Alex (Sandor, nickname- Shani) Satmary

Alexander, or Sandor, in the Hungarian, was born in the city of Maramarossziget, commonly know as Sighet, , the son of Szeren and Herman Guttman. He was the oldest of four brothers, the last survivor. Soon moved to the town of Bekes Csaba, in 1920, which made him Hungarian instead of Romanian as the new borders of Europe were being carved up. This change of borders changed his destiny.

His family was relatively well off- his father was station master, which meant that the family had free travel wherever the train line ran. While we think of that region of Hungary as the hot-bed of extreme ultra-Orthdox, there was a strong current of modernity, and the family belonged to what was called “ Neolog”- the equivalent of our Conservative movement, so they were both very Jewish and very Hungarian. His favorite childhood memory was of making pickles and sauerkraut with his grandfather. What could be more Hungarian than gypsy violin, which he learned from local gypsies. His skill, playing by ear, lasted him all through the years.

You have heard of his unusual and harsh experience during WWII, when he suffered first, as a slave laborer for the Hungarian army because he was a Jew. and as a Soviet POW because he was Hungarian.

I mentioned his violin playing. It this skill which helped him and his fellow prisoners endure the frozen prisons of the Soviets. He made a violin from wood scraps and branches and played to his fellow prisoners which may have helped all of them come through a horrible surrounding. Only one of ten survived the Soviet imprisonment; his music helped him beat the odds. This is an account that his daughter’s didn’t know about, till he gave an interview for the Shoah Foundation.

After the war, he discovered that only his brother, Andrew survived. The rest of the family had been killed at Auschwitz.

Eventually, he was able to come to a land of freedom, first Canada, where he met his wife, Violet Stern, and then to America. Alex worked as a store manager and Violet as a home care nurse, and by hard work, they gave their daughters that which they had missed. They were blessed to see their new family arise out of the ashes of the past.

Daughter: Shirley Jasper ( m. Neil) Granddaughter: Sarah Epstein ( m .Joshua) ggch- Ellie Violet & Isla Rose .Grandson: Eric Jasper(m. Stacey) ggch Sam & Zoe ( born just one week before 10/16/17) Daughter: Susan Hisrchhaut (m Rick) Grandchildren- Rachel & Ben They were also able to stay in touch with the children of the only surviving brother Andrew( Bundy).

As I mentioned, he loved violin and continued playing to the last years. For the last 25 years, he had been playing with a senior music group at Roxbury Park, and I saw a sweet touching photo of Alex playing to a class of children.

His favorite activity was to meet fellow older refugees at the Farmer’s Market on a regular basis. He called it the United Nations tables as the participants joining him were from around the world. Would were honored to have him in attendance at Hollywood Temple Beth El every Shabbat morning until his health no longer allowed it.

His daughters took loving care of him as best they could, trying to keep him going just a little more. His passed away with his daughters at his side in the same room in the house in which his beloved Violet passed away only 9 years earlier.

A wise scholar, by the name of Ben Sira,wrote of the praise due to the honorable and righteous. In contrast to the wicked, who are “as though they had never been” , these are
“merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.. . . their glory shall not be blotted out. “

Alex Satmary lived a goodly life, despite all that he endured. May his memory be for a blessing. Amen.
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Alexander, or Sandor, in the Hungarian, was born in the city of Maramarossziget , the son of Szeren and Herman Guttman. [Alex has a famous “ Landsman”, the great voice of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel. This city of Sighet, as it was called in Jewish circles, was Austro-Hungarian Hungary, then Romania, then Hungary again, and then Romania again. We are also Lantzmen in a way because my paternal great-grandmother’s family also came from that city. It was also famous, for its being led by Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, who became then the Rabbi of a neighboring town, Satmar, from which our dear friend also has his family name of “ Satmary”.]

Alex grew up in neighboring town of Bekes Csaba which remained Hungarian.,

Jews were patriotic Hungarians and as a 21 year old in 1941, he was called up for service in October of 1941 to build roads and he reported for duty.

