DR. ALFRED PASTERNAK

SAGA OF THE PASTERNAK FAMILY

Countless stories have been written which relate the trauma, trials and tribulations endured by Holocaust survivors. One may ask, why then are any more stories necessary? Yet, although commonalities abound, each story remains a unique saga of an individual's ability to overcome inhumane conditions, unspeakable acts, and severe loss. Although the experiences are in fact unspeakable, Holocaust survivors feel compelled to speak, in order that, as Dr. Alfred Pasternak explains: "We keep alive forever the fact that such atrocities were committed upon our own people. Other people all over this earth must never ever forget these senseless, barbaric acts of inhumanity and the individuals upon whom these acts were inflicted." Alfred Pasternak's story is a tale of individual faith and courage under these adverse conditions.

Hanna and Benjamin Pasternak, Dr. Pasternak's Grandparents.

The Pasternak family, prominent in religious, business and community life in pre-war Hungary, operated a flour mill and vineyards in Tallya. The family had lived in Hungary for seven generations, leading a peaceful and involved life within the orthodox community. The Pasternaks had three children. Alfred, the youngest, entered Cheder at the age of three.

Simon Pasternak, Dr. Pasternak's father, before the Holocaust.

In 1940, Alfred's older sister, Hedy, became engaged to a young man from Czechoslovakia. Surprisingly, the Pasternak's rabbi, contrary to religious custom, advised that the couple not rush to marry, but that the bride remain in Hungary until a more appropriate time. A few months later, the Pasternaks learned that Hedy's fiance and his family were deported to Poland where they were killed.

Between 1939-1944, Alfred's father was drafted several times into the Hungarian Labor Service, the harsh alternative to regular military service for Jews and other "unreliables." Fortunately, because of his long-time friendship with a general, he was discharged on the first day each time.

Auschwitz - Birkenau, taken in 1978

The Germans entered Hungary shortly after Alfred's Bar Mitzvah, and the Pasternaks relatively comfortable life came to an end. On the morning after Pesach, in April, 1944, the Pasternak family and the rest of the Jewish population were forced into a ghetto. The Gentile community of Tallya, which had enjoyed the generosity of the Pasternak family for so many decades, watched idly as Hungarian gendarmes marched them to the rail station toward an unknown fate.

The Pasternaks were moved to the ghetto of Satoraljaujhely, where they all lived in one room of a house filled with other ghetto residents. They remained there for six weeks before being crammed into cattle cars for a four-day journey that ended in Auschwitz. During the trip, one man attempted suicide by cutting his veins, but a doctor in the cattle car managed to keep him alive. Learning of the incident, the SS shot the man.

Upon arrival in Auschwitz, and after the separation of men and women, Alfred and his father clung together. They listened to camp veterans describe gas chambers which resembled showers where gas, instead of water, seeped out of ceiling jets. Shortly after hearing this, Alfred and his father had their bodies totally shaven and were sent to shower. Alfred tells us that his emotions at that time will remain with him all his life. Fortunately, the particular showers to which Alfred and his father were sent were real.

Alfred remembers another incident that happened on the first day. They were marching beside a corn field. One prisoner jumped out of the column and raced into the field. The SS guards hunted him down as though he were a wild animal and they were sportsmen on a hunting expedition. "Shoot him in the leg. Don't kill him," some of them shouted. But after they cornered their quarry, they did kill him. The commandant then decided to reinforce the message of "no escape." He announced that the column of men would be decimated. The two Pasternaks, father and son, were spared in the ensuing massacre, surviving to share yet another unforgettably horrifying experience.

Doernhau

Alfred and his father did not remain in Auschwitz for long. After eight days of virtual inactivity, they were shoved into cattle cars again and shipped to Doernhau in Lower Silesia, now part of Poland. They remained there until liberated by the Russians on May 9, 1945, one day after the war in Europe had officially ended.

Although Doernhau was not officially an extermination center, it was called the "cold crematorium" because of the thousands of inmates who died of cold, starvation, beating and torture.

