

Susan Gimesy

Title: *While I Was There... and Now*

Author: Susan Gimesy

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Cities/towns/camps: Hungary: Budapest, Óbuda brick factory; Austria: Vienna, Salzburg; Australia: Melbourne; Canada: Montreal, Toronto.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative.

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: in-hiding.



While I Was There... and Now is the 126-page memoir of Susan Gimesy, who survived in hiding in Budapest after being rescued from a transport to the camps by a Hungarian police officer.

Pages 1-26 describe the author's childhood and extended family in Budapest. Pages 27-52 recount the rise of Hungarian antisemitism and the author's Holocaust experiences. Pages 53-82 relate her escape from Communist Hungary to Austria in 1949 and subsequent emigration to Australia in 1950. Pages 83-90 describe her relocation to Canada, second-marriage and the birth of her children. Pages 91-114 recount the family's return to Melbourne and life there. Pages 115-126 offer life reflections. The memoir is interspersed with 24 photos of the author and her family.

Susan Gimesy (Zsuzsanna Barta) was born on 9 March 1929 in Budapest, Hungary, to highly assimilated, secular Jewish parents. Their names are not provided. Her father was an accountant and she had a younger brother Peter, born in 1936.

In the 1940s, Hungary's fascist government began instituting worsening antisemitic policies. These measures forced Susan to leave her government school and attend a Jewish school, and her father lost his job. In 1942, Hungary began conscripting Jewish men into forced labour battalions, a fate that claimed the lives of her father, three uncles, and four cousins.

Despite increasing restrictions, life retained some semblance of normalcy until March 1944, when Nazi troops occupied Hungary. Antisemitic persecution intensified – Jewish citizens were compelled to wear the yellow star and relocate to designated Jewish areas. Because Susan's family home was within one of these areas, her beloved uncle

Bela and aunt Margit moved in with them. Shortly thereafter, her uncle was taken away for forced labour.

Later, Susan was caught in a roundup of able-bodied women destined for deportation to Theresienstadt. However, she was saved by a Hungarian policeman who discreetly removed her from the line. That evening, two policemen, including the one who had rescued her, visited the house. Her mother invited them to dinner to thank them and they shared a meal together.

A few weeks later, authorities began rounding up and deporting Jewish residents to the concentration camps. During one such *Aktion*, Christian neighbours of the Barta family hid eight-year-old Peter, while the women were taken to a transit camp in Óbuda. From there, they were to be sent on a march to the Austrian border and deported to the camps.

While awaiting transport, Susan was unexpectedly approached by the same Hungarian policeman who had previously rescued her. After convincing their mothers to entrust the girls to his care, he pretended to escort Susan and her cousin Eva to an open field to relieve themselves. Instead, he led them out of the camp and released them. The girls returned to Budapest and, using addresses their mothers had made them memorise, travelled to separate hiding places. Susan sheltered with a Christian family friend, often hiding in a linen compartment.

After a few weeks, Susan's uncle Béla, having escaped from a forced labour brigade, unexpectedly returned and collected her. Through contacts connected to the Swedish embassy, the pair secured work and accommodation in a bakery.

Meanwhile, Susan's mother and aunt were forced on a death march to the Austrian border, but were rescued and released by the same Hungarian policeman. Returning to Budapest amidst the chaos of the Russian advance, they were able to secure identity papers from fleeing Christian refugees. After securing an apartment, they contacted their surviving relatives who were still in hiding, including Susan and Béla, who left the bakery to join them. The family was reunited in the apartment — Susan with her mother and brother, along with her aunts Irene and Margit and her cousins Vera and Eva — where they spent the final weeks of the war sheltering together while posing as Christian refugees.

Enduring severe starvation, relentless Russian air raids, and long hours in bomb shelters, they were finally liberated by Soviet forces in January 1945. Returning to their old apartment. Susan and her mother searched for the officers who had rescued them, but their efforts were unsuccessful.

After the war Susan met Robi (Robert) Szekeres and the couple married in November 1947. To escape communist rule, her brother Peter was sent to France in 1946 with the help of the JOINT. Around 1949, Robi obtained entry permits to Australia and the couple fled Hungary. They paid a smuggler to take them to the Austrian border, hidden

in a haystack on a horse-drawn cart. After crawling under barbed wire at the border, they crossed into Austria on foot and later boarded a train to Vienna.

Unable to obtain a landing permit, Susan remained in Vienna working as a translator while Robi journeyed to Australia alone. As Vienna was occupied by the four Allied powers, she once again found herself under restrictive Communist rule. To escape, she fled to American-controlled Salzburg, posing as an Austrian citizen, using the identity papers of a friend. In Salzburg she secured work with the International Refugee Organisation as a secretary in the Resettlement Department.

In September 1950, after receiving her landing permit for Australia, Susan travelled to Paris where she reunited with her brother Peter. She then continued to Genoa, where she boarded a ship to Australia, her fare paid by the JOINT. After a seven-week journey, she arrived in Melbourne. Peter joined her in 1951 and their mother finally escaped to Australia five years later.

During her years in Austria, Susan had met and fallen in love with fellow Hungarian refugee Tibor. In 1958, after divorcing Robi, she emigrated to Canada where she married Tibor. The couple had two daughters, Pam and Amy, but later divorced. After two decades in Canada, Susan returned to Melbourne in 1978 with her children. In 1985, she married Oscar Gimesy, a fellow Hungarian Holocaust survivor.

While I Was There... and Now, is a lucid overview of the author's life and wartime experiences. Specific dates, names and other historical details are sometimes missing and there are gaps in the narrative, such as details on the author's post-war life in Communist Hungary. Other notable events are recalled with candour, with the memoir addressing, for example, themes of sexual and gender-based violence and abortion in the post-war era. It also offers personal reflections on grief, Jewish identity, and the author's religious beliefs. The book was published by the Memoirs Foundation, an independent publishing and editing service based in Victoria.