

# SURVIVING THE ANGEL OF DEATH

THE TRUE STORY OF A MENGELE TWIN IN AUSCHWITZ

BY EVA MOZES KOR AND  
LISA ROJANY BUCCIERI

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# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Jaffa Mozes, my father Alexander Mozes, my sisters Edit and Aliz, and my twin sister, Miriam Mozes Zeiger. I also dedicate this book to the children who survived the camp, and to all the children in the world who have survived neglect and abuse, for I wish to honor their struggle in overcoming the trauma of losing their childhoods, their families, and the feeling that they belong to a family. Last, but not least, this book is dedicated in honor of my son, Alex Kor, and my daughter, Rina Kor, who are my joy, pride, and challenge.

—EMK

To Olivia, Chloe, and Genevieve: the reasons for everything. And to my sister, Amanda, for saving my life.

—LRB



# PROLOGUE

The doors of the train car were thrown all the way open for the first time in many days, the light of day shining upon us like a blessing. Dozens of Jewish people had been crammed into that tiny cattle car as it rattled through the countryside, taking us farther and farther away from our home in Romania. Desperate, people pushed their way out.

I held tightly to my twin sister's hand as we were shoved onto the platform, not sure whether to be glad for our release or afraid of what was coming. The early morning air was chilly, a cold wind nipping at our bare legs through the thin fabric of our matching burgundy dresses.

I could tell at once that it was very early morning, the sun barely making its way above the horizon. Everywhere I looked there were tall, sharp, barbed-wire fences. High guard towers with SS patrols, *Schutzstaffel* in German, leaned out, aiming their guns at us. Guard dogs held by other SS soldiers pulled against leashes, barking and growling like a rabid dog I had once seen on the farm, their lips foaming, their teeth flashing white and pointy. I could feel my heart pounding.

My sister's palm clenched sweaty and warm onto my own. My mother and father and our two older sisters, Edit and Aliz, were standing right next to us when I heard my mother's loud whisper to my father.

"Auschwitz? It's Auschwitz? What is this place? It's not Hungary?"

"We are in Germany," came the reply.

We had crossed over the border into German territory. In actuality, we were in Poland, but the Germans had taken over Poland. Germany's Poland was where all the concentration camps were. We had not been taken to a Hungarian labor camp to work but to a Nazi concentration camp to die. Before we had time to digest this news, I felt my shoulder being pushed to one side of the platform.

"*Schnell! Schnell!*" Quick! Quick! SS guards ordered the remaining prisoners from the cattle car out onto the large platform.

Miriam pulled herself closer to me as we were jostled about. The weak daylight was blocked and unblocked as taller people were first jammed up next to us, then pulled away by the guards to one side or the other. It looked like they were choosing some of us prisoners for one thing and some for another. But for what?

That's when the sounds around us began escalating. The Nazi guards grabbed more people, pulling them to the right or to the left on the selection platform. Dogs were snarling and barking. The people from the cattle car started crying, yelling, screaming all at once; everyone was looking for

family members as they were torn away from one another. Men were separated from women, children from parents. The morning erupted into pure pandemonium. Everything started moving faster and faster around us. It was bedlam.

*“Zwillinge! Zwillinge!”* Twins! Twins! Within seconds, a guard who had been hurrying by stopped short in front of us. He stared at Miriam and me in our matching clothes.

“Are they twins?” he asked Mama.

She hesitated. “Is that good?”

“Yes,” said the guard.

“They are twins,” replied Mama.

Without a word, he grabbed Miriam and me and tore us away from Mama.

“No!”

“Mama! Mama! No!”

Miriam and I screamed and cried, reaching out for our mother, who, in turn, was struggling to follow us with her arms outstretched, a guard holding her back. He threw her roughly to the other side of the platform.

We shrieked. We cried. We pleaded, our voices lost among the chaos and noise and despair. But no matter how much we cried or how loud we screamed, it did not matter. Because of those matching burgundy dresses, because we were identical twins so easily spotted in the crowd of grimy, exhausted Jewish prisoners, Miriam and I had been chosen. Soon we would come face to face with Josef Mengele, the Nazi doctor known as the Angel of Death. It was he who selected those on the platform who were to live and those who

would die. But we did not know that yet. All we knew was that we were abruptly alone. We were only ten years old.

And we never saw Papa, Mama, Edit, or Aliz again.



# CHAPTER ONE

Miriam and I were identical twins, the youngest of four sisters. To hear my older sisters grudgingly tell the story of our birth, you would have known immediately that we two were the darlings of the family. What is sweeter or cuter than identical twin girls?

