

MALKA CSIZMADIA

Malka Csizmadia's front door has a peephole four feet off the ground. A shade over four and a half feet tall, she ushers us into a sunlit apartment in a low-cost housing project in Nabariyya, Israel. It is populated mostly by Moroccan Jews. She knows her neighbors well and they know her. They call her "the sun," and it's easy to see why.

She begins to answer our questions matter-of-factly. Then she talks nonstop for twenty minutes. She doesn't want to be interrupted because she is reliving that time, telling her story as if it were a movie, scene by scene. Her words, spoken in slow, carefully enunciated Hebrew, quickly transport us to Satoraljaujhelyen, where her family of women—she with her two sisters and mother—saved more than twenty-five Jewish men from a nearby work camp.

My mother always reached out to others and she taught all of us to do that, too. She especially helped old people; I think it's in our blood. We heard about the Nazi occupation of other countries but we didn't think it would reach Hungary. But beginning in 1944, they began closing the schools—that's the first thing I remember; I could never finish school after that. Then they started to do things to Jews, like closing their shops, and rounding them up and putting them in ghettos. We would hear that a certain street was closed and we wouldn't know why—just that it was where Jews lived. I was only seventeen, and my sisters were twenty-one and fourteen.

I was born in 1927, in a small village, Satoraljaujhely, which went back and forth between Czechoslovakia and Hungary. We were Protestant, but simple people, not fanatic. I was the middle one of three sisters, and we lived with our mother because our father had left when I was very young. All my life we had Jewish friends.

We were living in an apartment building with eight other families, and one morning I woke up and saw a barbed-wire fence on the other side of our garden. They had put it there during the night. That day I walked around the neighborhood and saw an abandoned house; it was an image I'll never forget. There were things all over, food left on the table, spilled, a heater turned over on the floor, a little girl's dolls, and even dough left in a baking pan turning green with mold. Later I found out this was a house in the ghetto where children and old people had lived. The ghetto had been closed and the people were taken. I sat by the window and cried to think of how these people had had to leave their home and all their things. It's the clearest picture that still sticks in my mind and is always there. If a painter had been there, the painter could have captured the sadness of it. Whenever I think of it, I cry.

Later that day, I wanted to see what was on the other side of the barbed-wire fence, so I climbed a tree in our garden and spotted a man in civilian clothes but with a Hungarian army hat, standing outside over a big pot, cooking something. I asked him, "Who are you?" He answered, "I am a Jew, but it's very dangerous here. Who are you? What are you doing here?" I told him, "I live here, and I'm not afraid of you; I want to talk to you." I was seventeen, but because I was so small, I looked about thirteen, which was always to my advantage during the war. I kept talking to



Malka Csizmadia, 1947.

him from my place in the tree, and I even talked to the guard who was walking back and forth. He also asked me who I was and what I wanted. I told him I was just curious, and he told me, "It's too dangerous; I think you should leave." I climbed down, but when he was out of sight, I climbed back up again and asked the Jewish man if there was anything I could do to help him. He said, "You could take letters out for me." So this is how it began.

Anything he asked for, like newspapers, or paper and envelopes, we passed through the fence when no one was looking. He gave me his letters and I put my return address on them so the people could send their answers to me; then I gave them to him. I listened to the radio and kept him informed of the news about the war. I found out there were about three hundred men in this work camp—women and children had been taken to a different place—and Szarany, the man I was talking to, was the cook for the camp. These men were from all over Hungary, and they knew they would one day be deported to a death camp.

I didn't realize how dangerous it was until I began hearing stories about how people who were helping Jews were killed immediately or put into prison. But I continued even after I knew the dangers. And I didn't tell anyone about what I was doing. But one day Mother asked me, "Why are you spending so much time in the garden? You never used to like the garden." I didn't really answer her, but one day she saw me in the tree and asked what I was doing up there. I told her, "Look across the fence; I'm looking at that man." Then I whispered to her, "Mother, don't you understand? These are Jews and I'm helping this man by passing his letters back and forth." Mother and I discussed it and she agreed to help them, too. She said, "Who knows what will happen tomorrow. It's the middle of a war and today we'll do what we can."

With my whole family helping, we became even more involved. We took other men's letters, which were mostly to relatives in Budapest, so they'd send return letters and packages. All of a sudden I was getting so much more mail that the postman became suspicious. Then we dug a hole under the fence so the men could come to our house and listen to the radio. We paid off the guard, and he was happy as long as they returned that night. One night when a Jewish man named Friedman was at our house, our village was under attack so we all had to go to the shelter. I told Friedman that he'd better leave, but it happened that one of the German officers in the shelter understood Hungarian.

