

Elli Friedmann: A Hungarian Jew

In her memoir, *Coming of Age*, Elli Friedmann was only thirteen when she was deported to Auschwitz with her family in May of 1944. Elli grew up in a small Hungarian village in Somorja at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains (Rittner). Her family was religious Orthodox Jews and Elli had a typical, average life before her deportation. Her family was wealthy and well liked in her community. Elli was on the honor roll in school and dreamed of becoming a poet. All of this changed once the Germans occupied Hungary. Elli, like so many other Hungarian Jews, was stripped of her freedom, dignity, and life because of her religion.

Prior to the German occupation in March of 1944, Hungary was considered a safe haven for Jews. Up to March 1944, Hungary was the only European country where the lives of Jews could be considered safe. Sixty to seventy thousand Jewish refugees from foreign countries had fled to Hungary and lived there in safety until Hitler's armies occupied the country ("A Refuge for One Million Jews."). The restriction laws passed in Hungary, although they limited Jewish rights in society, managed to save the Jews from an earlier annihilation. The first law stated that anyone baptized before a specific date was not Jewish. This contradicted Hitler's law that stated any Christian or person who had Jewish roots in his or her background was to be treated as Jewish ("A Refuge for One Million Jews."). Another Jewish restriction was passed a few months later. It excluded Jews from many professions and it adopted the policy that a Christian was considered Jewish if his or her parents were Jewish ("A Refuge for One Million Jews."). However, despite these restrictions, the Jewish people of Hungary were better off than the Jews of the other countries occupied by Germany. Hungarian Jews were still able to own their property, live in their own homes, and live somewhat normal lives. Unfortunately, these things

all changed once the Germans occupied Hungary.

The German occupation took place in March of 1944 after the Hungarian leaders refused to deport the 800,000 Jews that resided in the country (Weiner). The situation for the Jews immediately took a drastic turn for the worst. Elli Friedmann and her family were forced to give up all of their personal property to the Germans. Elli remembers her thirteenth birthday present that she was later forced to give up:” a bright yellow girls’ bike with bright red-and-yellow webbing on the back wheel. It had a dark-yellow leather seat ...It was beautiful” (Rittner). Her family, along with the other Jews in Hungary, was forced out of their homes into ghettos. The ghetto set up for Jews during the Holocaust was overcrowded and unsanitary. Many people were not able to survive life in the ghetto because food was scarce and many contagious diseases spread quickly among the people (Bachrach). Elli and her family lived in a ghetto in Hungary for three months before they were deported. A mass deportation of Jews took place in Hungary in May 15, 1944 until July 9, 1944. During this time the Hungarian authorities deported 437,402 Jews from Hungary according to German records. With the exception of fifteen thousand people, all of them were taken to Auschwitz (“The Holocaust in Hungary“).

After the Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz, there was little chance for survival. Out of all of the Jews from Hungary that were sent there, seventy-five percent of them were exterminated during the first selection (Karsai). Elli Friedmann was one of the few Hungarian Jews who escaped extermination. When she arrived at the camp Elli barely escaped the selection. The only reason she and her mother survived was because Elli had blonde hair, a trait that the Nazis approved . She was told by a soldier that she had to pretend she was sixteen and, along with her mother, she escaped the selection. Her Aunt Szeren, however, was killed (Rittner). During her stay at Auschwitz, Elli went through drastic transformations. After the

selection, she was taken into a room with the other women and all of her hair was immediately shaven off. The effect of starvation also contributed to the drastic physical changes Elli experienced. Starvation was caused because of the food that was served at Auschwitz. The food consisted of a watery soup, few ounces of bread, and bitter coffee (Bachrach), “Breasts began to sag...then became virtual hanging empty sacks...the sacks became shorter. Eventually the skin was absorbed and they disappeared completely” (Rittner). Hunger became less of an issue as well. Eventually, the organs of the body became so weak from starvation that hunger was easier to deal with because the stomachs slowed down. All of these changes in Elli and the other women of the camp left drastic impacts on their lives.

Elli Friedmann’s account of her experience at Auschwitz is shocking. She was very frank in her descriptions of what physically happened to her. What was most shocking was that everything she went through was true. Reading what Elli went through is inspiring because she suffered so much, yet she was able to rise above it all and survive. The Nazis took everything away from her: her family, friends, school, career, dreams, talents, and basic living necessities. They stripped Elli of her humanity but they were not able to take her desire to live away. By reading her memoir, I have learned that the petty problems I think I face everyday are nothing in comparison to what she went through. After reading her experience in the Holocaust, I found myself not able to complain about frivolous things such as my homework load or the chores around the house. Also, her experience made me appreciate my family more. I have treated my family as if they will always be around when, in reality, something might occur that will take them away from me. Elli had the horrifying experience of being separated from everyone in her family except her mother, and she unfortunately experienced the loss of her father and her aunt in the Holocaust. I would not be able to imagine life without my family. Even though I had never

really shown an interest in spending time with my family, I still loved them. After reading what Elli went through, I make every effort I can to be with my family.

Works Cited

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