The inmates all had numbers. Alfred's was 41820; his father's, 41819. For any infraction, inmates were reported, not by name, but by number. The Kapos then beat them, usually to death. Alfred could often actually hear the spinal columns of prisoners break.

Courage and fortitude had much to do with Alfred Pasternak's survival at Doernhau. After a few months, he was assigned to work in the officers' barracks. He also became an orderly to the commandant. His job entailed serving food, shining boots, cleaning the barracks, etc.

Some of the officers suspected that Alfred saved their leftovers and took them back to his block. For spite, they would purposely put the food into the garbage, making it inedible. At great risk, Alfred continued to smuggle food from the officers' barracks to share with his fellow prisoners. He did this by first cutting out his pants pockets and tying the trouser bottoms. This method, which he had learned from a friend, enabled him to slip large quantities of food into his pants. He could leave the officers' barracks each evening, apparently empty-handed. Had he been caught, he could easily have been killed. He certainly would have been taken off his warm barracks assignment and given work outside, where many died in the freezing weather.

In the fall of 1944, a new commandant arrived at Doernhau. His name was Hans Mucke. His arrival was considered a miracle by Alfred and his father. Mucke was far more humane than his predecessor. This former schoolteacher from Duesseldorf was especially kind toward Alfred, perhaps because he had a son who was Alfred's age. Mucke's kindness toward Alfred served him well after Germany's defeat.

One day, an order came that the young men under 18 be rounded up and shipped out, reportedly for factory work during the winter. Alfred ran to the commandant and begged to be allowed to remain in Doernhau with his father. After some thinking, Mucke told Alfred to stay in his office until the round-up was completed. Alfred peered through the window as the other boys were loaded onto trucks, destined most probably for a death camp. After that, the commandant always informed him about potentially dangerous inspections, often helping him to hide.

In the Spring of 1945, rumors were spreading in Doernhau: The Germans might evacuate the camp, and as they would be forced to march toward the German "hinterland" the already meager food portions of the inmates would be even smaller.

The Pasternaks decided to cut off a small slice of their ration of bread every day and collect it for the time when it might save them from starvation.

One day the older Pasternak had "bad" news for his son: A member of a new transport somehow had smuggled a prayer book into the camp and he purchased it from him. The price was all the bread they had saved up.

Alfred first cried in shock and disbelief. But, as always, eventually he understood his father and accepted his decision. The book contained the Haggadah and a few days later, on the first night of Passover, Simon Pasternak held a Seder by reading aloud the Haggadah.

Everyone in the barrack listened in silence. Most men were wiping their tears, recalling Seder nights of the past. But the familiar words instilled new faith, hope and determination for survival in everyone.

Liberation

Alfred and his father were liberated at Doernhau by the Russian army about one year after their arrival. Alfred believes that although a series of miracles contributed to his survival, the most important factor was his father's faith, optimism and willpower. Mr. Pasternak was a tower of strength who never permitted himself to harbor negative thoughts during their time in captivity. He lived until he was ninety, maintaining the same positive attitude throughout his entire life.

Dr Pasternak's father — Simon Pasternak — in 1948 opens the International Trade Fair in Budapest.

Alfred had mixed feelings about their liberators, the Russians. The Russian army had in fact closed in as early as December 1944 and were within 60 kilometers of Gross Rosen and its satellite camps including Doernhau. Then they simply decided to stop. Alfred believes that had the Russians continued their advance, they could have saved an additional 30,000 Jews imprisoned in these camps. Saving Jewish lives, however, was not a priority. In addition, the Russian army did very little for the prisoners after liberation. There was no organized assistance for former inmates, though all were in terrible physical condition. For those with typhus, the Russians established a makeshift hospital in a couple of local school buildings.

After recovery, however, the patients were left with no organized transportation, food or clothing supply.

All the guards at Doernhau ran away the night before the Russians arrived. Commandant Mucke was told by Alfred and others that he would be protected. He remained at the camp to help inmates return to their former homes.

