

KATE LEBOVITZ



Kate Stern was 17 when the Jews of Budapest were forced into a ghetto and made to wear yellow Stars of David. There she met and married Gene Lebovitz from Czechoslovakia.

Few believed Gene's reports that Czech Jews were being taken away. Fewer thought it could happen in Hungary – until German soldiers ordered them to report to the synagogue in the middle of the night. As the lines of human beings were separated by guards, Gene, Kate and her mother, Hannah Stern, went to the right. Kate's father, Joseph Stern and 27 others went to the left. The soldiers took them to the Danube River and shot them in the head. Kate's two older half brothers, George and Martin, died in labor camps.

In better times, Joseph Stern drove a Mercedes-Benz taxi. Kate's brothers, George and Martin, were chauffeurs. Hannah Stern served the main meal, typically soup or pasta with fruit, at mid-day. In the evening, Kate liked toast with garlic spread and goose fat.

In public school, Kate excelled in math. At 16, barred from gymnasium because she was Jewish, she was apprenticed to a hat-maker. Kate enjoyed mountain climbing, picnics and listening to the radio, which, she believes, nurtured her love of opera and classical music. As a youngster, she was a Girl Scout. She also attended Hebrew school twice a week and synagogue on Shabbat.

Kate's father put on tefillin – phylacteries, or small black leather cubes containing Bible verses – only because Hannah, who came from a religious home of 12 brothers and sisters, insisted. Similarly, in the United States, Kate insisted her children remain home on Friday nights for the Sabbath.

"They cried," says Kate, "but now they say it wasn't so bad."

During the Holocaust, for a time, Kate and Gene passed as Christians and risked their lives helping a Zionist organization smuggle sick people out of the ghetto. Later, she came under the protection of Raoul Wallenberg, who gave her a Swedish passport.

In 1945, Kate and Gene made their way to Genoa, Italy. They wanted to go to Israel, but Kate was pregnant with George and the danger of being sent to Cyprus by the British, who were blocking entry to Palestine, prevented it. In 1946, with the help of Kate's aunt and uncle in America, they arrived in the Bronx.

Gene found a job as a pattern maker on Seventh Avenue. Allen, Shari and Karen were born. In 1960, the Lebovitzes were living on Long Island when Gene received offers for positions in Europe, San Francisco or Kansas City. Kate chose Kansas City because, she said, she had had enough of Europe and didn't want to live in a "hippie city."

George grew up to be a private school principal in Los Angeles. Allen is a lawyer. Shari and Karen are teachers. Kate made trips behind the Iron Curtain to visit her mother in Budapest at least six times before her mother's death.

Kate and Gene, married 56 years, have lived in the same house for 40 years. After the children were grown, Kate bought Abe's Tailor Shop, which she still operates, at 83rd Street and Wornall Road. The Levobitzes have nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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