



The Gift for the Orphans

by Brigitte B. Nussbächer

Sometimes the miracle happens that a person uses the suffering she has experienced to grow beyond herself and becomes a blessing for others.



Ursula wants to offer orphans the chance of a new start. Private photo

Hundreds of Israeli children were orphaned by the Hamas massacre on October 7, 2023. Hundreds were also forced to watch their parents being kidnapped. Ursula, who lost her parents in deportations long ago, is now supporting Israeli orphans. The true story of a woman that began 80 years ago and has not ended to this day.

Deportation to the Soviet Union/Ukraine - 1945

It was a freezing cold night in January, during the war, in the winter of 1945, in Kronstadt, Transylvania. The streets at 6:00 a.m. were dark and deserted. Only occasional horse-drawn cart bumped through the streets. There were mixed Romanian-Soviet patrols going from house to house with prepared lists. Anyone on this list was condemned to be deported to the Soviet Union to perform so-called "reparations" in the form of forced labor.



Since August 1944, Romania, and therefore Transylvania, had belonged to the Allies and was therefore an ally of the Soviet Union. But before that Romania had supported Germany's war of aggression. When the defeat of the German Reich became apparent, the Romanian King Michael ended the military dictatorship of Ion Antonescu and the military alliance with the German Reich in a coup d'état. Romania changed fronts in the middle of the war.

But despite this change, Stalin demanded 100,000 so-called "voluntary" workers from Romania in the fall of 1944 - as compensation for the former alliance with Germany in order to rebuild the Soviet Union.

Unlike other countries, Romania had not expelled the members of the German minority in Transylvania from the country. They had a better use for them.

From January 1945, Romanian Germans of working age (men between 16 and 45 and women between 18 and 30) were "lifted" by the Russian and Romanian military at night, i.e. deported and taken away in cattle wagons for forced labor. This was done systematically: The entrances to the villages were sealed off by the military and police, and telephone, telegraph and rail traffic was interrupted. Escape was impossible. The people affected were told to get ready for transportation within an hour - without knowing where they were going or how long they would be away. Only one piece of luggage was allowed. No consideration was given to those who stayed behind, even if there were children who were left without parents.

Now the cart had stopped in front of a house in the old town of Kronstadt. Thunderous banging on the gate, shouting male voices. Five-year-old Ursula and her three-year-old brother were brutally woken from their sleep. They stumbled out of their room, completely confused, and were suddenly confronted by armed, uniformed men shouting at their parents in an unknown language. They began to cry, but no one explained to them what was happening. They saw their parents gathering a few things and understood nothing. Then one last hasty hug and suddenly the apartment was empty and terribly quiet. Ursula ran out onto the balcony - the horse-drawn carriage was down there. She watched as her parents were pushed onto it. She shouted and cried - but the horses had already started moving and the carriage disappeared into the darkness of the night. The two children stood on the balcony, helplessly lost. They were too small to comprehend the full extent of what had happened. But their subconscious registered that something terrible was going on. They knew they were alone and wondered desperately when their parents would come back.



In the first few days, the neighbors looked after the children and tried to find relatives. The siblings were separated and taken in by family members for several months at a time. In total, Ursula stayed with four different aunts, some of whom had children of their own. For two years, an uncle paid a teacher to let her live there. Time passed without Ursula ever knowing the feeling of security and belonging again. The wounds to her soul became lifelong scars. She learned from her grandmother that [God](#) himself was the father of abandoned children - this thought and prayer, taking refuge in him, comforted her a little. But her parents never came back.

Ursula with her brother and parents, 1944, private photo



Post-War Fates

It was only many years later that Ursula found out what had become of them.

Her father was sent to a labor camp in what is now Ukraine. The conditions for the forced laborers were miserable. Many died of exhaustion and illness. They lacked everything. The worst was the hunger. In the summer months, they ate grass - in winter, they knew no other way to help themselves than to try to steal a few potatoes from the canteen. Every night, someone else would sneak into the kitchen and bring back a few tubers for everyone. Then it was Ursula's father's turn. For him, the proper man, the former commercial manager, the thought of stealing was particularly difficult. But he saw no other way out. However, his hearing had been impaired since his time in the army, so he couldn't hear the approaching guards. They grabbed him and started beating him. They beat him until he stopped screaming - until he stopped breathing! Because of a handful of potatoes!