We were born on January 31, 1934, in the village of Portz in Transylvania, Romania, which is in Eastern Europe near the border of Hungary. From the time we were babies, our mother loved to dress us in the same clothes, putting huge bows in our hair so people would know right away that we little people were twins. She even seated us on the windowsill of our home; passersby thought we were precious dolls, not even real people.

We looked so much alike that she had to put tags on us to tell us apart. Aunts, uncles, and cousins visiting our farm liked to play guessing games with us, trying to divine who was who. “Which one is Miriam? Which one is Eva?” a puzzled uncle would muse with a twinkle in his eye. My mother would smile proudly at her perfect little dolls, and my two older sisters would probably groan. Regardless, most

people guessed wrong. When we were older and in school, we would use our identical twinship to trick people, which for us could be so much fun. And we took advantage of how precious and unique we were whenever we could.

Although Papa was strict and admonished us and our mother about the perils of excessive vanity, emphasizing that even the Bible warned against it, Mama particularly cared about our appearance. She had our clothes custom made just for us, like rich people do today with fashion designers. She would order material from the city, and when it arrived, she would take Miriam and me and our two older sisters, Edit and Aliz, to a seamstress in the nearby village of Szeplak. At her house, we girls were permitted to hungrily peruse magazines featuring models wearing the latest styles. But our mother made the final decision on the cut and color of our dresses, for in those days girls always wore dresses, never pants or overalls like boys. And always our mother chose burgundy, powder blue, and pink for Miriam and me. After we were measured, we would set a date for a fitting and when we returned, the seamstress had the dresses ready for us to try on. The styles and colors of the dresses were always identical, two pieces made into one perfect, matching pair.

Other people may have been baffled by our identical twinship, but our father could tell Miriam and me apart by our personalities. By the way I carried my body, a gesture I would make, or the second I opened my mouth to speak, it was clear to him who was who. Although my sister had been born first, I was the leader. I was also outspoken. Any time

we needed to ask Papa for something, my oldest sister Edit would encourage me to be the one to approach him.

My father, a religious Jew, had always wanted a boy, because at that time only a son could participate in public worship and say *Kaddish*, the Jewish mourner's prayer, upon someone's death. But Papa had no son, only my sisters and me. Since I was the younger of the twins and his last child, he often looked at me and said, "You should have been a boy." I think he meant to say that I was his last chance at getting a boy. My personality just cemented it: I was strong and brave and more outspoken—just like he must have imagined a son of his might have been.

This stronger personality of mine, while setting me apart, also had its downside. It seemed to me that my father believed that everything about me was wrong; nothing I did seemed to please him. Many a time we would argue and debate, me not willing to give in. It was not enough of an answer for me that my father was right just because he was a man and my father and the head of the household. So we always seemed to be disagreeing, Papa and I.

I definitely got more attention from him than Miriam or my other sisters, but it was not always the kind of attention I wanted. I never learned to skirt the edge of the truth with little white lies, so I was always in trouble. I can recall tiptoeing around the house to avoid my father sometimes, as I am sure he often tired of me and my big mouth.

Looking back, however, I realize that my battles with Papa toughened me up, made me even stronger. I learned to

outsmart authority. These battles with my father unwittingly prepared me for what was to come.

My mother was very different from my father. She was quite educated for a woman of those times, because not all women got to go to school. Especially among religious Jews in those days, girls and women were mostly expected to take care of the home and the family, while the education and studying was reserved for the boys. And while my mother made sure that we learned to read, write, and do math, and study history and languages, she also taught us to care for others in our community.

We were the only Jewish family in Portz, our village, and were friendly with everyone. My mother heard all the town news and often assisted our neighbors, especially young pregnant mothers in times of need. She would take them noodles or cake, help them with the household if they were sick, give them advice on raising children, and read them instructions or letters from other family members. She taught me and my sisters to follow in her lead, serving those less fortunate, especially since we were better off than many other people in our small farming village.

Yet almost from the time we were born, anti-Semitism pervaded our country of Romania. That means that most of the people around us did not like Jewish people just because they were Jewish. We children were never aware of the anti-Semitism until 1940, when the Hungarian army came.

My father once told us of an anti-Semitic incident that happened to him in 1935 when Miriam and I were just one

year old. In that year, the Iron Guard—a violent anti-Semitic political party that controlled the village offices, the police, and the newspapers—stirred up hatred against Jews by making up false stories about how evil Jewish people were, and how Jews wanted to cheat everyone else and take over the world. My father and his brother Aaron were thrown into jail by the Romanian Iron Guard on fake charges of not paying taxes. But it was all a lie; they had always paid their taxes. They were singled out and arrested just because they were Jewish.