The next day, Mother said we had to stop, that it was becoming too dangerous. But then this German called me into his office and said, "You're small in size, but not up here," pointing to his head. "War is terrible. I haven't seen my children for five years. You should keep helping people." He gave me cologne and cake. I asked if there was anything I could do for him, but he said, "No, nothing."

Sometimes the men's relatives came from Budapest to stay in our house. They brought false I.D.'s and visited them through the fence or in our house. I'd go to the store and buy cake and ice cream. When the clerk started asking me why I was buying so much ice cream, I told her it was someone's birthday, and then somebody else's. They never really suspected because I looked so young.

In late summer we knew the war would soon be over because the Russian army was advancing quickly. We were afraid they'd kill everyone or take them to a concentration camp in Germany. Szarany said he would not go, so we decided we'd make plans to hide as many as we could when the time came.



One day in mid-November, very early in the morning, Szarany came to me and my mother—he always called her “Mother”—and said that at 10 A.M. there would be a lineup and they’d all have to report for it because they were moving all the men out. We had plans to take as many men as we could to nearby farms where people had agreed to hide them in their wheat. The first man we took had such Jewish features that we had to dress him as a woman and put a bandage on his face as if he’d just had a tooth pulled, to hide his beard. Mother took him and I took Szarany. The plan was for Mother to go first and I would come five minutes later, but by the time I got Szarany, Mother was nowhere in sight, so we had to make our way alone.

I found out later that she knew a way to go through the fields. The only way I knew was by the roads which were full of German and Hungarian soldiers. It was a very cold, rainy day, and Szarany had on a winter coat; his pockets were filled with cigarettes to give as bribes. He was so afraid that his teeth were chattering. I took his hand and gave him a cigarette, and tried to get him to relax. We decided to walk separately because it was safer. When a soldier stopped me to ask where I was going, I said, “To the village to get bread.” I would distract them by giving them cigarettes so Szarany could sneak by. We finally reached the farm. My mother wasn’t there yet, but she came in half an hour. My mother and I went back and forth bringing food, and my sister and mother brought about twenty more men; we just kept moving the men from hiding place to hiding place. We continued this for five weeks until the Russians liberated our area.

The Russians liberated Hungary on January 7, 1945, and all twenty-five of the young men came back to our apartment because they had nowhere else to go. Slowly they rented apartments and six months later my older sister married one of these men. Szarany said he’d never leave this family again. He married my younger sister and we all stayed in the same house. They had a son, and in 1949 Szarany wanted to come to Israel. He came first, then my sister and the baby. I wanted to be with them, and so did my mother, so we all followed him. We were real pioneers; Israel was a very difficult place in those days.

In 1950, I married a Jew from Morocco and we had one son. My older sister had converted to Judaism in Hungary; her husband is a religious Jew and they moved to Israel in 1955. They live in Akko, but Szarany and my younger sister live across the street here in Nahariyya; we’re very close. Sometimes I talk with him about this time, but it’s very painful. I told him I’d rather have a bullet in my head than do it again.

I live in this neighborhood full of Moroccan Jews, many of whom don’t know anything about the Holocaust. Most of them don’t know that I’m not Jewish, so they certainly don’t know what I did during the war. I received the Yad Vashem medal in 1966. Neither of my sisters would accept the medal; they didn’t want to talk about the war. They say they didn’t do it for publicity or reward or money. But I was divorced in 1964, and in a very bad financial position, alone with a young child, and I wasn’t well. My son had been born in 1954, by cesarean, and three days later I had a heart attack. I thought I would get some money if I got the medal, which wasn’t the case. The International Jewish Congress started giving me a small amount of money in 1966, but things didn’t really improve until the Israeli government recognized the needs of the Righteous last year and began giving us an honor pension. That was when I was able to buy furniture for my living room; before that I had only a cabinet and one chair.

My son had to have a formal conversion because I'm not Jewish, but even before that he was a Jew in every way. He's the vice president of a bank, he's married to a wonderful woman who's Moroccan, an English teacher, and they have three children.

I went to a kibbutz to tell the children about the war and what I did. Many reporters have visited me to hear my story. I do this because I believe in educating and teaching, especially the children, so it should never happen again. I'm sorry to come up against the Israeli youth attitude of not wanting to hear about the Holocaust anymore, but I keep my mind open about what everyone says.

I'm very idealistic. I love this country so much; you can be one people here. I often talk with soldiers to try to talk them out of leaving Israel. It's important to live here. I haven't had any problems not being Jewish. I've always identified with Jews, and from the very beginning I felt at home in Israel. I don't make a distinction between religions, but between people.