

Survival on the Streets

From School to the Streets

Thirteen-year-old Lewis tugged his traveling jacket around him as he boarded the train alone in Hungary. There were no seats, so he found a place in the middle of the aisle and sat down on his suitcase.

"Where are you headed?" a man in the row beside him asked.

"Budapest. For school, sir," Lewis answered, looking the man in the eye. The man nodded and left the boy to let his gaze roam around the train car. Lewis saw a few Hungarian Nazis yelling at an older Jewish man with long hair. Before the train could depart, the Nazis dragged the man off the train. Silence hovered in the car until it pulled from the station.

"Bad business, there," the man beside Lewis said. "Be glad we aren't Jewish."

Lewis agreed, but he kept his secret. He was Jewish. But he'd seen enough bullying that had come to blows in his small countryside home town. Better to blend in, especially as the laws restricting Jewish movement and rights were being passed with alarming regularity across the country. Hungary still had its own leaders, but many answered to Hitler.

When Lewis arrived in Budapest, he lived with his aunt for a few months, until her husband was killed. When she moved, he didn't go with her and ended up living on the streets or with friends for a couple of years. He'd been receiving letters from his parents occasionally, but he hadn't paid much attention to the news. He was too busy working and studying when he was able to go to school. Life was completely normal for most Hungarians in the capital city: most people went to work, school, dinner and the movies. They felt the pinch of rations (when food and supplies are limited), but even that was blamed on the Jews, fueling more antisemitism.

Lewis was always working, finding odd jobs here and there, scrapping to stay alive, and letters from family came further and further apart. But then a card came from his father in 1943 that was unusual. The card said the family was well and they were

being treated like royalty. Lewis read the words over and over. How could this be? It felt unreal. Would it be safe to go home? Lewis didn't trust his father's words.

Things began to get dangerous in March of 1944. Nazi Germany marched into Hungary and installed a new prime minister, demanding all Jews be deported immediately despite the protests of the Red Cross and other city agencies. Hungary had the largest population of Jewish people across Europe that had not yet been fully impacted by the war and Hitler's plans: 800,000 Jews.

In April, the German Nazis began quickly deporting Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, with Hungarian Nazis all too eager to help and abuse them. Lewis headed to the train station one day to try to escape the city, and he was caught by the Gestapo (the Nazi secret state police).



Jewish men on forced labor train, Hungary 1943 (photo via ushmm.org)

"I'm not Jewish!" Lewis called out, but none of the guards would listen. Lewis was shoved along with everyone else to the place where they were loading the trucks to get to the trains. Lewis had lived by finding ways to escape notice though and in the confusion, Lewis found a way to drop out of sight for long enough to lose the group he'd been with. Then he pretended to be one of the everyday Hungarian handlers loading the people onto the trains. He nar-

rowly escaped and ran back to a friend in the city who let him stay for a night until he could get work and food through one of the Jewish assistance agencies that operated in the city.

Lewis managed to keep away from the city authorities and found work in the kitchen of the Hotel Royal in Budapest. No one suspected he was Jewish. He was added to a truck detail that picked up the food deliveries from the market and loaded them into the kitchen in the basement of the hotel.

Liberation Incoming

By the fall, the Russian Red Army was approaching and the Nazi presence in Budapest was panicking. When they abandoned their quarters at the Hotel Royal overnight, they left a small unit across the Danube River for communications, and Lewis' delivery duties included taking supplies to that smaller outpost. He was there unloading when they received the order to pull up stakes and move. The soldiers in charge demanded two volunteers, and Lewis and another driver agreed to load the trucks and go with them to help unload at the new destination.



Bombed street in Budapest, 1945 (photo via ushmm.org)

As the trucks tried to leave the city, they were caught in a trap. The Russian army fired on the trucks.

Lewis and his friend ducked down as machine gun fire burned through the canvas covering the backs of the trucks. They heard the grenades exploding all around them.

The convoy was stopped on a kind of expressway, and Lewis' friend peeked out the back.

"This is it," he said. "This is when we jump."

Lewis followed him out of the back of the truck amid the explosions, and they rolled down the embankment fifteen to twenty feet until their feet landed on the ice, breaking it. Lewis' feet were immediately soaked by the freezing water, but the two young men didn't dare move. Gunfire and grenades were still raining down from the other side. Lewis held his hands over his ears and tried not to think of the cold.

Before long, the gunfire stopped, and it went quiet. They didn't move. Suddenly, a cow mooed in the distance.

"Did you hear that? A cow," Lewis said.

"That means there's a farmhouse or barn nearby. Let's go," his buddy said. They crept on their bellies slowly to a ditch that separated the farm property from the road. Along the way, Lewis crawled by a dead German soldier. He saw the man's boots and mostly dry pants and quickly pulled them on, hoping they might keep him from further hurting his feet.