Because of the anti-Semitism of the time, the Jews were segregated into the Jewish Labor

Brigades. But they were really slave laborers. A year later, Sept. 1942 he was taken to

Puspokladany. They were on starvation rations, forced to work until they collapsed. They were freezing and not provided with proper clothing or any medical care by their fellow Hungarian commanders and guards. If anyone got sick or was injured, he was shot. [ I think till today, the Hungarians are still overly represented in the “ anti-Semite” club]

It was apparent after he had been gone over a year, that no one was writing or coming back.

His mother got false papers for his younger brother Andrew, who was 18 months younger

than Alex. Andrew was sent to Budapest by his mother, and he survived the war there. If only she had gone with him with her two youngest children, 11 and 12 year old boys. But they didn't know that in 1944 they would be deported to Auschwitz, where they all perished.

 [ I have always found it another sad irony, that although the Hungarians hated their Jews, they nevertheless protected them against their Nazi allies as long as Admiral Horthy was in charge. The massive execution of Jews began only when the German’s swallowed up the Hungarian government. The tragedy of Hungarian Jewry is that they had been deluded because of their Hungarian protection into believing that the Germans would be as protective as were the Hungarians]

In November 22, l942 Alex and his fellow Jewish Labor Brigade members were marched to the Russian front near Stalingrad, in the labor battalion VI/6, to pick up mines and to build the defense lines for the Axis forces as they made their advanced onto the city that bore the name of their most hated enemy, Stalin.[ Again, the irony; my father was on the other side of the line, having escaped into the Soviet Union a year earlier.] They got there in December and his entire brigade was kept locked in train boxcars for three weeks. The Hungarians only fed them once a day and removed those who had died in the freezing winter of December in Russia. In January of 1943 the Russians surrounded the Germans and their allies the Hungarians as well as the Hungarian Jews in civilian clothes who were their slave laborers. The Russians broke through the defense lines on Jan 16-1943 at the Don River and Alex was taken as an enemy prisoner-of –war. The Russians considered them all as combatants, no matter what their background.

[We appreciate the sad irony of a Jew being drafted by an anti-Semitic army to defend the hated Axis and then be treated by his liberators as an enemy!].

He was a prisoner at the camp at Nyizsnij- Tagili in the Ural Mountains, half way across Russia

The terrible conditions continued in the prisoner of war camps: freezing cold, no proper clothing and little food. Typhus ran through the camp. Alex father caught it but survived without any medical treatment. Out of all the men taken prisoner by the Russians, only one out of ten was still alive when the war ended.

When the war ended , just a little over 70 years ago, the Soviets started to feed them better as they didn't want them to look starved when they returned home. Alex was in the first group of 150 Hungarians to be sent home in September of 1945. Among those 150 were 3 Jews. His Hungarian last name was probably why he was grouped with them. They were issued Hungarian military uniforms and put on trains heading back to Hungary.

When he got to his hometown of Bekes Csaba, he walked towards his home. He encountered a young woman on the street he remembered from childhood. He asked her if she knew how his mother and brothers were doing. She looked at him, and said ,”Don't you know, the Germans took away all the Jews and killed them.” He realized that from 1941 on he did not know what was going on in the rest of Europe. He eventually was reunited with his brother Andrew. They sold their home and paid smugglers to get them over the border to Austria where they were in a displaced persons camp. They waited there until they got papers to emigrate to Canada.

He first lived in Winnipeg and then after a year moved to Toronto. In late 1952 he met Shirley’s mother Violet, a recent immigrant to Toronto. They married and their first child Shirley was born there. Tn 1959 the family moved to Los Angeles and in 1962 his daughter Susie was born.

Our dear Alex, you made it despite the hateful Hungarians and the totalitarian Soviets and the freezing cold of the Russian steppes and mountains. We are so very happy that we can celebrate with you on this, your 94 birthday and 70 years to the end of a bizarre and horrid nightmare. May you merit many year of good health and Nahat from your family.