

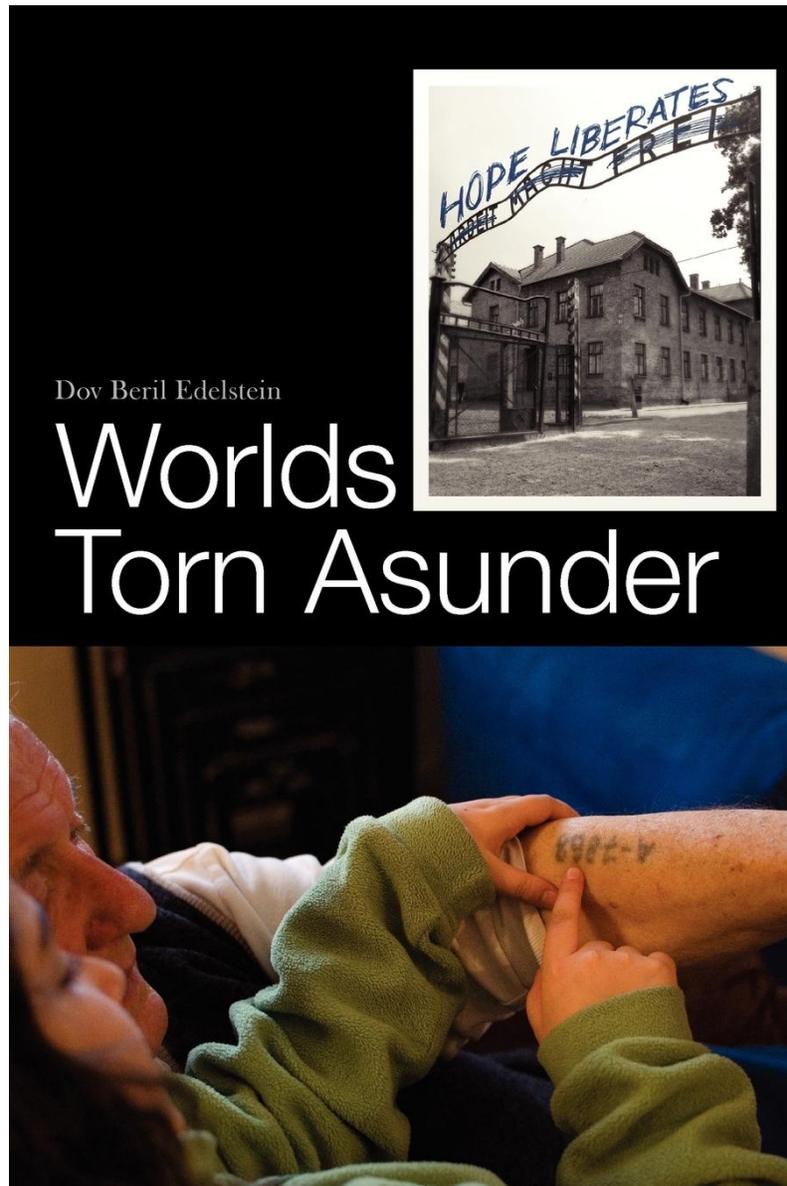
# WORLDS TORN ASUNDER

## A Holocaust Survivor's Memoir of Hope

by Dov Beril Edelstein

### *Preface & Sample Chapter*

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## From the Preface

This is not a Holocaust book. It does not record the horrifying atrocities, the barbarities, the mass killings. These, the author believes, have already been adequately documented by eyewitnesses and researchers.

The present volume is rather a microcosm of the great picture as seen introspectively by one youth who was torn away from his sheltered and comforting environment, and violently thrown into a cold, merciless, incomprehensible reality.

Steeped in Jewish lore and tradition, the Talmud-student-turned-captive interprets his personal vicissitudes in the light of the ancient traditions of his people and their historical experience. The horrifying present is somewhat mitigated by putting it into historical perspective, drawing profusely upon the Bible, Talmud, and Midrash.

What places this volume into a category of its own is its unique Jewishness. Even in the pit of utmost darkness and human degradation, Jewish faith and Jewish values asserted themselves, lending spiritual support and rendering life meaningful.

