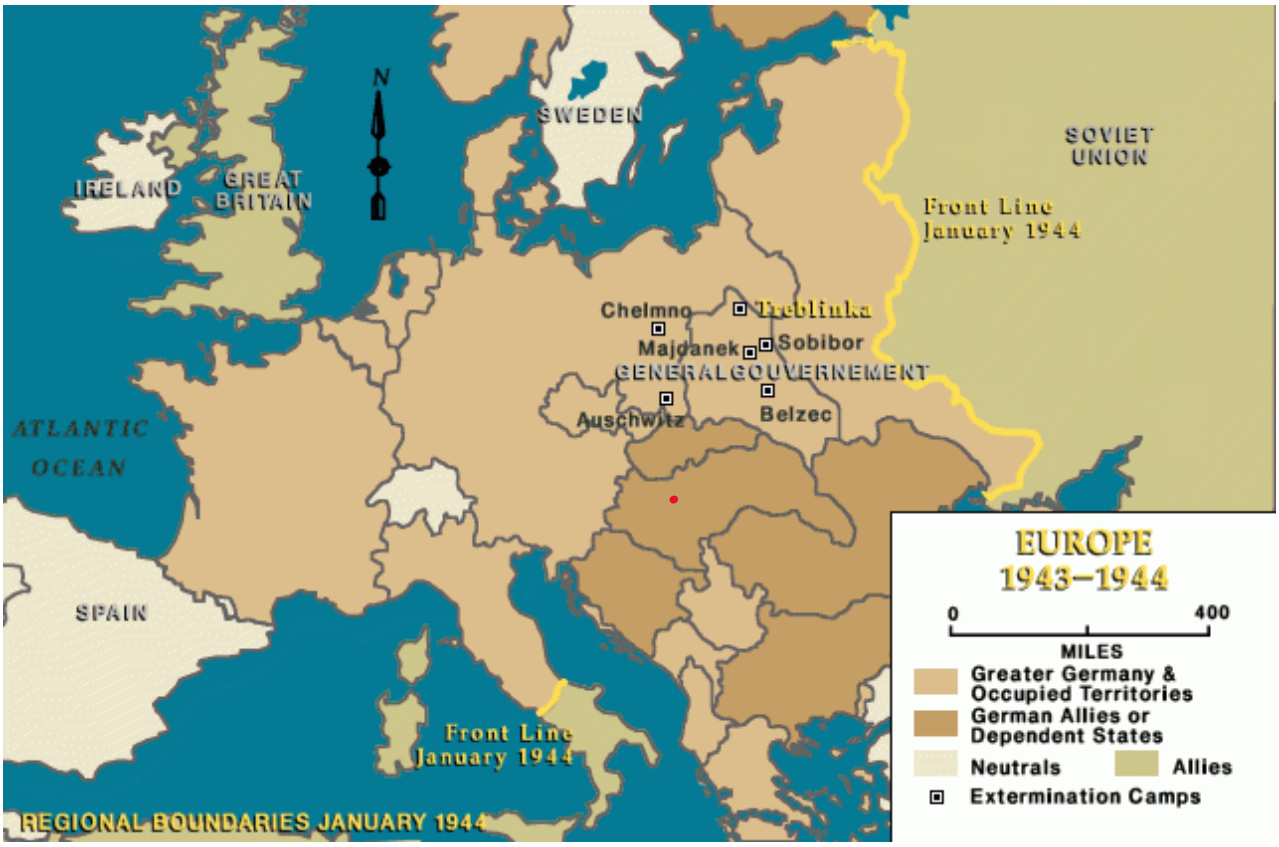
A note about sources: In addition to testimony I gathered from Suzanne over Zoom, I also relied on a public survivor talk she gave with the Holocaust Museum of Los Angeles which can be accessed via YouTube, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Holocaust Encyclopedia, as well as the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, which tells the stories of non-Jewish people who risked their lives to protect Jewish people during the Holocaust, such as Carl Lutz and Raoul Wallenberg. I recommend all of these resources for those curious to learn even more about the historical context of Suzanne's story, as well as the Holocaust at large.

Background: Jewish Life in Wartime Hungary before the German Occupation



Map courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Holocaust Encyclopedia; Red dot indicates approximate location of Budapest for reference

In the 1930s and early 1940s, Hungary was highly influenced by developments, such as the rise in Naziism, in Germany, and formally joined the Axis alliance in 1940. Between 1938 and 1941, Hungary passed their own version of the German Nürnberg Race Laws, which laid out, in racial terms, who was defined as "Jewish". This included ethnically Jewish people who had previously converted to Christianity as well. As a result of these

laws, Jews were highly restricted or forbidden from working in many different professions, including government positions.

