

Peter Gaspar

Title: *Lucky to be Here: Of All Other Possibilities*

Author: Peter Gaspar

Publisher: Makor Jewish Community Library

Place of Publication: Caulfield South, VIC.

Year of Publication: 2021

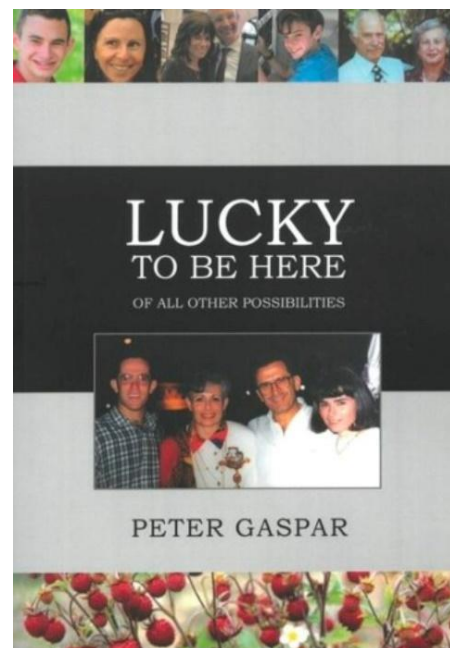
Location of Book: Lamm Jewish Library, State Library of Victoria and National Library of Australia.

Cities/towns/camps: Czechoslovakia: Bratislava, Čataj, Sered transit camp; Theresienstadt; Austria: Vienna; Australia: Melbourne.

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

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: child survivor; in-hiding; ghetto



Lucky to be Here is the 126-page memoir of Slovakian-born child survivor, Peter Gaspar, who with the help of Christian rescuers spent three years in various hiding places with his family before being deported to Theresienstadt in 1944.

The front matter provides an introduction explaining the author's reasons for writing his memoir. Pages 1-19 describe his upbringing and his extended family. Pages 20-49 recount the rise of Nazism, the author's time in hiding with his parents and subsequent deportation to Theresienstadt in December 1944 with his mother. Pages 50-71 describe his life in post-war Bratislava, escape and travel to Australia in 1949. Pages 72-98 recount his life and education in Melbourne. Pages 99-126 describe his marriage, extended family and retirement years.

Peter Gaspar was born 14 July 1937 in Bratislava, the only child of assimilated, well-to-do parents Eugenia Weiss and Imre Gaspar. Peter's father was a mechanical engineer. Though religious, the family was socially liberal. They spoke Hungarian, Slovak and German and had a wide circle of both Christian and assimilated-Jewish friends.

On 29 September 1938, after the Nazi annexation of the Sudetenland, Slovakia became an independent state under the rule of the nationalist Slovak People's Party, led by Jozef Tiso. The newly established fascist government soon implemented antisemitic legislation, stripping Jewish citizens of rights. In April 1939, Gaspar's father lost his job and by the end of 1942 Jewish children were barred from school.

In November 1940, Slovakia officially allied with the Axis powers, leading to intensified antisemitic persecution. Beginning in the summer of 1942, some forty members of Peter's extended family were arrested and deported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. His uncle Paul was the sole survivor. Initially, the Gaspar family avoided arrest as their home was on the outskirts of town.

In 1942, hearing a rumour that conversion to Christianity could offer protection, Peter's father sought out a Lutheran priest willing to perform baptisms. The priest risked his own safety to help the family, and through him they met Jan Kraus and his family, who were crucial in sheltering them.

During the height of deportations, their home was confiscated by Frantisek Tiso, the brother of President Tiso. Remarkably, instead of evicting them, he occupied the upper floor while allowing the Gaspar family to hide in the lower level. However, by 1943, growing suspicion among their neighbours forced them seek shelter with the help of a network of Christian friends and colleagues: they hid in cellars, cupboards, attics, garden sheds, and even in boat sheds by the frozen Danube River in the middle of winter. Peter was also briefly placed in a Catholic orphanage.

By 1944, the family exhausted their hiding options in Bratislava and moved to Čataj, a small agricultural town in western Slovakia. Through Jan Kraus, they were given refuge on the Brinza family farm. Initially living in comfortable conditions, growing German military presence forced them to hide in increasingly extreme conditions. By mid-December 1944, they were sleeping in a dugout barely larger than a grave, covered with branches and melting snow. Peter soon became seriously ill. Lacking medical aid and unable to endure further hardship, the family surrendered to local authorities and was sent to the Sered transit camp.

On 23 December 1944, Peter and his mother were deported to Theresienstadt, while his father was sent to Sachsenhausen. In Theresienstadt, Peter was placed in a home for young boys. For the next five months, he lived in the boy's dormitory, enduring hunger, cold, and illness, and was permitted to visit his mother in the Dresden barracks for only one hour per week. The pair were finally liberated by the Russian Army on 8 May 1945 and returned to their abandoned apartment in Bratislava.

In June 1945, Peter's father miraculously returned, emaciated and unrecognizable from his time in concentration camps and a death march. In September 1945, eight-year-old Peter started school for the first time. His father resumed work and the family attempted to rebuild their lives. However, following the 1948 communist coup in Czechoslovakia they decided to leave. With the help of a cousin in Paris, they secured Australian landing permits. In October 1949, they travelled to Vienna and then Genoa where they boarded a ship to Melbourne.

The Gaspar family arrived in Melbourne on 6 December 1949. They were welcomed by their cousin and taken to a boarding house in St. Kilda. In February 1950, with his parents working six days a week, Peter was sent to a boarding school. Though his father held an engineering degree, he worked as a mechanic in a garage. Peter rapidly adapted to English and, by 1956, aged 19, he was tutoring Australian-born students. After matriculating from Melbourne High School, he pursued a degree in Commerce at Melbourne University, where he met his future wife, Lesley. They married in 1964 and had two children, Tim and Michaela, later becoming grandparents to five. Peter eventually became a successful businessman.

Peter and his parents maintained contact with their rescuers, the Kraus and Brinza families. In 2006, he travelled with his wife, children, and a grandchild to Bratislava for an emotional reunion. In 2020, Peter began volunteering as a survivor-guide at the Melbourne Holocaust Museum.

Lucky to Be Here offers an overview of the author's life and wartime experiences as a child in hiding. As acknowledged by the author, due to his youth at the time, he was unable to recollect some events with full accuracy. Rather than a strictly chronological account, his book provides a narrative interwoven with significant memories. The post-war period is recounted in greater detail. His memoir was published as part of the Makor Jewish Community's "Write Your Story" program.