

CHILD OF WAR



Olga Lehrman looked down at her left arm where the fading reminder of events long ago remained. Her life as a child had been the worst it could be for any child. She had survived, she does not know how, to reach the age of eighty-nine. A tattooed number was all she had to keep her memory sharp.

Now, she lived in a comfortable apartment on the upper west side of the city. She had three children; one of them had since passed. Her daughters were coming to check on her every week. Their father died two years before.

Her children were now married and had families of their own. The grandchildren loved to visit her, and she would tell them stories about their parents and the fun they had had growing up. They loved her accent when she spoke.

On this day, while sitting and talking with her grandchildren, one of the children, Lucy, asked her, “Grandma, why do you have a different way of speaking and what is that mark on your arm?”

Her family was curious about where she came from and how she got the marks. However, no one had ever asked her these questions before. Olga was a very private person who did not like to talk about herself.

Patty, the mother of the child spoke up, “Lucy, that’s not a nice thing to ask.”

Olga looked up at her daughter and answered, “It’s OK honey. It’s time I told my story to you. I’m getting older now and you have to know all about my life so you can tell your grandchildren about me.”

“Are you sure?” Patty asked, realizing that many of the questions she had had as a

child were now going to be answered.

“Yes, my dear. It’s time I tell you my story. I know you have always wondered about my life before I came to America.

“It’s a long story, and I’ve never told anyone, except for your grandfather,” Olga answered in a soft voice.

Olga began to cry. She had not talked about her childhood in a very long time, but the memories were still fresh in her mind.

“I’ll tell you my story, but it will be difficult,” Olga spoke softly, holding back the emotions she was feeling.

Her two daughters sat down next to the children. Their mother had never told them about when she was young; before she came to the United States. They had never had the courage to ask her.

Olga looked at her family. She held them close and then started to tell the story of her life, of how she had gotten the number on her arm, and how she arrived in America.

“I was born in Budapest in the country of Hungary. My father was a banker and we had a big house in the city and another in the country. During the summer, I would stay with my mother and grandparents in the country house and my father would come to visit us on the weekends. I loved the country house. I had a pony named Gustav and I rode him every day.

“Then the big war began. Soldiers came into our city and made everyone move from their homes. It was a time of confusion.

“My parents, who were Jewish, heard that the soldiers were taking Jews out of their houses and making them live in the middle of the city, and rumors were spreading that many were being taken in long trains to a place far away.

“Since my parents were afraid of this, they asked a family they knew, who were not Jews, if they would take me into their home and protect me.

“They agreed, and I moved into their house. I became a member of their family.

“When I was eight years old, the soldiers came and took my parents away. I watched from the window of the house where I was living. I cried and screamed, but the

soldiers did not notice nor did they care.

“We knew that once the police came and took someone away, they were never seen again. I knew this would be the last time I would see my parents. I wanted to go outside and go with them, but my new parents said no. They had promised to keep me safe.”

Olga began to cry large tears as she thought about her parents, and of how the new family had taken care of her.

As she took a hankie from her sleeve and pressed it gently to her eyes to wipe the tears away, she continued, “I wish I had pictures to show you of my family, but they were destroyed a long time ago.

“I lived with my parent’s friends for two years. I attended school and was a part of the family.

“Then, one day, the police came to the house. There was a long argument with my new parents and the police. Someone had told them I was not their child and that I was a Jew. They came to take me away.

“My new parents were pushed to the ground and told to stop protecting me or they would be killed.

“Then the police found me.

“I was told I could bring one bag. I quickly packed a small suitcase with things that were important to me. I looked around the room. I knew I wasn’t coming back.

“My new family cried as the police took me out of the house. I looked back at them through my tears. I was lucky to have had someone take me in, even if it only lasted for a short time.

“The soldiers made me walk behind the car to the train station. It was not easy carrying my bag and walking on the stones in the road. There were about twelve of us walking together, struggling to keep up with the car. If we stopped or fell down, the soldiers hit us with long leather straps. I knew it would hurt badly if they hit me, so I kept walking, even though my feet were painful.”

Suddenly, Olga got up and walked to the kitchen. The children stared at her as she left the room, wondering if she would return.

She was not gone long. While in the kitchen, she poured herself a cup of hot tea, and when she returned, she brought some cookies for the children to eat.

She sat back in her favorite chair, took a small sip of her tea, and then continued her story, "I'm sorry. I needed some tea. Where was I....?"

Willard spoke up, "You were walking to the train, grandma."

"That's right. I was walking behind the car to the train station.

"When we got there, several other people were standing on the platform waiting for the train. I was surprised that I didn't need a ticket. Every time I traveled on the train before I needed a ticket, but this time was different.

"I think we may have been waiting for the train for at least an hour, when a long dark train, puffing black smoke, came around the bend in the tracks. The train was loud and it was dirty.

"Some of the women began to scream. Some of the people tried to run, but when they did, the soldiers shot them in the back. It was best to just stand and wait.

"When the train arrived, they took my bag and threw it onto a large wagon. When it landed, the latch opened and all of my things fell to the ground. A worker picked them up and threw the items back into the wagon. Mostly they were pictures of my family. I would never see those pictures again."