Forced laborers building railroad tracks in Hungary, 1942. Courtesy of USHMM

These race laws forbade Jewish men from serving in the armed forces, so a forced-labor service was established in 1939, which became obligatory for all able-bodied Jewish men by 1940, when Hungary formally entered the war. Forced labor conscripts performed manual labor and construction work for the purpose of supporting Hungarian soldiers under unimaginably brutal conditions, often lacking adequate food, shelter, and medical services. Before the March 1944 occupation began, at least 27,000 of these forced laborers died. One of these Jewish conscripted forced laborers who survives was Suzanne

Reyto's father, whose survival and resilience forms an important part of her family's story.

Beginnings: "In the darkest moments, there are always decent people"

Suzanne Reyto was born 13 March 1944 in Budapest, Hungary – six days before the Germans invaded and occupied the country. On the day of the invasion, there was chaos throughout the hospital, but her mother struggled to get any information about what was happening from anybody. Eventually, a nurse had told her that not only had they been invaded that morning, but that the Nazis had also established their headquarters on the grounds of the hospital. Later, in spite of the disorder and uncertainty, their doctor told her mother that he was aware of their circumstances and was able to secure them an ambulance which could safely deliver them to their relatives' home and out of harm's way. Additionally, he had asked for a sign to be placed on the ambulance indicating that they were infectious disease patients, which meant the roads would clear for them, and they could safely return home.

Early Life and Family

The Swiss Consulate General, Carl Lutz, was instrumental in providing aid and protection to the Jewish community, including Suzanne and her mother. Lutz gave them *Schutzpasses* (protection papers, designating them as Swiss citizens), and rented 76 different buildings to serve as safe houses. Later that year, they were also able to obtain a *Schutzpass* from the Swedish government via the diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. Although the efforts of Carl and Gertrude Lutz were instrumental in protecting the Jewish people of Budapest, Suzanne explains that this relief was only temporary. Because these buildings served more people than they were originally designed to support, the facilities within them were often poor, and, due to constant bomb risks, these people often had to shelter in the basement cellars, which were always cold, dark, and damp. Needing to spend much of her early life in this basement, as well as the lack of adequate medical care, left her constantly sick.

In April 1944, Hungarian Jewish people living on the outskirts of Budapest were ordered to concentrate within the city's ghetto. In most cases, they were forbidden from leaving the ghetto, which was under constant surveillance, making it akin to an open-air prison. Due to the ongoing war and the increasing precarity of their situation, food was becoming scarce. As buying groceries involved going to multiple businesses for all of the things we can today find in one supermarket, even a simple shopping trip meant risking one's life. When Jewish people got in line to shop at some places, they had to compete with the rest of the denizens of Budapest and were often sent to the back of the line, and by the time they got their turn to shop there would be nothing left. Suzanne's mother struggled to

nurse her due to the scarcity of food. From his position and connections as a merchant, her father tried his best to smuggle food from the country to them.

In May, Adolf Eichmann arrived in Budapest to deport Jewish people, mainly from far eastern Hungary, to slave labor and death camps. Separating children and the elderly from able-bodied adults, they were loaded onto cattle cars. In a period of around 6 weeks, between 440,000 and 600,000 Jewish people were deported, with most being sent to Auschwitz. By July, Budapest had the only remaining Jewish community in Hungary.

After a coup-de-état installed a fanatically pro-Nazi regime in October, Eichmann returned to Budapest to facilitate another round of deportations. This time, Suzanne was left with two non-Jewish women for her protection as her mother, grandmother, and aunts were ordered to stand with other Jewish people in a soccer field. Her mother did not think she would ever see Suzanne again. While standing in the field, a man approached her mother and began shoving her away until they got to the gate, and then pushed her out of the gate and locked it. She tore her yellow star, and she was immediately able to return to Suzanne, whom she could hear crying of hunger. Had her mother stayed on the field, she may have ended up at Bergen-Belsen or Ravensbrück, which is where her mother and sisters ended up.

