

# Livia Frisch Polcz - A modern heroine

## Saved hundreds of Jews from the Nazis

By JENNIFER ENRIGHT

The petite, brown-haired woman from the linen factory in downtown Budapest was pretty. And Las Polcz's father, Gyula Polcz, probably felt an instant attraction to her. A photograph taken of her on their wedding day suggests she was attractive. But she was also Jewish.

Livia Frisch, the mother of Milton resident Las Polcz, was discouraged by her parents from being courted by a young Hungarian of partially German descent. Her father Adolf Frisch, who owned the linen factory, was a conservative Jew. Gyula was a buyer for a large department store in Hungary that purchased linens from the factory where he'd met Livia who was working in her family's business. They fell in love. "They found each other and that was pretty well it," says Las.

Las's parents did marry, even though they faced opposition to the union. He believes their mixed marriage was actually a blessing since it helped both of them - as well as many others - survive the Second World War. "It was a lucky situation for both families. They greatly benefited from the marriage."

But at the time many felt they were making a grave mistake. Hungary in the early 1940s was a country that had allied itself with the Axis powers as part of an arrangement to reclaim the territories the nation had lost at the conclusion of World War 1. In return for their support of the Axis powers, Hungarians hoped to create a new map of their nation, one that resembled somewhat the old one that existed in the early 1900s. Las says Hungary lost about 67 per cent of its territories during the first major conflict of the 20th century. Pressures, though, were mounting from Berlin, the capital of Nazi Germany. Hungary might be an Axis supporter, but the Nazis were intent on ensuring that the nation complied with its party's anti-Semitic views and policies - and that included opposition to mixed marriages between Jews and Gentiles. Livia's in-laws were not unsympathetic to Nazi policies. "They pretty well shared the Nazi views," says Las. "They thought he (Gyula) was an idiot marrying a Jewess in 1940."

### "WHY ARE YOU MARRYING A JEWISH GIRL?"

But against the opposition of both of their parents - and even the judge that presided over the wedding ceremony - Livia and Gyula married. Livia spoke briefly about her wedding day when she was interviewed for a video presentation produced by Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. The university's School of Holocaust Studies asked her to be part of a project in the 1990s in which wartime survivors related their experiences on film. During the video, she recalled the judge saying to her future husband, "Why are you marrying a Jewish girl?"

But if she needed all of her strength then, she

would need even more in the years to come. When Hungary was occupied by the Nazis in 1944, she feared for her family.

She took action at considerable risk to herself in those dark days as Budapest became a city dominated not only by Hungarian Fascist sympathizers but also Nazi occupiers.

Las isn't certain if his mother ever met Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who issued Swedish passports, false identity papers and passes at his country's embassy in Budapest during those years. But he can say without hesitation that without Wallenberg's assistance his mother would not have been able to save the lives that she did. After the war, Wallenberg was captured by the Russians; his death has never been confirmed but many believe he died while in Russian custody.

### "ON ONE OCCASION, SHE OBTAINED PAPERS FOR 47 PEOPLE."

Livia, who went by the nickname Lily, could move about freely in two worlds as she was born a Jew, but married to a Lutheran Hungarian and had converted - for convenience only - to the Christian faith. It also helped, as Las explains, that his father had joined the Hungarian army and that she had access to his papers stating that he was an officer. With her Jewish identity papers she could enter the ghetto and with her Christian papers she could survive in the Gentile world that was largely out of bounds for Jews. This ability made her ideally suited to the dangerous task she had before her. With Las's brother, Gyorgy, on one arm and her purse in the other, she would enter the ghetto to obtain the names of residents and then take this information to the Swedish embassy. Wallenberg, whose work was not entirely condoned by the embassy, would then issue papers to provide protection for these Jews. On one occasion, she obtained papers for 47 people.

Helping her family was also paramount in her mind, but it was difficult at times. At one point, her cousins were rounded up and taken to a transit camp, a step considered the precursor to a journey to one of the death camps. Susan Weintrob, an American columnist on Jewish subjects who appears in the Ball State film, says Livia walked to the transit camp with the papers that secured her cousins' release.

Las says his mother's family was luckier than most during the war years. But tragedy did strike twice. One of her brothers died while working as a labourer digging trenches for the Germans near the Russian front. Las's grandfather also passed away during wartime, the result of an attack by Hungarian Fascists. He was delayed one night and found outside after the required 4 p.m. curfew for Jews. "He took a severe beating as a consequence and shortly after that he died," says Las.

kith 'n' kin



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Livia and Gyula Polcz's wedding photo shows them as they were in 1940. Four years later, their Hungarian homeland would be occupied by the Nazis.

After the war, Las's mother continued to help others, but this time in an ironic twist she was saving people by identifying them as Jews. The Russians wanted to round up Nazis and Hungarian officers. When her husband, who was a Hungarian soldier, was captured by the Russians and was on his way to a Siberian labour camp she contacted a Jewish group known as Hyas and secured his freedom. "She got documents for him attesting to his Jewishness and he was saved."

Las says his mother's success assisting her father led to more attempts to help others. But not everyone was as receptive to being identified as a Jew. One of her husband's friends was unaware that she obtained papers for him, and this lack of knowledge cost him dearly. "My mother got protection papers for my Dad's best friend. My father's best friend was called up to the Russian commandant to be released because his papers said he was a Jew. And when they told him that, he felt offended and he said, 'I'm not a Jew. I'm a Hungarian officer.' He spent seven years in a Siberian labour camp."

After the war, Las's parents left their native homeland eventually settling in Muncie, Indiana. In the years following the Nazi occupation, Las doesn't remember his parents dwelling much on their wartime experiences. But, even so, he says they left behind a legacy that he's proud of and that he would like his three daughters to know about. Las's father passed away in 1998 and his mother a year later.

The Milton resident, who works as a business broker and volunteers with the Halton Children's Aid Society, says his parents' past has left its mark on him and members of his family. "We stay away from anything fanatical, and ideologies that would promote control."

## J. Scott Early Funeral Home Inc.

"personal and caring service"

- After-care Services
- Children's Activity Area
- Pre-arranged Funerals
- Cremation
- Large Seating Capacity
- Ample Off-Street Parking
- Prepaid Funerals
- Reception Room
- Complete Handicap Accessibility

An Independent and Family Operated Funeral Home

21 James Street, Milton

905-878-2669