Once they cleared the trees, they began to look for the barn, finding the rough structure built part-way into the ground.

They opened the door a crack and crawled in, only to be surprised by a small group of Nazi soldiers hiding.

"Don't say anything," Lewis' friend whispered to him in Hungarian. "Not a word."

They huddled in the barn until they heard the heavy footsteps of boots outside and the murmur of voices, first the ones outside and then the hushed voices of the soldiers in the barn.

Lewis' friend leaned over. "They are going to throw a grenade. Let's go out—we can tell the Russians we were hiding."

When they stepped into the night air, a huge Russian soldier stopped them. He had grenades hanging from his belt and he was unsteady on his feet. He began to yell at Lewis, calling him "German! German!"

But Lewis protested, even as the soldier pointed at the pants and boots Lewis wore.

His friend was able to tell them in Russian that they were Hungarian Jews—not German soldiers.

As the men argued, a Jewish commander came up in his tank, aiming the submachine gun at the two young men. The Russian and the tank commander had a short stand off until the Russian walked off.

“Prove to me you’re Jewish,” the commander said, his gun still pointed at Lewis and his friend. “Tell me one of the blessings.”

Lewis quickly spoke the blessing, and the commander nodded in approval. He held out a canteen that had hot coffee and rum in it and let them each have a drink. They followed the commander to the farmhouse where they were able to eat and rest for the night. Before the commander left in the morning, he gave them some paperwork.

“You’re right in the middle of the front line, boys,” he said. “You need to go around the capital. It’s under attack right now. Go south and around. This paperwork will tell anyone you meet that I cleared you.”

Lewis and his friend shook his hand and thanked him. They set out in the opposite direction, but in the bitter cold, exhaustion set in. Before they could even go ten miles, they stopped at another farmhouse. The woman inside was scared. They told her they weren’t Jewish, but they just needed to rest. She gave them some hot soup, and Lewis passed out asleep.

The next day, they got back on the road walking, but before long, they found themselves stopped by a group of Russian soldiers. Lewis tried to show them the paper from the commander, but they didn’t care. Lewis and his friend were detained in a holding block with Germans, soldiers, Hungarians, and others trying to get around the capital. Lewis eventually convinced a woman in charge of processing that he was too young to be a soldier, and he was released.

Lewis decided that the capital was too dangerous, so he began to try to get back to his hometown. He knew it was going to take a long time as it was nearly 200 kilometers away, but there wasn’t anything waiting for him in Budapest.

The war was still raging, and before long, a group of German Nazis caught him and found the tank commander’s paperwork on him. They sent Lewis to Mauthausen in Austria, a work camp near a de-

fense plant. He worked there under German guard for three short months before escaping and being liberated by the American 42nd Armored Division.



Mauthausen Camp After Liberation, 1945 (photo via ushmm.org)

It took Lewis another four weeks to make the trek to his hometown of Szakoly, Hungary where he found his parents’ home and belongings had all been taken by neighbors. Angry and alone, Lewis traveled one town over where he had a cousin who had survived. He had no other family nearby, so he headed back to Budapest and eventually made his way to Austria where he’d heard Americans and other agencies were helping Jews relocate.

While there, Lewis wrote his uncle in West Virginia a letter. His uncle found a connection near Lewis and put him in touch with someone who could help at the embassy in Vienna. Within a few days, Lewis learned he would be headed to the United States on a troop carrier. They took him by truck to Munich where he was processed and sailed from Bremerhaven on July 15, 1946. Lewis was only eighteen years old.

In the U.S., Lewis began a program in Kentucky where he learned English and skills to help him settle into life in the United States.

Years later, Lewis bitterly remembers the loss of his family and his youth. “It makes a tough person out of you. Antisemitism and hate are diseases. We need to teach the history of the Holocaust to keep that hate from rising up again.”

Source:

Rossinger, Lewis. Interview. SCE-TV and the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1990.

Lewis Rossinger

Teacher's Guide

If you haven't taught first person survivor testimonies before, we highly recommend reading [this guide](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Before you read:

1. Define the Holocaust.
2. What is a first-person testimony or account?
3. What role do first-person testimonies play in understanding history?

Questions to think about as you read:

1. Why was Lewis on the train to Budapest at the beginning of the story?
2. How did Lewis survive in Budapest once his aunt left?
3. What were some of the things Lewis had to do to escape and survive as the Russian and American forces worked to free Hungary from the Nazis?
4. How did Lewis come to the United States?
5. What did Lewis say would help keep hatred from rising up again like it did during World War II? How can teaching the Holocaust help with this?

Final reflection:

1. What will you remember most from this survivor's story? How does it add to your understanding of the events of the Holocaust?