managed to stay together in the crowd. A lot of people lost their loved ones in the crush. All night you could hear their cries when they rushed around looking for each other. It was awful.

Everybody who had arrived on the train had to be disinfected, our luggage too. The men and the women were divided and I went with mother. When we had showered everybody stood naked to dry. The women found it embarrassing and hard as the soldiers went back and forth and looked at them. In those days women usually weren't naked even in front of their own men.

After the shower we were housed in barracks. We got bunk beds. Mother and me shared one and father got one for himself. I don't remember much more from the Strasshof camp than that they gave us very little food.

About a week later we were put on a train again and were transported to a smaller town in Austria called Bruck an der Leitha. There we were divided into smaller groups. Our group consisted of 23 persons. We were placed in something like a boarding house and the adults were ordered to work in a garden. We got good food when we stayed there.

After a couple of days a man arrived with a horse and carriage, one of those you use in farming. The man took us to a place called Neudorf bei Bahnhof. We were going to work at a farm. The barn where we were housed was divided into two rooms. We slept about 10-12 in each department on beds made from straw that we arranged directly on the floor. In the group there were four children, I was 11 and the oldest. The others were 6, 9 and 10. There was also a boy who was 14, but he was counted as an adult and had to work with the others. We the younger didn't need to do that, at least not in the beginning. Instead the older children and I helped the matron in the kitchen. She was married to the man who collected us. He was supervisor in the fields and a decent man. His wife on the other hand was nasty. She let us help but she looked on us with a mean gaze.

While we were there we didn't have to starve. We got potatoes and beans alternately twice a day and tasty bread. On Sundays we had meat. We children also got some milk every day. In that way life on the farm was alright and we hoped to be able to stay there till the war ended.

I don't remember exactly when, but one day German soldiers brought a group of Polish women. The women were put in a storehouse in another part of the farm. Earlier on father who was handicapped hadn't had to work and neither did we, the children. Now the Germans forced us out into the field. It was immensely hard work and an old woman died. This was going on until the end of November 1944.

Life in Bergen-Belsen

Some time at the end of November we were ordered to pack up and then we were transported back to Strasshof. Exactly as last time we slept outdoors the first night. As it was autumn it was very cold. The only place where we could get warm was the loo, but that smelled so badly. The day after we had a shower and our luggage was disinfected. Then we were placed in barracks again. We were there for another week and then we were put on another train.

Three days later, on 6 of December the train stopped at Bergen-Belsen. I remember we had to drag our things on the road to the barracks. Among other things we had two quilts which mother and father carried on their backs. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire and divided into different departments. None of us had heard about Bergen-Belsen. We didn't know which kind of place this was.

My family and about 2 000 other people came from Szeged. All ended up in the same group. We were placed in the part of the camp that was designed for Jews from Hungary. It consisted of something like ten barracks and in each about 200 people lived. The bunks in the barracks were organised in three levels, one bunk for two people. We, who were a family of three, got two bunks. Mother and I shared one. Father got his at the bottom, as he couldn't climb. On the third level over us was an elderly couple with their grandchild. The adults went out to pee at night but the child peed in a container. One night I woke as something dripped down on me. It turned out that the container had overturned and the content had drained.

The food at Bergen-Belsen was pitiful. In the morning we got a thin liquid. I don't really know what it was. In the middle of the day we got something in-between soup and stew called "dörgemöse". Usually it was made from swedes. There could be carrots, too. Every third day we got a small, square, thin piece of bread. It was as tight as clay. Mother made us save it so it would last to the next distribution. We starved. It was a horrible experience. Once we got a food package from the Swedish Red Cross. We were five persons who shared two packages. It contained among other things small candies. I remember that, but nothing else in the package.

Every morning we were ordered to go out and get counted. That was tiring. We were five, six or maybe ten person in each line and the counting took a very long time. Then we could go back to the barracks. I saw that father handled something



View of Bergen-Belsen.

© U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

on his own. Maybe he wrote the diary in his pocket calendar. Mother and I spent some of the time picking lice. We were very dirty, both body and hair. We undressed and picked the lice that lay in the hem of the clothes. Then we took turns to sit on a stool standing beside the bunk and pick lice and nits in one another's hair.

In the middle of the winter it was very cold, but when the weather was fine we children left the barracks. In-between the different parts of the camp there was a broad road. We children stood at the gate there and looked. Every day horse drawn flat wagons came fully loaded with naked corpses. The humans looked like skeletons. Day after day they passed with such wagonloads. We also saw groups of men and women being transferred in the morning and coming back at night. They had striped prisoner's clothes and were in very bad condition. Probably they were used for some sort of work.