*Worlds Torn Asunder* depicts the richness of Jewish life in Hungary as experienced by the author during the last decade prior to the Holocaust. Woven into the dynamics of everyday life, all the major and minor festivals, as well as a great array of customs and traditions, are touched upon from a unique point of view.

*Worlds Torn Asunder* is a direct outgrowth of hundreds of encounters with thousands of high school and college students during the past twenty years.

Ostensibly we met to discuss Judaism. I told my eager listeners about Jewish history, religion, customs, and ethics. At the beginning, in the early sixties, no one ever dared ask me about the Holocaust; the subject, they thought, was anathema, too painful, too hurting to talk about.

With the passage of time, the ice gradually melted away. The natural eagerness, the psychological need to know what had happened there in that inferno came to the fore. I encouraged them to ask; they did.

## Sample Chapter: Into the Ghetto

HOW WELL I remember. The lilac tree at the rear of our courtyard stood in full bloom, but I was permitted to enjoy its loveliness only from a distance. I was forbidden to pick the flowers, forbidden even to stand near the tree more deeply to smell its fragrance. I looked at the tree and thought of Chanukah candles. They are sacred, can only be looked at, are not to be used for any practical purpose. Chanukah candles burn only to commemorate the victory in 165 B.C.E. of the Hasmonean priestly family over the Syrian-Greeks who sought to extinguish the light of Israel. Chanukah was months away, and yet there I stood by our door early that morning, thinking of the miracles and mighty deeds brought about by God on behalf of His people.

The truth is that the restriction against too fully enjoying spring flowers had arisen out of sorrow. Our lilacs bloomed sometime during the seven weeks between the festivals of Pesach and Shavuot. Once, these seven weeks had been the liveliest and most joyous days of the year. Following the ill-fated Jewish rebellion against the Romans in 135 C.E., the same weeks had been designated by the rabbis as a period of mourning in memory of those massacred in the defeat. Thus, nearly two thousand years later, I was forbidden our lilacs

until the day of Shavuot Eve. Then we would decorate our home with flowers and shrubs in honor of the Torah, which was given to Israel on the festival of Shavuot.

In 1944 our Shavuot was preempted. Two weeks after Pesach, the walls of the Sztatmar ghetto were completed, and the non-Jewish residents of the area encircled by the walls were moved out. The transfers completed, the herding got under way. Jews living in all parts of the city outside the walls were systematically sent into the ghetto. Our time had come. We received orders from the Hungarian authorities to be at home, to be ready to get out.

Days before, mother had finished making rucksacks. This she had done by hand, without a sewing machine, each stitch made in the midst of deep concentration. From time to time she had turned aside to wipe away a tear. Night after night I watched her sew in saintly devotion, seeing also those Israelite women of old who had spun goats' hair into yarn for the fabric of the Lord's tabernacle erected in the wilderness. Mother had made four sacks, one smaller than the others. The latter was for Shiele. Each sack had crisscrossing straps so that our loads might be eased. Even before our transfer day, we had trained ourselves in packing our rucksacks, filling them with essentials only, among which tefillin and Siddur had priority.

Most difficult for me was parting with my books. Carefully, and often at the cost of going hungry, I had during the years acquired a library of about thirty books. I could never have taken along all of them, so I tried to pick two or three favorites. I could come to no conclusion. Struggling not to cry, father had counseled me to leave all of them. He reasoned that there would be enough books in the many synagogues and Jewish homes encompassed by the ghetto. He further counseled me to make a list of my books and to take the list with me so that when eventually we returned home I could determine whether any books were missing.

I worried about my books and about Shiele. He admired me as his older brother and favorite storyteller. On the other hand, we had often quarreled and fought ferociously. One of our fights had ended with the blast of shattering glass. We had broken our door pane. Not until many days later could mother come up with the money for a new pane. But lately we hadn't fought. While things worsened and the ghetto walls were going up, a special bond of tenderness and love had developed between Shiele and me. More frequently than before, he sought my companionship. He had always been quiet and delicate, but now his paleness and his pensiveness were more obvious. Once he asked me to promise I would always be close to him, that I would never leave him. I promised, not knowing that forces stronger than I and more brutal than Satan would separate us forever.