Suzanne's father, who was only sporadically present in her early life, tried to evade persecution and escape forced labor. Many times, he escaped and was repeatedly captured, and escaped once again. At one point when he was stranded in a country town, he began to speak to a man near a car, and convinced him to drive him back to Budapest, but only after learning that he was the chauffeur for a high-ranking Nazi official. The conditions of the ghetto made it difficult for him to reunite with his family, but he devised a creative solution: he went to one of his old factories and, with the help of the people there, constructed a metal box for him to hide in, with small holes for air and food. In December, he entered this box, which resembled a coffin and was placed near a cemetery and did not leave until the Soviets liberated them 6 weeks later.

After the War: A Hidden Childhood in Communist Hungary

After liberation, some conditions improved, but it felt bittersweet, because many survivors feared the worst had happened to their lost family members. In the case of Suzanne's family, her grandmother and her aunts all survived the death camps but had to walk back home from Germany after liberation, which took months. Some survivors, like her father – who had worked in firefighting materials manufacturing before the war – simply wanted to return to normal life.

Despite a brief period of improving conditions, the family's life in Hungary took a turn for the worse when the country became a Soviet satellite state in 1948. The communist

government took over her father's business, but despite this, he still wanted to stay in Hungary for business purposes. By the time that the family decided to leave the country in 1949, when she was five years old, the borders were not as porous as they used to be, and the smuggler they hired to traffic them across the border instead turned them in to the authorities. Suzanne emphasizes in her testimony that does not blame this man for turning them in, as he likely meant no harm through his actions, but likely acted in self-preservation. Her parents were sentenced to one year in prison, and she was sent to a prison nursery, where she was subject to constant medical experimentation. When she was reunited with her parents, their home was dispossessed, and they were sent to a farm labor concentration camp. One of the men they shared lodging with was a former military official who never addressed her by her name, only calling her "you dirty Jew, the ruination of my life". Once they were freed from the camp, Suzanne attended school for the first time at seven years old, in hiding. Eventually, the family was able to flee to Australia after the 1956 revolution on 19 March 1957 – 13 years exactly after the Nazi invasion of Hungary.

Telling Her Story

At first, her parents told her not to tell her story, due in part to the political stigma doing so would attract, and in part because they worried it would resurface trauma and shame. For almost her entire life she never spoke about her story until her grandson asked her to talk to his class because he was learning about the Holocaust in school. Since she was an infant during that time, she asked her own mother to fill in gaps in her memory, and, to her surprise, she was very willing to tell the story. When Suzanne went to her son's

school to speak, she had expected to tell the story to just one class but ended up speaking to the entire school about it. After she spoke, a student came up to her and said that she should write a book, so that his sister could read about her experiences, which inspired her to co-write a children's book with her mother. Today, in addition to speaking about her life with audiences young and old, she is also the chair of Violins of Hope Los Angeles, which organizes concerts played on violins which belonged to Jewish people around the time of the rise of fascism in Europe.