In our camp there were families only. In other departments there were either men or women. There was a watchtower with a German soldier. From the tower he used a searchlight all the time. When we went to the loo at night the searchlight followed us back and forth. The toilet was a big room. There was a bench where you saw to your needs. Both men and women went to the same toilet.

It was horrible to be in Bergen-Belsen. We prayed to God that the airplanes flying over the camp would drop a bomb, as we longed for death. That's how bad it was. We saw no light.



During the time in the ghetto and camps Susanna's father kept a diary.

The Two Last Weeks

At the beginning of 1945 we were urged to leave Bergen-Belsen. We had been in the camp since the beginning of December and everybody was starved and in bad condition. Those who managed walked on foot. Father was so weak that he didn't manage and my mother and I didn't want to leave him. We saw people leave the camp one by one. We who were left were to be transported by truck. Everybody tried to get on the truck. We couldn't pass the others as father was creeping. So we were on the last truck to leave the camp.

Everybody was transported to the train station. Where there was a long train set up. No one brought anything and still there wasn't room. When we came it was already fully packed. I can't describe how it felt, such a disappointment. We saw this train as our salvation. Suddenly a woman called out to us: "We've got room for the child." She meant me. Mother heard and helped me up. It was late at night and fairly cold. No one thought that the train would leave the same day. But father started arguing and whining. He said: "Bring the child out. If we are going to die, we'll do it together." Mother had to fetch me. Then we sat there. A short while later the train left. If I had been in the cattle car I had been separated from my parents.

We were about 40 people left in the station. There was an empty wagon. We climbed up into it. Those who didn't manage stayed outside. One of them died during the night. No one knew what was going to happen to us. We couldn't do anything just waiting.

Everywhere on the platform there were clothes and personal belongings that people had left. Mother picked up a flowery dress from one of the heaps and we went to some houses further away. We stopped in front of a big house and mother waved the dress in front of the woman who opened the door. The woman went indoors and came out with two slices of bread. She didn't want the dress. We went back and shared the bread with father. A little later in the day I discovered a heap of swedes. I collected some and mother started to peel them with the knife we had brought.

In the afternoon a transport with men in striped clothes arrived. There was a German in the opening of each wagon. He beat with a cudgel and shouted to the men to hurry up. Fellow prisoners helped those who were weak. Many who were carried out were already dead. I can't describe the horrible sight. The men were lean as skeletons and in very bad condition. The platform was full of people.

A man who saw that we sat there and had swedes shouted at us and asked us for something to eat: "We haven't eaten for three days," he said. Obviously he was from Hungary because he spoke to us in Hungarian. I didn't dare to go near him so I threw the peels towards the men. When one man came creeping to fetch them a German soldier came and started to beat the man. He beat and beat with the cudgel till the man lay stretched on the ground dead. I was then 12 years old but I still remember the sight.

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A sign warning of a typhus-infected area in Bergen Belsen. (The picture was taken after the liberation in April 1945.)

Eventually the men were transported from there into the camp, but many corpses were still lying on the platform. When I was fetching water I had to step over them. At last we too were brought back to Bergen-Belsen, not to the same part of the camp as before but to the part nearby. That was a camp for Dutch Jews.*

When the camp was emptied earlier on a few people were left. Some ten people in our part had typhoid fever and that turned out to be very contagious. All lay in their bunks I don't remember if we got any food or anything else to eat. No one managed anything. As long as my mother stood on her legs she went round and gave people water and helped them in different ways. Towards the end, just before the camp was liberated, she was also ill and weak.

* Much later Susanna got to know that she and her family during the last period in Bergen-Belsen were in the camp where Anne Frank died, the girl whose diaries have been published in several languages.

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Part 5 • Liberated 1945

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ETERNAL ECHOES

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Liberated

Bergen-Belsen is Liberated

In the middle of April I sat outside the barracks in Bergen-Belsen. The sun was shining and it was fairly warm. Suddenly I saw some strange vehicles. They were painted green and had a pentagram on the side. The men who came wore other uniforms than the ones the Germans used to have. Immediately I went in and told my father what I had seen. Then he exclaimed: "Thank God, we are free." That was the second time, while all this had lasted, that I heard him mention God. Once earlier I had heard him mention God and that was when he felt great pain. Now he mentioned God again and thanked him for our freedom though he was an atheist.

On 15 of April Bergen-Belsen was liberated. Two days later father died. When mother and I went up to his bed that day he was dead. The corpse looked like one of those skeletons I had seen on the flat wagons. In a paper bag next to him there were documents that he had kept from our home, his glasses, a pen and the pocket calendar. Later I got on writing where my father had finished.



© Wikipedia Commons

Former prisoners are taken care of. Bergen-Belsen, April, 1945.