Papa told us that when he and Uncle Aaron got out of jail, they decided to go to Palestine to see if they could make a living there. Palestine, at the time, was an area of land in the Middle East where the Jewish people lived before their exile during the time of the Roman Empire; especially during periods of persecution, it was always thought of as a homeland by many Jews. A part of Palestine had been set aside for Jewish immigration early in the twentieth century, and it eventually became the independent state of Israel in 1948.

My father and Uncle Aaron stayed in Palestine a few months and then came back to Romania. Upon their return, Uncle Aaron and his wife sold all their land and possessions and planned to emigrate, or move.

Papa urged Mama to leave and settle in Palestine, too. “It’s good there,” he said. “The country is warm. There are plenty of jobs.”

“No,” she protested. “I can’t move with four small children.”

“We need to leave now, before it gets worse here for us,” urged my father, who was worried about the news he was hearing of increasing persecution of the Jews all over the country and Europe.

“What would I do there? How would we manage? I have no desire to live in the desert,” said my mother. And like mothers sometimes do, she put her foot down and refused to go. I often wondered what our lives would have been like had she relented.

In our little village in Romania, we lived in a nice house on a vast farm. We had thousands of acres of crops—wheat, corn, beans, and potatoes. We had cows and sheep, from which we produced cheese and milk. We had a large vineyard and produced wine. We had acres of orchards, giving us apples, plums, peaches, and juicy cherries in three colors: red, black, and white. In the summer, those cherries became our beautiful earrings when we pretended we were fancy, dressed-up ladies. Mama also loved her flower garden in front of the house and her vegetable garden in back, and her cows, chickens, and geese.

But what concerned her most was leaving behind her own mother. We children loved to visit Grandma and Grandpa Hersh. And my mother, as an only daughter, felt responsible for taking care of Grandma Hersh, who was not in the best of health and often needed Mama to look after her.

“Besides, we are safe here,” said my mother. She really believed that the rumors of Jews being persecuted by the Germans and their new head of state, Adolf Hitler, were just that: rumors. She saw no need to flee to Palestine or America, places of safety for Jewish people like us. So we stayed in Portz.

Portz, a largely Christian village of one hundred families, had a minister. The minister's daughter, Luci, was our best friend; both Miriam and I loved playing with her. In the summer we climbed trees in the orchard, read stories, and put on plays in a little theater we made by stringing up a sheet between two trees. In the winter we even helped Luci decorate her Christmas tree—we did not tell our father because he would not have approved.

Though rumors of Jews being deported to labor camps began to spread here and there, Mama did not believe we were in danger. Even when we heard of the new ghettos—restricted areas of European towns where Jews were forced to live so they could be controlled in squalor and poverty—we did not believe we were really in any danger. Even when Jews were stripped of all possessions, all freedoms, sent away to labor camps and driven to work for no pay like slaves, we did not think it could happen to us. We never thought they would come to our tiny village.

One of my early memories is of the men of a Jewish labor camp from Budapest who came through our village. The Hungarian government would bring these slave laborers out of the camp to work on the railroads; when the work was completed, the laborers were taken back to the labor camp. While working on the railroad, they had nowhere to stay at night, so my father let them all sleep in our barn. Sometimes their wives would come to visit and stay in our house. In return, the women brought us lots of toys and, more importantly, lots of books from the city. We children

spent hours lost in the worlds of those books. I could finish a book in a day. Because of them, I developed a love of reading at a young age.

As I understood only later from my reading, Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany as the head of the Nazi party in 1933. Hitler hated Jews as much as the Romanian Iron Guard did, and leaders of the anti-Semitic and racist parties became allies, joining together in their hatred and their designs to rule all of Europe. Then in September 1939, World War II began when German Nazi troops invaded Poland. The Hungarians, under the leadership of Miklos Horthy, also trusted Hitler and became allies. All this began to happen around us, but still far enough away from us that only Papa fretted about our safety.

But in the summer of 1940, when Miriam and I were six years old, things changed. Hitler gave the northern part of Transylvania to Hungary. At that time the population in Transylvania, the larger area surrounding our village, was half-Hungarian, half-Romanian. But everyone in our village was Romanian. Rumors spread that the Hungarian army would kill Jews and Romanians and set our village on fire. Even as a six-year-old child, I knew we were in danger.

Miriam, the quieter of the two of us, felt my anxiety, must have seen it on my face and in my body language. But she never complained; it was not her nature.