Once again, Olga had to stop. She took the hankie from her sleeve and wiped her eyes again.

"This is not an easy tale to tell," she said threw her tears.

"It's OK grandma. We can wait," Lois said, as she stood up and hugged her.

"Thank you my dear. That was very sweet of you," Olga said still crying.

She gave Lois a hug in return, and then made space for her to sit right next to her in her chair. Lois snuggled up to her grandma and wrapped her little hands around her arm, giving it a squeeze.

Olga looked down at Lois and smiled. It was nice to have her family around her.

She took a deep breath and then began the story again.

"The next thing I remember was being told to get onto the train. I followed the other

people, and then I had to be lifted onto the boxcar since I was too short to get in myself.

“Once we were in the boxcar the big door closed, and then the sound of the metal lock closing echoed inside. It was dark and smelly. There were small windows, but they were too high for me to see out, so I just sat in the middle of the car and waited for what was to come next.

“I could hear women crying and young children asking questions like, ‘What are they going to do to us?’ and ‘Where are they going to take us?’

“There were no answers, but I knew we would know soon.

“I think we were in the boxcar for two days. We made two stops on the way to add more passengers. It was getting so crowded I was unable to sit on the floor anymore.

“They didn’t give us food or water for the whole trip. It rained and some water leaked from the roof. It tasted terrible, but it was wet and cold.

“When we got to the end of the line, the doors opened. The fresh air was cool and inviting. Everyone jumped off the train or was helped down, like me.

“The soldiers told us to go in different directions. Children went one way, women another and men still another. The families that came together were screaming as they were separated. I can still hear the sounds on nights when the air is calm. It makes me afraid all over again.”

Olga stopped telling her story as she looked out of the window onto the dimly lit street below. The memories were flooding back and they were difficult to speak about.

After a short time, she settled back into her chair and looked up at the ceiling.

She took a deep breath and then continued, “I went with the children. I looked back at the adults as they were pushed into groups. “I was wondering what they were going to make me do.

“I was taken to a big building. The boys went to the left and we girls went to the right.

“We were taken into what looked like a shower. A lady came over to me and started to cut my hair with a pair of scissors. I watched with tears as my hair fell onto the ground.

“I thought to myself, ‘It will grow back’.

“We were told to take off our clothes and then they sprayed us with a white powder.

“When I was given back my dress, the buttons and other decorations had been removed.”

Willard spoke up, “Why did they take your buttons?”

Olga responded, “Because they were made of gold and the army needed gold to buy weapons. They took everyone’s gold, even if it was in their teeth.”

Lois asked, “When did you get the number on your arm?”

“Oh, I almost forgot. After we put our clothes back on, we were taken to a table where a woman with a needle machine put ink into our arms. Everyone had a number. From then on, I didn’t have a name. I was just this number,” Olga explained as she showed the number to the children.

“Did it hurt?” Willard asked.

“Yes, it did. I wouldn’t want any of you to have to go through that,” Olga replied.

“The next thing I remember was they took us to another long building made of wood. There were small windows along the sides. The wood looked old. There wasn’t any paint on it.

“Inside of the building there were many beds; some two and others three high. The beds were made of hard wooden slats and they were already filled with children who looked at us in silence as we walked by.

“When we were all in the building, the soldiers told us to find a place to sit. I ended up on a bed with three other girls. The place was crowded. There was a lot of noise as some of the girls started to fight over where they would sit.

“The soldiers yelled at us and told us we had three seconds to find a place to sit, or we would all be taken outside and shot.

“Suddenly the room went silent.

“After the guards left the room, I looked at the girls who were sharing the bed with me. They smiled at me. Their clothes were torn and very dirty. Their hair was cut off, like mine. They had bug bites on their legs and arms, and their skin was sunken into their cheeks. The only thing that had life was their eyes. They still had a sparkle in their eyes.

“I curled up as best as I could so I wouldn’t take up too much space. I fell asleep quickly since I had not slept at all on the train.

“Early in the morning, some women came into the room and started to yell at all of us. They told us we had to get up and go outside.

“It was a very cold morning and I didn’t have a coat, or a sweater. Only the dress I had worn on the train. I held my arms together to try to stay warm.

“Shortly afterward, a woman came to us with a bucket. She gave each of us a drink of water. It tasted bad, but I was so thirsty I drank it anyway.

“Then another woman brought us something that looked like mashed corn. I tried some of it and almost threw up. It was disgusting. The other girls ate as much as they could get. I followed the example, although it was hard to swallow.

“This went on day after day. I began to look like the same as the girls did when I arrived. My dress was dirty and torn. My ribs were showing from a lack of food.

“Later I was given different clothes to wear. They had stripes on them. Some of the others in the camp had tried to escape. The soldiers decided it would be easier to find us if we had on the clothes they gave us.

“We were asked to do hard work from the time the sun came up until the sun went down. When we got back to the beds, we were too tired to do anything but tell tales of our lives to each other.

“I heard many stories, but I’m not sure how many of them were actually true.