A little more than a week later my mother was totally worn-out. She hardly managed to raise her head. Some days later I also was bedridden. We were helped to completely undress. Naked and covered in blankets we were carried out of the barracks and transported in some kind of military ambulance. All the time I held on to the bag with all the things that father had left.

We were transported to debugging and baths. A German woman who scrubbed me said scornfully: "*Welches schmutziges Kind*" (that is really a dirty child). As I had studied German in the Jewish school I explained to her in German that I had not been able to wash and change for five months, as there was no water. She didn't answer. She just kept quiet.

Then we were placed in a big sort of barracks. There were a lot of people. At that time my mother was almost unconscious. As we hadn't got any other clothes we lay there naked covered in blankets. The staff was German and an English soldier was responsible for the work. There were no other children. One day the Englishman gave me an orange. To me it was a sensation to see such a fruit!

Eventually we started our recovery. In May we managed to walk around a bit. We had no clothes so everybody went around covered in sheets. It looked like a ghost town. I realised that among the 40 persons on the truck only my mother and I and two more people had survived. Also after the liberation a lot of people died.

Before we left the barracks we went to a big storehouse. There we got clothes to dress in. We also got clothes to change to and sanitary products. All got a little suitcase to put the things in. As I was the only child I got an extra suitcase with room for a checked winter coat. When we came to Sweden all we owned were packed in these three small suitcases.

The Journey to Sweden



Susanna and two Swedish carers at the school in Malmö where she stayed.

* We don't really know when Susanna came to Sweden. Probably it was on July 24, 1945, but it may also have been July 14.

Later we were transported to another place where our rehabilitation went on. We were placed in a room with proper hospital beds. One day a man came asking if we wanted to go to Sweden for six months to get nutrition and recover. Mother whimpered and said that she wanted to go back to Hungary. Then a younger woman placed near to us started arguing: "What are you going to do in Hungary? Your husband is dead. Bring your daughter to Sweden. That made mother change her mind.

In July we travelled to Sweden via Lübeck.* There we were accommodated on a big ship. We got a berth each. We didn't know anything about Sweden, but someone said that in Sweden they eat a lot of cheese. Someone else talked about snow and cold winters.

The ship took us to Malmö. There we were placed in a big storehouse. We were very many who sat there and waited for our luggage without knowing what would happen. My mother went away for a while to talk with some women, and I felt lonely and deserted. I had kept in her wake throughout the difficult times. While she was away a tall man dressed in shorts came up to me. He started to speak to me in German and showed how to conjugate the verb "be" in both German and Swedish. Then he gave me a scout pin.

Mother and I ended in a school in the suburbs of Malmö. The school served as quarantine and was surrounded by double fences. There was supposed to be a distance between ourselves and the people who came to visit us. We stayed there with women both from Poland and Hungary. Swedish staff took care of us as well as they could. For us it felt like heaven. Everybody was so nice. Our first impression of Sweden was that everybody was so nice.

What Happened Afterwards?

After three weeks in quarantine in Malmö and six months of rehabilitation at Loka Brunn a new life started for Susanna and her mother in Sweden. Susanna's mother eventually was placed in a washing up-job in a commercial kitchen in a town in middle Sweden. "We were the only people from Hungary and we felt very lonely," Susanna tells. "Mother also had difficulties in learning Swedish."

Susanna started to go to school in Sweden spring term 1946. Then she was 13 years old and attended third form. The years in school were difficult ones for Susanna as she didn't know Swedish and had difficulties following the instruction. Her mother eventually got a job in a plastic factory in Arboga and school helped Susanna finding a



These pictures of Susanna and her mother, Erszébet Lukács, were taken a few years after their arrival to Sweden.



summer job among other things as maid on a farm. At the same time they got to know Hungarian families in the area and life started feeling a bit better. Susanna's mother died in 1977.

In 1953 Susanna married Arne Christensen. The couple has two children, a son and a daughter and a grandchild. In 1969 Susanna was admitted as a trainee at The Employment Authorities and became an educated job advice. Susanna went on working there till 1996 when she became an old age pensioner. Susanna leads an active life and often meets students to tell about her experiences as a child surviving the Holocaust.

Susanna has visited Hungary several times since the end of the war. "But I don't count it as my home country", she says. In 1966 she went back for the first time. In Makó Susanna met the woman who brought a food basket to the family at the time in the ghetto. "I introduced myself and told her who I was", Susanna tells. "She was much moved to see me again."

Three of Susanna's uncles in France and Hungary and an aunt in Yugoslavia survived the Holocaust. Two cousins were born after the war.

The pocket calendar where Susanna's father wrote his diary nowadays belongs to the archives of Bergen-Belsen. In the museum you can also find her father's glasses.



© Private



In this pocket calendar Susanna's father kept a diary all of the time the family was in the ghetto and camps.

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