After 5 years, her mother was brought with a medical transport to a camp in Austria. Romania was 1000 kilometers away and there were no normal travel options between West and East during the years of the Iron Curtain. In the camp, Ursula's mother met another man and emigrated with him to America.

As a result, Ursula was effectively orphaned by the Soviet's retaliation for the Nazi invasion on the one hand and her mother's abandonment on the other.

Alone

Time passed. She learned a profession, married young and started her own family. She and her husband raised a total of six children. And they had a heart for all those in need, so much so that they were well-known in the city for it. People knew that if they came to Ursula, they could count on her for help. She had never forgotten what it felt like to be helpless. She wanted to spare others that experience as much as possible. The time of being alone and abandoned should be over - for her and for her near and dear ones.



Ursula as a bride, 1962.



Ursula with her husband and children, 1982.



Turning Destiny Around

Around fifty years after the deportation of her parents, Ursula and her husband were about to go home one Sunday afternoon after an event when they noticed three children, between 10 and 15 years old, standing at the door of the hall. It appeared they belong to no one. There was something about them that echoed in Ursula's soul. She approached the children and asked them, who they had come with. The answer was no one. And where were they going now? Back to the train station, where they would live. Ursula shook her head - it was quite obvious that something was wrong here. She invited them to join her for lunch.

During the meal, which the children devoured hungrily, she learned their story. The parents had divorced, and the four children had stayed with their mother. When their mother died of cancer a few years later, the eldest sister took care of the three younger ones first. But now she wanted to get married, and her fiancé had demanded that she send the children to their father. The father, however, refused to take them in. They did not know any other relatives. They didn't know who they could turn to. They did not know any laws, were not aware of any maintenance obligations and would have had no way of legally claiming them. They felt helpless, unwanted and without options. They had become de facto orphans and street children.

The years rolled back in Ursula's mind: she remembered how she was sent from one aunt to the next and didn't feel welcome. She now saw the lostness and uncertainty that had accompanied her for so many years in these children. And she decided to stop the cycle of suffering. She and her husband took the three of them - in addition to their own children (four of whom no longer lived in the same house) - into their home for the time being. It was a huge challenge for the family both in terms of space and financially. And then they began to look for long-term solutions: they placed the youngest child in a private orphanage where he was well looked after. After a few months, they found a boarding school for the middle child, who still had to go to school. Today he lives in France. The eldest, Liliana (15 years old at the time), stayed with them in the house and began vocational training as a seamstress, which she successfully completed. Ursula looked after her for four years. At Liliana's wedding, Ursula and her husband took on the role of her parents. Today Liliana is happily married and rents out private guest rooms in Kronstadt. She has three children of her own and runs a voluntary children's and youth ministry together with her husband.



*Liliana, 15 years old
All photos private*



Wedding of Liliana, 1998



Liliana with family, 2016

This way Ursula was successful in interrupting the way of suffering and gave these three children the chance of a new beginning, despite all the loss they had experienced. She had voluntarily taken on this task and shouldered it together with her husband. To her surprise, no one in her circle of



acquaintances asked her how they were coping. Apart from a one-off donation, they never received any support. But it was somehow also healing for her. Already as a teenager, she had wondered whether she would one day be able to help orphans, whether her love for others would ease the pain caused by the loss of the security of a parental home. It seemed as if she had come full circle... but it wasn't the end yet.

October 7, 2023

It was a crisp morning, just before sunrise in the fall of 2023, in Israel on the border with Gaza, on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles. The quiet streets at 6:00 a.m. shone in the rising sun and were deserted. Then suddenly motorcycles and pick-ups raced through the streets. They were heavily armed terrorists from the Hamas Brigades from the Gaza Strip who had broken through the border to Israel and were now going from house to house. Anyone who lived in these houses was condemned to be injured, raped, kidnapped or murdered. Escape was impossible. The terrorists had called this attack the "[Al Aksa Flood](#)" and stated their goal as the liberation of Jerusalem from the Israelis.