In a journey that took about two weeks, the two Pasternaks returned to Hungary by foot, train, hitchhiking, etc. Although the hope was unrealistic, Mr. Pasternak firmly believed that his wife and two daughters were also alive and would return home.

Dr. Pasternak's parents Anna and Simon Pastenak in 1950 before the communist takeover in Hungary.

When the men arrived, the women were not there. While Alfred's father regained his home and re-opened his business, he began a search for his wife and daughters through newspaper ads. It was already July 5, 1945, two months after the war, and no one had seen or even heard of the Pasternak women. But in the early morning of that day, the housekeeper woke him up, telling him that three women were standing at the gate. Mrs. Pasternak and her two daughters had returned home.

Dr. Pasternak in 1955.
Freshly graduated physician.

Alfred's mother had been so sure that her husband and son were no longer alive, that she had not intended to return to Hungary. She wanted to immigrate to America. Although her daughters suggested that they return home to sell their belongings, she stayed at the Munich displaced persons' center near Dachau. One day, however, the three women met an old friend of Mr. Pasternak's on the street who told them that Alfred and his father were alive. The women sent a telegram to their home and left for Hungary. The telegram arrived three weeks after the family's miraculous reunion.

Post-War Hungary

The Pasternak family thought that Hungary would become a democracy. Many survivors rose in the new regime to take government positions. Mr. Pasternak was more interested in rebuilding his business and reviving the Jewish community. His large flour mill and several vineyards were operating within a couple of weeks after his return. He sponsored the restoration of the beautiful old synagogue in Tallya, and also donated two Sifre Torah (Torah Scrolls) to the community.

Alfred went back to school and again excelled in his studies. In his last year of high school, he won the Prime Minister's Award, the National Essay Contest in two different subjects, and was valedictorian of his graduating class. In spite of all of these achievements, his attempt to enter medical school was met with great difficulties, and his acceptance was made possible only through his father's old personal connections. The communist regime had little interest in educating the son of a capitalist.

Life and Success in the United States

Alfred excelled in medical school. In his fourth year, his paper in obstetrics and gynecology won the first prize in a national contest, and he graduated "summa cum laude." He could still not get a residency in his desired specialty; he was assigned to work in the medical offices of a factory.

Dr. Pasternak in 1984, President Reagan's guest at a private lunch in the White House.

In December, 1956, after the Russians crushed the October Revolution, Alfred escaped from Hungary and came to Los Angeles, where some members of his family had been living for some time.

Having passed the California State Board examination, Alfred completed his internship and residency in obstetrics and gynecology at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital. He became a Diplomate of the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology, a Fellow of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and a member of a number of local, national and international societies. He was Chief of Gynecology at Century City Hospital, and headed various key committees at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. He is also a member of the Board of Governors. He is on the faculty of UCLA School of Medicine, where he holds the position of Associate Clinical Professor. Dr. Pasternak has lectured and published locally, nationally and internationally, and is the author of a lecture series on "Medicine in the Holocaust." He is currently completing his book on "Medical Experiments in German Concentration Camps."

Although it would be nearly impossible to include all the awards bestowed upon Dr. Pasternak, some of the more important include Honorable Citation by the U.S. House of Representatives, the California Assembly, and the City of Los Angeles; "Humanitarian Award" by the City of Los Angeles; "Man of the Year" by Torath Emeth Academy and the National Telethon of Chabad. He received the "Flame of Truth Award" by the Fund For Higher Education in Israel and the "Semmelwis Memorial Award" from the Postgraduate School of Medicine in Budapest. He became an honorary member of the Hungarian Gynecology Society and, most recently, has received the title "Doctor Honoris Causa" from the Haynal Imre University of Health Sciences.

This is the story of Dr. Alfred Pasternak. He inherited limitless faith and unbreakable optimism from his father. He learned to fight adversity at a very young age and to devote himself to the achievement of his goals.

Dr. Pasternak feels that building a new life, and becoming an active and creative member of his community, while continuing to believe and to hope, is his ultimate victory.