

GABRIEL MERMALL

On Easter morning in the year 1944, I took my six-year-old son by the hand and began walking from my home town toward the valleys and forests of the Carpathian mountains. For nearly eight months we lived in barns, attics and makeshift cabins. With the generous help of an unusually courageous man, we managed to survive Europe's greatest fit of madness. Those who walked in the opposite direction on that Easter day were less fortunate. They were taken in trainloads to places whose once obscure names are now, and forever will be, synonymous with terror, evil and death. What follows is our story of survival told to the best of my ability, in plain, simple language.

In March of 1944 the SS troops took over the internal affairs of Hungary and proceeded to organize the deportation of the Jews. To the Nazis this was a routine assignment; within hours all local officials were informed of operational plans. The high command issued a directive designed to placate Jewish fears and induce cooperation. It was announced that the Jews would be shipped to Poland as an emergency labor force and that they were only being drafted for temporary work. There were many who believed this version. Others, less credulous, resigned themselves and hoped for the best. Still others began to make plans for escape. By April 13 the Hungarian Jews were being rounded up from all over the country in what was once a huge brick factory. The rest is well known.

I was working in Ungvar and usually came home on weekends. At that time it was no longer possible for a Jew to travel freely.