

## Esther and Mike Prayzer



My mother, Esther Fromovitz, was born October 2, 1922. She was delivered at home by a midwife in Uy Butchko, Romania, located in the Carpathian Mountains. A larger city, Sziget, Romania, was about 20 kilometers away. She was the sixth of thirteen children. Her father, Efriam, was a tailor and a religious man; he was the person who Jews in the small town came to for help or advice. Her mother, Bila, cared for her family at home, and her maternal grandmother, Sura lived with them. The inhabitants of Uy Butchko were poor, close knit, and lived with little social interaction with the non-Jewish population. The synagogue was the center of their intellectual and religious life. The family followed the typical Orthodox Jewish traditions, giving devotion and respect to Talmudic scholarship. Esther told of walking four or five miles to school, where education was considered complete upon graduating from the sixth grade.

Sometime in the early 1940s, there was a knock on their door; they were removed from their home as it was burned along with other houses. Many families were displaced and located to a farm, which was the first house in the village and included a few acres of land. They had a garden where they grew vegetables; they also raised chickens and had a cow for milk. They baked all their own bread, cooked on a wood-burning stove, and carried water from a neighbor's well. Electricity was unavailable, and there was no inside plumbing. They made do with what they had. In April 1944, the Hungarians announced that all Jewish people had to leave their homes, taking only one small package. They were all rounded up at the schoolhouse where they stayed overnight, and the next day they were taken to a ghetto about 20 kilometers away. In the middle of May 1944, they were loaded into railroad cattle cars. In the same car as Esther were her mother and father, her oldest sister and her four children, her five sisters (Goldie, Helen, Pearl, Esther, and Frieda) and her younger brother Erwin. They traveled in the car for about a week with no idea where they were going. Once separated, her parents and remaining siblings met their demise at the crematorium. Their brother Al managed to smuggled himself on a boat to America before the war. Al's twin died at birth, and two other children died at a young age.

Arriving in Auschwitz, Poland, they were greeted by SS Gestapo and the infamous Dr. Mengele. They were separated into two lines - a "life line," and a "death line." Goldie, Helen, Pearl, Esther, Freida, and Erwin were placed in the "life line." The sixth sister and the sister-in-law would not leave their children, therefore meeting their deaths. Esther shared that they were sent to a shower room where all clothing was taken from them, and their heads and entire bodies shaved. They were issued a prison dress with their number stamped in red on the back. They were sent to the barracks that held about a thousand people. Death surrounded them night and day. The crematoriums were operating twenty-four hours a day and the stench of burning flesh was constantly in the air that they smelled and breathed. The daily routine consisted of a head count, outside at 5 AM, and then they were given a piece of bread and black coffee. They were assigned to work cleaning toilets or sorting clothes from dead bodies. Their day ended with a bowl of warm water with a potato in it. The older sister Freida became ill and was taken to the crematorium. In October, the remaining four sisters were selected to go to Nuremburg where they worked in the Simmons airplane factory making parts.

In March 1945, the American army was getting closer, so the sisters were relocated to Metoyer (near Leipzig) from which the Americans liberated them on April 16, 1945. Those surviving Auschwitz were Esther, Pearl, Helen, Goldie, and Erwin. Following their liberation, they all lived in Lorain, settled within four blocks of one another, and vowed never to be separated again. Helen Weingarten was the last sibling survivor who passed away in 2021.

My father, Meyer (Mike) Prayzer was born on December 25, 1922, in Bendzin, Poland, the son of Moses Herch and Machela (nee Kucharska). His family owned a prosperous fish business. Germany invaded Poland in 1939 and their life changed dramatically. A curfew was imposed, the entire town was set on fire, and those who ran out risked the chance of being shot. The SS death squads also

burned the synagogue and murdered 200 Jewish inhabitants. Meyer and his family escaped the fire, but not the Nazis. They had moved to another neighborhood, but were eventually captured by the SS. Mike was approximately seventeen years old at the time the Germans came through, and endured the hardships of surviving ten different concentration camps.