Father in those days seemed detached, his heart and soul elsewhere. He would open a book, then soon close it. He hardly spoke at all. Yet again and again he said something about steadfastness and complete faith, always with a tremor in his voice. I saw him repeatedly open the drawer in which we kept over two hundred postcards written by his father, grandfather, and great grandfather. The cards held both family history and Jewish wisdom. He would leaf through them, put them back into the drawer, take them out, and again replace them. I could sense that those cards meant a great deal to him.

I don't know how long I stood gazing at our lilacs, but it was Shabbat; we had a sacred duty to fulfill, and so I walked with father and Shiele to the synagogue. We left home earlier than was our custom, for we wanted to be back before the movers arrived. Never before had I experienced such strained worship. To begin with, the synagogue was half-empty; many friends who regularly prayed with us were not there. Still more disquieting, everyone present was highly nervous, seemingly anxious he would miss the opportunity to be taken into the ghetto. Indeed, though we were just where we should have been, we felt out of place. Our houses of study and worship, our homes and our shops, by decree, suddenly belonged to some power or another. Just as the dead must surely long to be taken to the cemetery, we felt a need to join our people already walled up in the ghetto.

By eight o'clock we were home again. Ordinarily, services would not have concluded before noon. During those hours, we youth had always managed to find a few minutes to relax, to talk about the confusions of the young, to create and strengthen friendships. Shabbat had always been for renewal, for rejoicing. At home, our Shabbat meal traditionally lasted for two hours or more. We would sing, exchange interpretations of Scripture, Mishnah, or Midrash. Sometimes, especially when we had guests at our table,

our singing and discussion would continue until late afternoon. Afterwards, while our parents napped, we youngsters would socialize, play games, study.

This Saturday, this Shabbat was demolished. Mother nonetheless made a supreme effort to carry off some semblance of what used to be and should have been. Just as we had gone early to services, we now sat down early for our Shabbat meal. The traditional food and wine were on the table; we pronounced the blessings, but we did not sing. The meal was tragic, as sad as the one that preceded the fast of Tisha b'Av. What was happening? For what good reason were we leaving our homes? Why were we Jews being separated and sealed off from the other citizens of Szatmar? What had we done wrong? When might we return to what was ours?

I was tormented to the point of exploding. The day was long, painfully long. Even by afternoon the movers had not arrived. We could only sit and wait. I began to wonder which of the four families living at 17 Bathany Street would be taken first. Would the movers start at the front of the building, or would they begin at the rear and take us first?

Our landlords, the Schroeders, a couple of about sixty-five, occupied the front lodgings. They never pressed for the rent when mother was late with it, as she often was. I do not remember their ever having been visited by children or grandchildren. The Schroeders liked to sit on their porch and always smiled at me when I passed by. If I helped them by running an errand to the market or by fetching a pail of drinking water from the city fountain, they would reward me generously. Both Shiele and I received frequent treats from them. The Schroeders were the only ones in our lodgings who did not follow strict Orthodox tradition. They originated from Germany; their dress was flawless, their manners refined. They were the antithesis of the stereotyped East European Orthodox Jew. Once, Mrs. Schroeder gently tried to convince me to conceal the fringes of my tallit katan under my shirt and to arrange my earlocks so that they would be less conspicuous. Such worldliness and drift toward heresy I could not abide, so I had fled from her as from temptation itself. Nonetheless, we had remained friends.

In the second lodging lived the Schwartz family. The father was a widower and an avowed follower of the Szatmarer Rebbe. He had two sons and three daughters. The younger son was about my age, seventeen. His adolescent sisters were a constant vexation for me. After all, my strict Orthodox upbringing strictly prohibited looking at a strange woman, and even at anything suggesting womanhood. Imagine then the discomfort created by the clothesline strung between two poles at the rear of the courtyard and readily visible from our window. Even when the girls were not in sight, their dresses danced in the breeze. Moreover, the youngest of the three sang most attractively when hanging wet laundry on the line. Alas, I had no sisters and had always wanted to ask my age-mate and neighbor just what it meant to dwell with such creatures.