About My Art Pieces

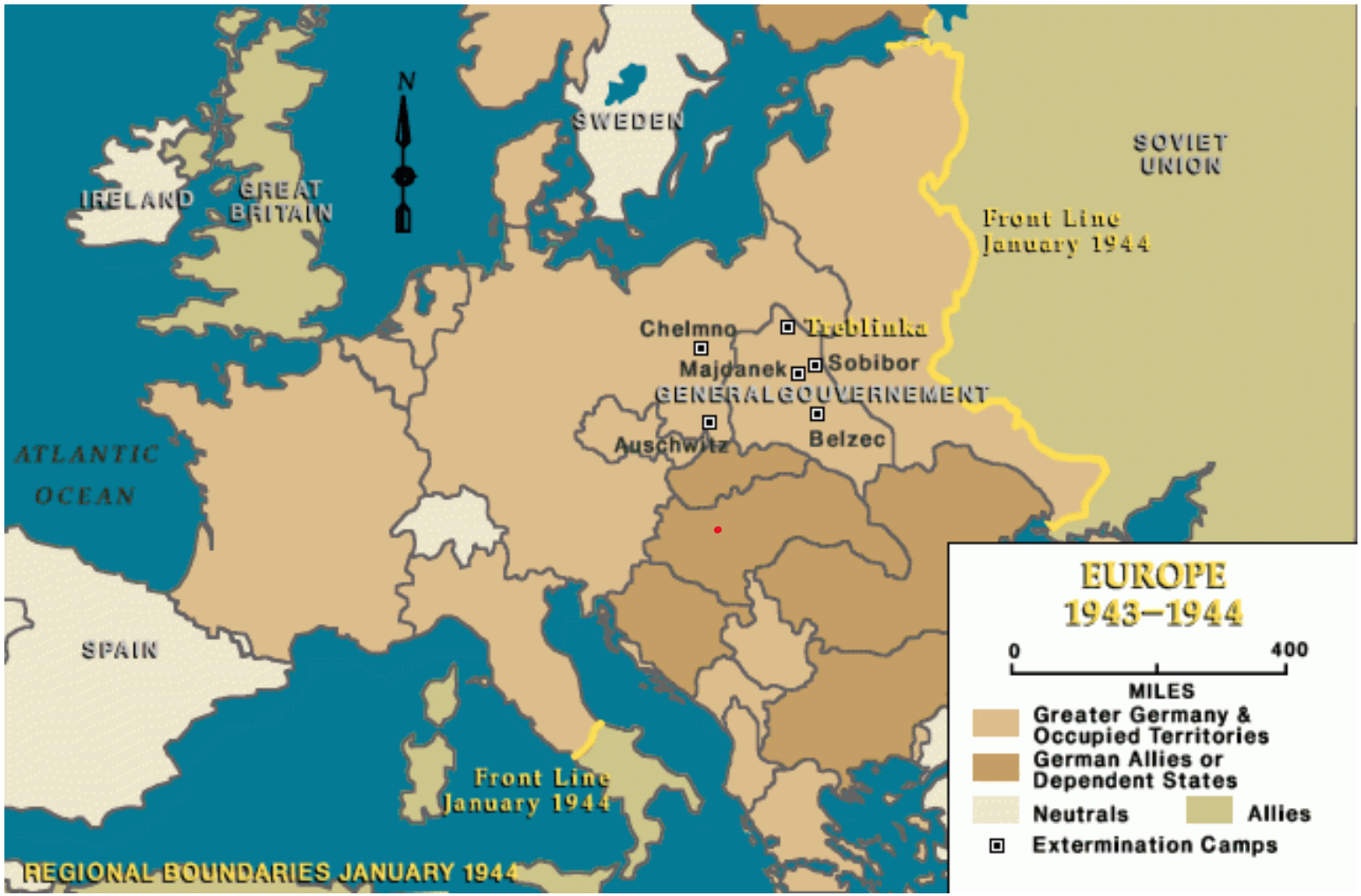
I was inspired to create linoleum cuts based on parts of Suzanne's story, and pulled inspiration from the German artist Käthe Kollwitz, whose depictions of poverty and suffering left in war's path are rendered so starkly in her prints.

Käthe Kollowitz, *Die Mütter* (Mothers), state VII/VII, plate 6 from *Krieg* (War) 1921–22, published 1923, woodcut, 13 1/2 x 15 3/4", New York, MoMA.

The first print, “Special Delivery/Infectious Disease” depicts Suzanne and her mother’s escape from the hospital, and the beginning of her life in the shadow of war.

The second print, “Ghetto Gate” is an abstracted representation of the gates, which play such an important part in her family’s story, both representing the enclosure of the ghetto itself, but also the gate which Suzanne’s mother was pushed through for her own safety, and the specter of death and uncertainty that hung over it.

The third print “Box”, is to represent the sort of living coffin her father hid himself within in anticipation of liberation, being constantly surrounded by death, but narrowly avoiding it through a combination of determination, ingenuity, and luck.


N
SWEDEN
SOVIET UNION
IRELAND
GREAT BRITAIN
Front Line January 1944
Chelmno
Treblinka
Majdanek
Sobibor
GENERALGOUVERNEMENT
Belzec
Auschwitz
ATLANTIC OCEAN
SPAIN
Front Line January 1944
REGIONAL BOUNDARIES JANUARY 1944
EUROPE 1943–1944
0
400
MILES
Greater Germany & Occupied Territories
German Allies or Dependent States
Neutrals
Allies
Extermination Camps

György Beifeld, “Peaceful Surroundings” postcard, 1942-3. Courtesy of USHMM

Beifeld, much like Suzanne’s father, was conscripted into the Hungarian forced labor service (Munkaszolgálat) and brought art supplies along with him to the eastern front. His many drawings depict the places where he was stationed, along with the deplorable conditions that the men faced, and even some satire, such as this postcard. The “Beifeld Album” is an important form of testimony in and of itself, as it offers scholars insights into the daily lives of these men, as well as the ways they sought hope in such unforgiving circumstances.