The terrorists stopped in the kibbutzim near the border. Thunderous banging on doors, yelling male voices. Residents and children were brutally awakened from their sleep. They stumbled out of their rooms, completely confused, and were suddenly confronted by armed, uniformed men shooting and shouting at them in an unknown language. They understood nothing. More shots and suddenly the apartment was empty and terribly quiet. A body was left on the floor; the mother was dragged out of the house and pushed into the pick-up truck. The terrorists showed no consideration at all. The children began to scream and cry, but no one explained to them what was happening, and the pickup truck had already started moving with its engine howling and the car disappeared from their sight. The children were left behind - helplessly lost. They were too small to grasp the full implications of what had happened. But their subconscious realized that something terrible was going on. They knew they were alone and wondered desperately when their parents would come back.



Destroyed houses



Traces of blood, photo private



Burnt bodies, photo Zaka

Life's Call to Us Will Never End

Although many times more brutal, a fate similar to that of Ursula, this time caused by the bestial attack of a terrorist group that left hundreds of Israeli children orphaned, that is if they were not murdered as well.

It happened over 4,000 kilometers away from where Ursula lived. In 2012, she had celebrated her golden wedding anniversary together with her children and grandchildren. A few years later, her husband died, and she was now living with one of her daughters.



Ursula's golden wedding anniversary in 2012 with her children and grandchildren. Photo private

Ursula had been to Israel herself in 1995 and was impressed by the country but especially by its inhabitants. She also considered Israel as [God's chosen people](#) from the Bible. She was accordingly touched by the events.

In April 2024, 6 months after the attack and shortly before the Iranian attack, her eldest son and his wife, who do volunteer work for Israel, flew there to help those affected. They reported privately and on their website [ARC to ISRAEL](#) about the fates of the people they met in the [destroyed villages](#). On their last evening in Jerusalem, they met a married couple: Smadar and Shlomo, who had an appointment with the Israeli president to plead for the release of the body of their sister-in-law Maya, who had been taken to Gaza by the terrorists.

Avner, Maya's husband, was also murdered in Kibbutz Nir Oz on October 7th and has been buried. Avner and Maya left behind 4 children, whom Smadar and Shlomo are now caring for, in addition to their own three (see article: [Bring Maya Home Now!](#)).



Smadar & Shlomo with Ursula's son & Daughter-in-law , 2024



Avner & Maya with their children before 7.10.23

One fate of 240 abductees, two fates of around 1,400 people murdered. And a [story](#) that conveys the personal scope of the suffering of the individuals and puts faces to the pain and destruction.



It's a story that reminded Ursula of her own traumatic experiences, of the night her parents were deported - and of how, 50 years later, she took in the three orphans while the rest of her world looked on, unconcerned. Another 30 years or so have passed since then. And yet the cycle seems to be repeating itself in a spiral: more orphans, more indifference, more suffering.

But Ursula didn't want to simply look the other way this time either. As she did 30 years ago, she chose the more difficult path. She focused on the fate of these families, empathized with them and wanted to support them. For health reasons, she can no longer travel to Israel and as a widow she only has a very small income. But her 85th birthday was approaching on September 7th, 2024. As one of her sons-in-law was turning 60 on the same day, they decided to have a big party together. And then she recognized the special opportunity and wanted just one thing as a birthday present: donations for the Israeli orphans and donations for the families who took in the orphans.

Once again, Ursula wants to stand in the way of suffering, alleviate the pain with her love and give these children the chance of a new beginning, despite all the loss they have experienced. This is her very special response to her own grief and hardship: a message of sympathy, solidarity and active help. And a call to the world not to ignore the suffering caused by terror in Israel. Her gift is the gift for the Israeli orphans of October 7, 2023. The fact that she can give makes her feel rich and fulfilled.

Sometimes the miracle happens that a person uses the suffering they have experienced to grow beyond themselves and become a blessing for others who are going through similar experiences. This is the wonderful story of a woman that began 80 years ago and is still going on today.



Ursula's life was a blessing for many. Summer 2024. Photo Johannes B.



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