



# The Survivor Mitzvah Project

*“Your hearts, pure and noble, beat for those who forgot what happiness is, who live with the memories of those who died.”*

*A Survivor Remembers ~*

*International Holocaust Remembrance Day*

*“All my life I have had the feeling that I remember what happened to us, though I understand, quite well, I can’t possibly remember that. I was born in Siauliai, Lithuania on June 7th, 1941. The doctor told my mother that if on Sunday, June 22nd the weather was nice, she would be able to take the baby outside. But on that Sunday we were already sitting in a cellar. The war had broken out.*

*All the Jews who had no time to run were sent to the ghetto. Grandmother took care of me there. I was often ill. There was no food. Mother did heavy labor, forced to help push trains, work in the fields, and at a slaughterhouse for animals. There she tried to get a few drops of milk for me, pouring it into a small bottle tied to her leg. It was forbidden to bring anything into the ghetto from the outside. This was punishable by death.*

*One policeman was particularly brutal. When he was on guard duty at the ghetto entrance, people threw away whatever they were trying to sneak in. But my mother risked her life - she had an infant to feed. Once she was searched and the milk was found. She was taken to the police station, but one of the ghetto dwellers, Isaak Sheras, was able to find vodka and tobacco somewhere and “paid off” the policeman to leave her alone. That is how much a person’s life was worth. Once she was lucky to be sent to clean the carriages where civic railroad engineers lived. They talked to my mother, who knew German, and shared food with her from their rations.*

*The people in the ghetto knew that children’s “aktions” (mass murder) were being planned. The time came for this in Siauliai ghetto. We lived on the second floor, and there was an attic above. At night, stacking a table and some stools one on another, grandma and I hid there. With the help of some sleeping pills I was put to sleep so I wouldn’t start crying. There was also a beautiful little girl named Aviva who was hiding there with her grandmother.*

*That evening, after the “aktion”, when the adults returned from forced labor to the ghetto, most of them failed to find their children. The moaning and screaming throughout the ghetto was deafening.*

*An old man, mad with grief, told mother that he had seen her mother and baby taken away. She had my hat in her pocket and at that moment realized the hat was the only thing left of me.*

*Mother wandered towards home when she saw a policeman who sat playing the harmonica. She screamed, “Bastard! How can you play, when everything is blood drenched, including the blood on your hands?” She hoped he would kill her, as she lacked the strength to go on. However, he didn’t even hit her, but only said, “You are young, one day you will go to work in Germany.”*

*My mother finally arrived “home”. Raising the hatch a little, Grandmother called to her, but she didn’t respond for a long time. Then finally she realized that somebody was calling her. Grandmother handed her the sleeping baby and then came down. Mother still couldn’t believe that we were alive. Grandma pinched her face to make her “come to” and told her what had happened. The policemen went from apartment to apartment taking away the children. When they came to us and saw a hatch in the ceiling, they started butting their rifles on it, shouting, “Get out of there!” Aviva’s grandmother couldn’t stand it any longer and whispered to my grandmother, “Let’s go down. I have diamonds – we will bribe ourselves out.” My grandmother answered that if she was destined to die she would let death chase after us, but she was not going to accept it passively. Aviva’s grandmother opened the hatch. Aviva the beauty was taken away.*

*After the children's aktion there were to be no children left in the ghetto. Those who were left were doomed to die. Mother decided we must run away. She ripped the six-pointed star from her clothing. We found people who helped us. My mother knew Lithuanian and German well.*

*The first to give us a helping hand was a teacher, Antanas Margaitis. He waited for us with a cart in an appointed place at an appointed time. On that day Grandma, Mother and I were among the people driven to work. Before leaving, I was again given a sleeping drug. Mother tied me with ropes around her body, put on a wide overcoat with a big kerchief on top of it, and walked along even though she could feel me slipping down. Somehow we managed to leave the convoy of people unnoticed. Margaitis put us in his cart and took us to a village. But it was dangerous to stay in one place for long. Mother and Grandma managed to get false passports. I was given the birth certificate of a girl my age who had passed away, and I became "Marite Kazlauskaite." The certificate was issued by a priest. To this day I regret that I don't know the name of that noble man.*

*The last place we stayed in was in the shtetl of Vaiguva near Siauliai. The owner of a mansion, Maria Rusteikaite, took us in. My mother worked in a registry office, Grandmother was dressed as a nun, and I was put into an orphanage in the same mansion. By that time I had forgotten Yiddish completely and spoke only Lithuanian. I was taken to a Catholic church, where I would pray and cross myself as a true Catholic. My mother couldn't approach me, even when we were alone, so as not to provoke any suspicion. I never said the word "Mama", even when we came across each other. Only once, when no one was around, I asked, "When we are alone, may I call you MAMA?" I often think about how it is possible to prevent a baby from saying, "Mama" in normal life. I am sure it is impossible. In such extreme situations children grow up quickly.*

*Our family was lucky. Many decent people took part in saving us: ordinary villagers, the highly educated and intelligent Maria Rusteikaite, a teacher, the priest who wrote out a baptismal birth certificate in my name, and even the German railroad workers helped, sharing their food with us.*

***I REMEMBER them all.***

***I REMEMBER beautiful Aviva, who was taken away in the ghetto.***

***I REMEMBER my cousins Dora and Mirochka, whom I never met... torn away from their mother's arms in the Kovno ghetto's "children's aktion."***

***I REMEMBER my father's sisters and parents, who lie in mass graves, killed in Ponar.***

***I REMEMBER my mother's sister, murdered with her family in the 9<sup>th</sup> Fort in Kovno.***

***I REMEMBER everyone and everything." Sulamit Natanovna, Lithuania***

We can honor those who perished, by helping those who survived. The survivors we currently help were born between 1916 and 1945. There are not enough funds to help all of our survivors every month. Please REMEMBER them by giving generously and urging others to donate. Thank you for your kindness and compassion.

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