

# MY STORY

(In Print and Video)

By Susan Kalev

## MY MOTHER'S FIRST LIFE



*My mother, Ilona Spiegel, at age 32, in Hungary.*

My mother, Ilona Spiegel was born in 1917 in Budapest, Hungary, and this is her story. She escaped deportation to Auschwitz because a relative was allowed to include her on a list of family members to be sent to a Budapest Ghetto. Only she and I survived the Holocaust. The ensuing upheavals in her life are highlighted here. Since 1957, we made our lives in New York City where my younger sister and I grew up. I was 12 years old when I arrived to this new world.

After our mother's sudden death at age 79, my sister and I discovered hidden letters that our mother had meant for us to find. She wrote that in 1945, when she was liberated from the ghetto in Budapest, she staggered out into the daylight, searching for food, cradling me, a small infant. The winter of 1944 had been bitter cold in the ghetto — a biting chill with high snow, broken windows, scarce food, and no hot water. She could not believe that the world had outlasted the Holocaust and that life was moving on.

She grew up in a loving Orthodox home with secure roots, tradition, and the assurance that a happy, orderly future awaited her. Her world was incinerated in 1944 when the war took her husband, her sister, her parents, and her firstborn little girl. Two years later, she married another survivor who had lost his family, and he became my father (I never knew my birth father). We moved to Kapuvár, the small town where my new father had lived, and my mother had another daughter, Marian. She wrote that the comfortable life they had created was only an illusion: her losses could not be forgotten. She lived a new life in the shadow of those past memories.

Our parents did not talk about the past, the losses, the children who came before us. Like most Holocaust survivors they locked up the past and thus the suffering and trauma followed them wordlessly into their new life.



*Left: My mother's wedding photo. Right: my older sister who died at age 3 during the Holocaust.*

I felt that I “remembered” my mother’s memories, that I experienced her first, her “real” life, though I was not there. Is it possible to inherit that trauma, to inhabit what happened before I was born? Now, my role is to preserve and safeguard those memories as if I were a silent witness to her first life.

My mother asked, how was it possible to live among the Hungarians, the people who betrayed and murdered all that was ours and all that mattered? How could we speak the language that was used to humiliate us because we were Jewish? How could she continue to pray to a God who allowed this to happen? And yet, she and her new husband lived: they raised another family, and they prospered.



*Reconstructed family in Kapuvár, Hungary, in 1948.*

In 1951, the Russians came and the regime took over all properties and businesses, and my parents lost it all. We fled the small town and the big house and moved to Budapest to start anew — to create another life — with little to guide us. My mother kept a traditional Jewish home; my sister and I attended public schools, and we were the only kids in school who did not carry our schoolbooks or write in class on Shabbat.

With the 1956 Hungarian uprising, my family, along with 200,000 others, fled the country to escape Communism. Again, and again, my parents were uprooted and thrown into a new start, now in America. How many times can one begin yet again? How do you pick up the pieces, learn a new language, earn a living, send your children to a strange school? How do you face the unknown? Do you still mourn that first authentic life that was yours, that was your birthright?

After 36 years I took my mother back to visit Hungary, the country she never wanted to see again. But something in her had broken, or opened up, and she agreed. Her reunion with Emma, our old nanny and housekeeper who carried our past history, was tearful, joyous, and almost heartbreaking. So many years of memories that only the two of them shared.

My mother sat by Emma's bed and they covered all the years of caring for two little girls, the task of keeping a kosher kitchen, changing to Passover dishes, tending to the chickens and the ducks in the back yard, and every Friday baking the challah and the traditional cholent with the



enticing aroma that filled the house with expectation. We never talked about those times with my mother. With Emma, my mother could revisit the days of calm and order, and perhaps of hope.

We took time to walk the streets, to watch the people, to gaze at the still familiar street names. Strangers let us into the houses — the homes — where she had lived and that she shared with my father. Some furniture was still intact. The tenants who now inhabited the spaces that had been my mother's home still remembered our family.



*Family home in Kapuvár, where Susan lived from age 2 to 6, and where she was the only Jewish child to survive the Holocaust.*



*Last home in Budapest, Hungary.*

We sipped coffee and ordered sweets from her favorite corner coffee shop that she frequented as a young girl. I could only look at her face and wonder about where those happy memories were lodged in her heart. Were they still happy after so many years?

We visited the house, now rebuilt, where my mother grew up. She looked about with her sad brown doe-eyes that hid the old pain. She cried in the garden, the land that had been planted by her father and tended by her mother in what had once been a happy universe. This here had been her life before she became my Mommy. She breathed this air, she slept in this bed, she carried her books to this school. The rich poetic Hungarian language floods us both with early memories: it brings us to the primal scenes. Fragments and smells, cobbled streets, wine cellars, yellow streetcars. We were both born into this life.

I too want to live the life that was taken from me. I too feel shadowed by the life not lived, missing the past, missing even what I never knew. I want to live that “first” life. With my mother gone, I return to Hungary often to relive my history. I go back to keep my mother alive within me.



*Ilona with Susan's two daughters*





*Recent photo of Susan with her daughters and granddaughter*

## **A VIDEO REMEMBRANCE FROM ME, MY DAUGHTER, AND MY GRANDDAUGHTER**

The following 12-minute video and narrative was filmed by DOROT, a nonprofit organization that addresses the challenges of an aging population in New York. It is part of their **Legacy Project**, a collection of life stories from seniors who wish to leave their histories for future generations.

I was known to DOROT Senior Services via their website. They reached out to me and assigned a “Lasting Impressions” volunteer to work with me for 4 months. She was very helpful and technically savvy and it became a labor of love for me, my daughter, and granddaughter. In my research for material and old family photos the project brought back many early memories.

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/qmgv93p1u00kmrg/AADdYGC9DNgiPvJBR0LFqFEua?dl=0&preview=Susan+Kalev+Legacy+Project+MPG.mpg>

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*For many years after the family immigrated to New York City, Ilona Spiegel worked very hard as a seamstress at a clothing factory. She sewed and knitted all of her family's clothes. She studied English at Hunter College and became an office manager for a large firm, where she worked until the day she collapsed and died.*

*Susan Kalev lives in New York City and works as a psychotherapist with people who often deal with trauma, separation, and loss. Her experiences as a child survivor who has been uprooted inform her present work. She writes often on Holocaust issues and is a member of the Hungarian Hidden Children and of the Hidden Child Foundation's group of Infant Survivors. She sees hope in her children, and granddaughter, who carry the lessons of this legacy into the future.*