One day Hungarian soldiers marched into our village, the commanding officer leading the troops in a long, shiny black car. It was impressive, as it was intended to be. We villagers



were to take note: The armies were now in power, so we were to welcome them! We heard the soldiers singing, “We are Horthy’s soldiers, the best-looking soldiers in the world.”

That night, my mother and father allowed the soldiers to camp in our yard; the commanding officer slept in our guest room. Mama treated the officers like company: She baked her best torte and invited the officers to dine with our family. I remember that there was much conversation about good food, and Miriam and I were excited to sit at the table with these important men in uniform. It was a pleasant evening, and the officers praised Mama’s cooking and baking. Before they went to sleep, they kissed her hand as they thanked her, a courtly habit of many European and Hungarian men of the time. Early the next morning they left, and our parents seemed to be reassured.

“See?” said Mama. “There is no truth to the talk that they are killing the Jews. They are real gentlemen.”

“Why would people tell such stories?” Papa asked, not expecting an answer, much less disagreement from my mother or anyone else in the family. “You’re right. Nazis will never come to a small village like ours,” he concluded. This we were to take as fact. Papa had said it.

Yet late at night, behind closed doors, our parents listened to a battery-operated radio. They spoke to each other in Yiddish, a language none of us girls understood, as they discussed the news. What was it they were hearing that could be so secret? That could make them try to hide it from us girls?

I pressed my ear against the door and eavesdropped, trying to hear what was happening. “Who is Hitler?” I asked when they came out.

Mama brushed off our questions with blithe reassurances: “You don’t need to worry about anything. Everything will be fine.” But we had overheard some of the radio broadcasts with Hitler yelling about killing all the Jews. As if we were bugs! We *felt* there was trouble, no matter how much our parents tried to reassure us otherwise. And because of their secretive behavior, even Miriam became anxious. We were always worried, even as young children. There was a disquiet about the unspoken, the undiscussed.

That autumn, in 1940, Miriam and I started school. Unlike elementary schools today, our schoolhouse had children from first grade to the fourth grade in one room. Miriam and I were the only Jews. We were also the only twins. Every day we wore matching outfits to school and the same color ribbons tied at the ends of our long braids. Like our family had before them, our new classmates enjoyed figuring out which twin was which.

We also discovered we had two new Hungarian teachers at school who had been brought in from the city by the Nazis. To my surprise, they brought with them books containing slurs against Jews. The books also showed cartoon caricatures depicting Jews as clowns with big noses and bulging bellies. And marvel of marvels, for the first time, we saw “jumping pictures” projected on the wall—which is what we called early motion pictures because we did not know

what a film was. I clearly remember watching the short film called “How to Catch and Kill a Jew.” These propaganda films, something like today’s commercials but filled with hatred, were shown before feature films in the theaters in cities. Imagine watching instructions on how to kill Jews right before a Pixar movie!

Watching the hate movie and reading these racist books inflamed the other students. Our friends, or other children who had been friends, started calling Miriam and me names like “dirty, smelly Jews.” Their name-calling really made me angry. Who were they to call us dirty? I knew I was as clean if not cleaner than any of them! Kids began to spit at us and beat us up at every opportunity. One day, our math book contained this problem: “If you had five Jews, and you killed three Jews, how many Jews would be left?”

Upset and frightened, Miriam and I ran home crying. Our clothes were filthy from being pushed into the dirt once again, and our dusty faces were streaked with tears. “Children, I’m so sorry,” Mama said, hugging and kissing us, “but there is nothing we can do. Don’t worry! Just be good girls. Say your prayers, do your chores around the farm, and study your reading.”

One day at school in 1941 some boys played a trick on the teacher when her back was turned. They placed birds’ eggs on her chair. The entire class knew they were there, but no one said a word. We all held our breath as she turned around and sat down. Of course, the second her behind hit the chair, the eggs broke, spattering on her new dress.

“The dirty Jews did it!” stated one of the boys in our class matter-of-factly.

“Did you?” asked the teacher, looking at Miriam and me.

“No, Madame Teacher, no!” We were horrified. We had never misbehaved like that or played a trick on a teacher. We would never have heard the end of it from our parents had we dared! And we loved school and loved learning.

And then it happened. “Yes, they did!” screamed the other children. “They did it! We saw them!” It was as if they had all made a secret pact behind our backs beforehand, and this was the result.

Miriam and I protested, but to no avail. We were Jews, and we were guilty.