He shared that because he was young and able to work, that helped him survive. He was first taken to a camp in Karvina, Czechoslovakia, and then Klattenhoff in Germany. There, he was forced to carry steel all day to the point of exhaustion. With little to eat, he remembered that some German people would walk by the camp and throw bread despite threats on their lives if caught. He was moved to Schvaignic, then Falbrick, where he became ill with typhus. Unknown to him, his brother David was also a victim of typhus, and was in the same room recovering – a bittersweet reunion. They both survived, and still very weak, Mike was moved to Gross Rosen where he reached the ultimate depths of despair and human degradation. He was tasked with carrying the dead to the crematoriums. He also worked to erect buildings, and in a factory where ammunition was made. An attempt was made to commit sabotage by failing to put gunpowder in some bullets, which resulted in death for many of those involved. Near the end of 1944, there was a 17-day long march to Buchenwald. He shared that “less than half of those who started made it.” When they arrived, there was no room for them, and were ordered to march to the next destination – Dachau. He was imprisoned in Dachau for two and a half months, and then liberated on August 5, 1945 by the American soldiers; he was 22 years old at that time. He shared that there were approximately 65,000 detainees being freed at that time, with nowhere to go. After an exhausting search for surviving family survivors, he went into a movie theater in Munich, sat down to watch a show, and when the lights came on his brother, who was also searching, was sitting next to him. It’s a story that will last the time of history.

My father had three brothers (David, Joseph, and Kopel) who survived. Two immigrated to Israel, and one to Sweden. His parents, sister, and brother were casualties of the holocaust. After post liberation of the war, the top priority was to find any surviving family. A network of information developed over time, and those in search often connected or discovered the demise of those who perished. Esther has re-connected with three sisters and one brother, and knew another brother was safe in America. Her parents and other siblings perished in the war. Mike connected with three brothers, and learned of the unfortunate fate of his parents, brother, and sister. Esther and Mike met after the war in Rehau, Germany, and were married on August 25, 1946. Their first child, Morris, was born in Germany in 1947. While in Germany, they received documentation that would allow them to relocate to America, Australia, or Israel. They decided to immigrate to America in 1949 because Esther had an uncle who lived in Lorain, Ohio, who provided sponsorship that allowed them to enter the country. They settled in Asbury Park, New Jersey, where Esther’s youngest brother Al had escaped before the war and became a US citizen. He proudly fought against the Germans as a soldier in the US Army. My parents arrived with no formal language skills – Yiddish was their primary language. They stayed with my uncle Al for a short period of time when they decided it would be best for them to have a place of their own. My father went out for a walk with his two-year-old son and passed by a cabinet-making shop. He went in, and mind you, could not speak English, but communicated with the shop owner by picking up some. The shop owner took him in, taught him the trade of cabinet making and carpentry. My father started working for him, and that provided the opportunity for the family to get an apartment of their own.

After a year or so, they moved to Lorain, Ohio, where all of Esther’s surviving siblings (except Al) had re-located. Once settled, my sister Bernice was born in 1951, and then myself in 1960. My father became a carpenter and was a master of his trade for over 30 years. Esther took pride and joy in providing a home while raising three children, maintaining a household, and keeping in accordance with the Jewish religion and customs. The Jewish holidays were of utmost importance to her. She cherished family celebrations, and made sure to include those who did not have anyone with whom

to celebrate, as part of our extended family. She was active in the Lorain synagogue, a member of Hadassah and Sisterhood, and a long-time volunteer in the gift shop at St. Joseph's Hospital.

Unfortunately, Esther died at the early age of 58, but her legacy lives on. She chose not to share much of her history or experiences, as not to inflict additional personal pain, and did not want others to be traumatized from what she had endured. It was as if during that time in history, there was more of a hush about what happened, instead of having a story to tell. After my father retired, he decided he wanted to share his story with people who would listen. He felt it was important that we, as human beings, never forget what happened. He started speaking to junior high and high school students, which quickly led to many more requests to tell his story. He was also fortunate enough to address college students, and religious and civic groups. In 1985, Mike produced a video at the request of National Council of Jewish Women Cleveland Section. This gave him the opportunity to tell his story and ensure that it would be available for future generation. It can be accessed through the US Holocaust Museum website. Mike (Meyer) passed away in 1995, but his legacy remains.

Esther and Mike Prayzer experienced and survived such a horrendous chain of events, and used them as a test to become two of the most kind and giving people you could ever meet. They would do their best to help those who were less fortunate, and turned their bitterness towards kindness. Let this be a lesson for all mankind, and let us remember, so these atrocities never happen again.

**Resources used for historical accounts and facts about Esther and Meyer (Mike) Prayzer:**

United States Holocaust Museum Collection / National Council of Jewish Women Cleveland Section Holocaust Archive Project

Jewish Heritage Collection – College of Charleston interview with Bernice Prayzer Rubin

The Morning Journal

The Metropolitan Magazine

Wikipedia