“I don’t know how many times I woke up in the morning and one of the girls was dead. We had to take them out of the building and bury them along the fence line. Soon there were too many to bury so the guards made us throw the bodies over the fence into a large ditch. The smell became unbearable.”

Olga paused in the story again. Tears were now flowing down Olga’s cheeks. The memories were hard to tell. She was feeling the pain of her suffering all over again.

Patty spoke up, “Mom, you don’t have to tell us this story. We know how hard it is for you. We love you.”

Everyone hugged Olga as she rocked back and forth.

“Why are you rocking, grandma?” Lois asked.

“This is how I make myself feel better when I’m alone. I rock myself and imagine that my mother is holding me and kissing me,” Olga said, as she looked into the faces of her dear family.

Tears began to flow from her children as they comforted their mother the way she had comforted them when they were younger. She always had such a soft touch.

After she calmed down, she sat forward in her chair to get closer to the children.

“Let me continue,” Olga said as her daughter wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“OK momma, we’ll listen,” Susan said, as she consoled her mother.

“I thought I was going to die. The soldiers were so mean to us and the older bigger girls always got the food first, but I was able to survive because I did little favors for the soldiers and they would give me scraps of bread and meat. I wasn’t proud of what I did, but I survived while others around me died.

“I don’t know how long I was in that place. Maybe two or three years, but what I do remember is the day the war ended. The soldiers ran away and left us alone in the camp. We didn’t know what to do, so we sat on our beds waiting for something to happen.

“Suddenly, the door to our building flew open, and in the doorway was a soldier wearing a different uniform. I later found out he was a Russian soldier.

“His face had a look of disbelief. We looked terrible to him.

“He left, but soon afterward others brought us food and water. Doctors came and gave us medicine. They could not believe what they saw.

“One of the girls in my building spoke Russian and answered many questions about what had happened to us.

“After we were released, I ended up back in Budapest, but nothing there was familiar. I wasn’t able to find my house in the city. So much of the city had been destroyed by bombs from the Americans and Russians.

“I was able to find the family that took me in. They were so surprised to see me. Very few of the people who were taken from our city had ever returned. They helped me to get my health back.

“I found out they had been punished for hiding me, but they said it was worth it, especially since I had survived.

“I finally found my country house, but other people were living there. No one from my family ever returned to our city.

“I met your father and grandfather when I was working at a relief station in Budapest. American soldiers brought supplies to us.

“He was so handsome. I never thought I would be loved by anyone. He was wonderful to me and we were married in the spring.

“Then he brought me to this wonderful country where I was able to raise two beautiful daughters and be given three amazing grandchildren.

“I have never told my story before, but I’m glad that you asked, Lucy.”

Olga looked down at Lucy and smiled at her. She patted her on the head to show she was not angry with her.

“Now you know all about your grandma and how she came to the United States of America.”

VOCABULARY: (*Match the word to its definition*)

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. fade _____ | a. way of speaking |
| 2. tattoo _____ | b. small horse |
| 3. accent _____ | c. coupon, voucher |
| 4. emotions _____ | d. place to get food |
| 5. pony _____ | e. small cloth, handkerchief |
| 6. suitcase _____ | f. ink design on the skin |
| 7. ticket _____ | g. shine, glisten |
| 8. hankie _____ | h. feelings, sentiments |
| 9. sparkle _____ | i. dim, grow weaker |
| 10. relief station _____ | j. place to pack clothes |

TRUE / FALSE:

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1. Olga lived in her daughter's home. | T / F |
| 2. Olga had a tattoo on her arm. | T / F |
| 3. The children wanted to sing and dance. | T / F |
| 4. Patty was Olga's granddaughter. | T / F |
| 5. Olga cried while she told her story. | T / F |
| 6. Olga was a Jew. | T / F |
| 7. Lucy asked her grandmother for a cookie. | T / F |
| 8. The soldiers were very nice to Olga. | T / F |
| 9. An American soldier opened the door to their building. | T / F |
| 10. Olga married an American soldier. | T / F |

MULTIPLE CHOICE:

1. What did Olga fix in the kitchen? _____
 - a) hankie
 - b) tea and cookies
 - c) he favorite chair
 - d) her story

2. How did Olga get to the camp? _____
 - a) walked
 - b) by car
 - c) by bus
 - d) by train

3. How long was Olga in the camp? _____
 - a) maybe 2 or 3 years
 - b) maybe 2 or 3 months
 - c) maybe 2 or 3 days
 - d) until she died

4. What happened to Olga's hair? _____
 - a) it fell out
 - b) it turned gray
 - c) it grew long an beautiful
 - d) it was cut with scissors

COMPREHENSION: (*Write a complete sentence to answer the question.*)

1. Where did Olga grow up?

2. Who did Olga live with after her parents were taken away?

3. What did the soldiers take off of her dress?

4. How many girls shared the bed with Olga in the building?

5. What did they do to the bodies when a girl died?

6. What did the food look like the first day she was in the camp?

7. Why did they give her different clothes?

8. What was the name of Olga's pony?

9. Where did Olga meet her husband?

10. Where did Olga live when she told her story?