The third lodging was taken by the Friedmans. They were quiet, just recently married. And of course, I wasn't supposed to look at her either, yet I knew she was pregnant. Her husband, who must have been nearly twenty-five, tried desperately to appear years younger. The results were often ridiculous, but then he was simply trying to avoid being blown to bits if sent off to the Russian front to clear minefields. While he waited for the authorities to catch up with him, he dealt in mushrooms. He would buy mushrooms wholesale and then bag them for distribution among the vegetable stalls of Szatmar. When the Friedmans couldn't handle all the bagging, I would help them in the evenings and turn my earnings over to mother. Sometimes only Mrs. Friedman and I would bag, while her husband secluded himself in another room to study Talmud.

But on this day, no one worked, no one studied. We waited, all of us the Schroeders, the Schwartzes, the Friedmans, and the Edelsteins. Mrs. Schroeder was no longer concerned with my fringes and earlocks. For the first time, the presence of the Schwartz sisters did not distract me. Friedman did not conceal his age. None of these things mattered anymore. Neither did anyone attempt to hide or run. Only one determination served us all—to remain with family, come what may. In a world cold and hostile, future uncertain, there was only one warm spot left—one's own family.

Terrible things had been told by the Polish Jews who had come to hide in Szatmar. I didn't want to think about their stories and of the possible implications for me. Instead, I tried to fancy what life would be like when confined to a very small section of what used to be my city. I thought of my Shabbat afternoon

walks in the park, situated at the very heart of Szatmar. In the summers, a military band would play there while large crowds, Jews and non-Jews alike, strolled about, enjoying both music and the cool breezes from the Szamos River. I thought of the many synagogues, chedarim, and yeshivot which the division of Szatmar had left outside the ghetto. I knew that soon, on a given day, at a given hour, all would be silenced. How would Szatmar look without its Jews? Would the gentiles be pleased to see us go? Would they feel remorse, shame?

I felt a slight touch upon my shoulder. It was Shiele, standing beside me, a faint smile on his face. I was glad to see him smile; he so seldom did. I wondered what he was thinking about, what doubts and fears tormented his young mind. "Do you think, Beril, that Antshel, Marsha, and the baby are already in the ghetto?"

I was stunned. Thoughts about my oldest brother, his wife, and their two-year-old baby often invaded my mind, but they were too painful, and so I had always worked to dismiss them. Nine years older than I, Antshel had been a strict disciplinarian. When I was younger, father had served as an itinerant rabbi, and was often away for days, sometimes a month at a time. Antshel was then head of the family; he had been especially difficult about my studies and my piety. He was the only one of the five sons who had not acquired a thorough talmudic education. He was the only of us to learn a trade; he had become a bookbinder. After he married, some three years earlier, he and his wife, Marsha, had moved to Nagyvarad, a two-hour train ride from Szatmar. While still a bachelor and living with us in Szatmar, my oldest brother practiced extreme piety. Although our own family was of limited financial means, he would often practice almsgiving with the last coins reserved for family essentials. Since Hershil and Yosil were at yeshiva, I was the one, while at home, who had to bear the brunt of his disciplinary measures. Yet I admired and respected his devotion to the advancement of my education and of my piety. Since the German invasion of Hungary we had received no message from Antshel, Marsha, and their baby. We knew that Marsha was now pregnant with her second child. My heart went out to them and to all the babies and the pregnant mothers. How would they manage this ordeal?

Even as Shiele was asking his question, we could hear the wagons rolling in the streets. The movers had arrived; I never answered Shiele.

The Hungarian police who were doing this phase of the Germans' dirty work were polite. The round-up system was by then well polished. We were told to reduce our belongings, our essentials. Where had we erred? Was it too much bedding, too many cooking utensils? Whatever it was, we left with rucksacks less full than we had planned.

I took a final look at my books, covered them with a sheet to protect them against dust, then stepped to the door. A last touch of fingertips upon our mezuzah, fingertips touched to lips, and I was out. Inadvertently I breathed deeply of our lilacs, wondered where we would this year pick flowers and shrubs for Shavuot.

The horses were given the order to move on. Father, mother, Shiele, and I followed the wagon as if in a funeral procession. The journey was short, only a few minutes, for we lived not far from the ghetto. The gate opened widely and closed immediately. We were now inside the ghetto. I felt a tremendous sense of relief; the ordeal was over, at least for the time being. I was again with my people. Thousands filled the streets, and there was a great commotion. I was dazed, not comprehending what was real and what a mirage.

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