Without asking more questions, the teacher called us up to the front of the class for our punishment. She threw dry corn kernels onto the floor. “Kneel!” she demanded, pointing to us. For an hour, she made us kneel on those corn kernels in front of the class. The hard kernels dug into the flesh of our bare knees. But that was not what really wounded us the most. What hurt most were our classmates taunting us, leering at us, making ugly, smirking faces at us. Miriam and I were as shocked as we were hurt.

When we came home and told our mother, crying and hugging us, she said, “Children, I am sorry. We are Jews, and we just have to take it. There is nothing we can do.” Her words made me angrier than the teacher’s punishment. I wanted to hit someone myself, pound something hard like those kernels into dry corn dust. How could Mama’s words be true?

When Papa came in from farming at the end of the day and heard what had happened to us, his attitude was like Mama's. "For two thousand years the Jews have believed that if they tried to get along, they would survive," he said. "We must obey tradition. Just try to get along." Papa reasoned that since we lived so far out in the middle of nowhere, the Nazis would not bother to come take us away.

In the afternoon and evenings, the disturbances continued. Teenage boys who belonged to the Hungarian Nazi Party, but who were not yet eighteen years old—the age at which they could begin to serve in the military—often surrounded our house and shouted obscenities at us for hours. "Dirty Jews!" they yelled. "Crazy pigs!" They threw tomatoes or rocks that smashed right through our windows. Other villagers joined in. Sometimes this would go on for three entire days with us unable to leave the house.

"Papa," I called, "please go out and make them stop!" I wanted him to *do* something!

"Eva, there is nothing we can do about it. So just learn to take it."

I could not have known it at the time, but Mama and Papa must have felt that if they tried to stop these juvenile delinquents or fight back, they would be arrested and taken away from us. At least we were all still together as a family.

Miriam and I huddled together in our bed, frightened. Our sisters stayed away from the windows. I know they were scared as well. Conditions grew increasingly worse. In June 1941, Hungary entered World War II as an ally, or partner in

war, of Jew-hating Adolf Hitler and Germany, his country. Jews in other places in Europe were forced to wear a yellow star of David—the Jewish star—on the outside of their clothing or on their jackets to let everyone know that they were Jewish. We did not have to wear the yellow star, but everyone knew that we were Jewish. We were increasingly isolated in our village.

Unlike many Jewish children in Europe, Miriam and I were still allowed to attend school with other non-Jewish children, although it was progressively more difficult for us there, as the teasing and taunting did not stop. Our lucky older sisters, Edit and Aliz, were tutored in German, art, music, drawing, math, and history—all the subjects required in high school—by a Jewish teacher who lived with us at home.

As the light of autumn darkened into early winter, the days became shorter and our lives became more constricted. We did not venture to play outside or go into the village as much as we used to. Our parents never let on what they were feeling, but Miriam and I grew more and more afraid.

Then one night in late September 1943, Mama and Papa shook us awake. “Eva! Miriam!” they hissed urgently. “Get dressed! Put on your warm clothes, as many as you can get on, with your jackets and your boots. Do *not* light that candle! It has to stay dark. And be very, very quiet.”

“Wha-what are we doing?” I asked sleepily.

“Just do as you’re told!” murmured Papa.

We piled on our warm clothing and went into the kitchen. By the light of the glowing embers in the fireplace, we

saw our older sisters standing there. They were bundled up as well, their faces like stones in the shadows.

Papa gathered the four of us girls together and whispered, "Children, the time has come when we must leave. We are going to try to get over the border to the non-Hungarian side of Romania where we will be safe. Follow us and remember: no noise."

Single file, with Papa in the lead and Mama at the rear, we slipped out of the house into the darkness. Outside it was cold and windy. But at the time I had only one thought: We were in trouble, big trouble. And we were running away.

Silently we walked, one behind the other, to the back gate of our property at the edge of the orchard. Just beyond the gate lay the railroad tracks. No trains passed at night. It was silent except for the sounds of the crickets and the occasional call of a night bird. If we were to walk along the tracks for an hour or so, we knew we would arrive at the safe part of Romania. When Papa reached the gate at the edge of our property, he leaned over to unlatch it and pushed it open.

"Stop!" shouted a voice. "If you take another step, I'll shoot!"

A Hungarian Nazi youth pointed a gun at us. A group of teenage boys wearing Hungarian Nazi armbands with swastikas and khaki caps had been guarding our farm, stationed there to make sure we did not get away. How long they had been there was anyone's guess.

We were only six Jews. How could we be so important? I clutched Miriam's hand, not daring to look directly at them,

but sneaking sideways glimpses at the soldiers. Papa closed the gate, and the boys marched us right back to our house.

Our only chance of escape had just vanished.