

Ruzena Guttmannova

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Growing up

I was born in 1921 in Breznica, Eastern Slovakia, into a strictly Orthodox family and have adhered to the Jewish traditions up until now.

My father, Aron Kleinmann, was born in 1880 in the town of Ladomirov, which was in Austria-Hungary at the time. He owned a large estate in Breznica. We had an inn, and in summer, we used to sit at the tables outside. I even have a picture of this. We also used to congregate on a big porch in summer. My father had a short beard and a moustache, always wore a cap, a coat and a tie, and dressed in modern fashion.

My mother was born Ester Gruenwaldova in Breznica in 1882. She had two brothers, Adolf and Toba. Malvina Gruenwaldova, who was born in Presov in 1907, is the daughter of one of my uncles. She was a housewife. My cousin Malvina survived the Holocaust and died in Montreal, Canada, in 1980.

My mother also had a sister, who was very pretty and was always elegantly dressed. In America she married a cousin called Friedman. He was born in 1899 in Breznica and became a successful businessman in the United States. He owned some hotels. He died in New York in 1988.

My parents had eight children. My oldest brother, Nabel, was born in 1900. In 1929 he went to America and worked as a servant first, and, after a while, as a waiter. There he changed his name to Irving. I was 22 when he left for America. I hardly knew him and we met for the first time after the war, when he turned 75. Irving used to send us pictures from America.

All other children stayed at home and helped our parents on the farm. My second oldest brother Emil, born in 1902, was married, so he wasn't with us. My oldest sister, Tonci, was born in Breznica in 1910, then there were my twin brothers Max and Adolf, born in 1914, then my brother Iosef, my sister Malvina, born in 1919, and me.

We got along rather well with the non-Jews in our village. I remember that we used to sit in the courtyard with Helena and Dulet Friedmanova; the

Friedman family were our neighbors. They were nice and very helpful. We enjoyed friendly relations until the great tragedy came with the rise of the war-time Slovak State and that state destroyed our whole family.

During the war

When the first deportations started in 1942, I was rounded up as a young girl, the first one of my family. I was deported on 22nd March 1942 with the first transport. I remember the despair of my parents when they learned that I had to go; I packed my suitcase, my brother harnessed two horses, and, along with my father and a policeman, I left. I still remember those painful first moments in the assembly center in Poprad.

We were on the train for several days, and my first impression of Auschwitz was that I had arrived in hell. I managed to stay alive for three years in Auschwitz. I survived several selections and experienced Dr. Mengele's periodic inspections. Toward the end of the war, I was forced out of the camp and on to a death march. We went through several other concentration camps. Until now, I have never returned to Auschwitz.

While still in Auschwitz, I learned from my neighbor, who was deported later on, that my parents paid 4,000 Slovak crowns in order to obtain an exception as economically important Jews because they had a big farm. However, the very next day Slovak guards [1](#) came to pick up my parents. So it seems the bribe they paid did them no good.

Many members of my family didn't survive the Holocaust. My father Aron and my brothers Emil and Max were killed in Auschwitz. My sister Tonci, along with her three little children, of whom one was only a baby, and her husband Berkovic were all killed in Auschwitz, too, probably in 1942. My mother Ester died in Majdanek concentration camp [2](#) in 1942.

Two of my brothers - Emil, who was 27 year old and already married, and Max, who was 22 - didn't want to leave our parents and went with them to the concentration camp. Max had served in the Czechoslovak army, so we have a lovely picture of him in his uniform.

I remember my cousin Kosen Goldman, who was born in Ladomirov in 1907. Before World War II he was a businessman. During the Holocaust he was taken to Auschwitz, and killed there.

My brother Adolf and I survived together. My other brother, Iosef, also survived because he had been in a forced labor brigade attached to the army, and that's how he made his escape. And, of course, Irving, who had left for America in the 1920s, also survived.

Post-war

After the liberation, I returned to Breznica for a while. However, our house had been destroyed by bombs, everything was in ruins. But my brother and I were well received by our neighbors and classmates. These good relations have lasted until now.

I then moved to Stropkov in Eastern Slovakia along with my brother, and we lived in our cousin's house.

I got married in Stropkov in 1946. My husband, Viktor Guttmann came from an Orthodox family from Vranov. Out of six siblings, he was the only one to survive the Holocaust.

We moved to Bratislava in 1949. Our first-born son lives in the USA now. We had two more sons, one of them lives in Bratislava. Our family property is now owned by an agricultural cooperative and as yet I haven't got any compensation for it. I'm retired. After the death of my husband I live alone, but keep in touch with my sons and their families.

My brother Irving worked as a manager after World War II. He was married to Ester Kleinmannova, who was born in Poland in 1912. She was a housewife. She died in Florida in 1999. Irving died in Florida in 1986. He suffered from mental disorder. My other brother, Adolf, died in Israel in 1990.

I was at the funeral in the USA. Many people came to the ceremony and there was a big mirror. Police were in the front, then the body was carried in a car following the police and then people who attended the funeral were following. There were about ten long big cars with about twelve people. I attended this funeral where bodies in coffins were put into a wall. Ester was put next to Irving.

Glossary

1 Slovak Guards

2 Majdanek concentration camp

situated five kilometers from the city center of Lublin, Poland, originally established as a labor camp in October 1941. It was officially called Prisoner of War Camp of the Waffen-SS Lublin until 16th February 1943, when the name was changed to Concentration Camp of the Waffen-SS Lublin. Unlike most other Nazi death camps, Majdanek, located in a completely open field, was not hidden from view. About 130,000 Jews were deported there during 1942-43 as part of the 'Final Solution'. Initially there were two gas chambers housed in a wooden building, which were later replaced by gas chambers in a brick building. The estimated number of deaths is 360,000, including Jews, Soviets POWs and Poles. The camp was liquidated in July 1944, but by the time the Red Army arrived the camp was only partially destroyed. Although approximately 1,000 inmates

were executed on a death march, the Red Army found thousand of prisoners still in the camp, an evidence of the mass murder that had occurred in Majdanek.