We lived in a white-painted brick house on Kodur Street in Dej, which had a population of about 15,000, around a quarter of whom were Jewish. I was the youngest of five, and we spoke Yiddish within the community and Hungarian and Romanian outside. We had a garden and backyard, full of plums, peaches, cherries and apples. Among the smells of my childhood were my mother’s goulash and the scent of Shabbat candles. My father was a merchant, a travelling salesman. My mother had the full-time job of keeping the house and family. I remember the lullaby she used to sing me, Schaefeleh, schluf mein tier kind (Sleep well, my precious little child). The synagogue or shul was the centre of communal life, and the centre of my life from three years upwards. I don’t remember any overt antisemitism, just my parents warning me to be inside before dark: “Lest some other kids decide they don’t like the look of your sidelocks and pick on you.” I just thought my parents were being overprotective.

We had no daily paper, no radio or phone, so the only news we got of the second world war was from newcomers to town. The change started at the end of 1942-43, when people began expressing their anger towards us, especially the Hungarian neighbours. We’d hear: “Zsidók, menjetek ki, Gyerünk haza!” (“Jews, get out of here, Go home!”) I was in the synagogue singing when a rock shattered the stained-glass window. The rabbi tried to convince us it was just some drunk, but as a 10-year-old, I knew better.

One day, four or five men came to our synagogue. They had escaped from Poland and came with stories we found impossible to believe – of Nazis rounding up Jews, looting their possessions, murdering them. People said the men weremeshuggah (crazy).

The only impact these stories had on my family was the cache of extra potatoes and bread that I discovered stashed away in our basement. But by 1943, we started getting clearer signs.

My father’s beard was shaved by some locals, who grabbed him. I stopped going to school. My parents gave me a lantern to carry with me after dark. Then I wasn’t allowed out at all.

One day the Hungarian gendarmes came to our house and ransacked it. In 1944, the Nazis ordered all Jews living outside Budapest to be rounded up and placed in ghettoes. Then it was our turn and that was the day our misery truly began. In the spring of 1944 we were part of a contingent of 7,500 Jews who were corralled into a makeshift ghetto in the Bungur forest. We had to wear the yellow stars of David. That was the day when almost one-and-a-half centuries of Jewish life in Dej came to an end.

In our forest ghetto I remember a local man, Mihai, who brought his cow to help us out with milk, having heard we were starving. He was arrested and beaten to a pulp and remained a paraplegic for the rest of his life. Two weeks into our ghetto life, we were sent to Auschwitz, 435 miles north-west of Dej.

 The Auschwitz fence. Photograph: Mondadori Collection/UIG/Rex

At this point my family was still together. They told the women and children to go to the left, and that’s what my mother and two sisters did. My father and I were inspected by [Josef] Mengele, who was holding a baton, and went to the right. It was the last time I saw my mother and sisters alive.

Other Jews responsible for telling us the rules approached us and said: “Farvos inem gehenem zayn’ du kumen aher?”(“Why the hell did you come here?”) “Didn’t you hear the warnings?”

I saw some soldiers toss a baby up and shoot it in mid air for fun and from then on I had no doubt about what awaited us here.

I worked out pretty quickly certain survival tricks. That if the guards called us to line up in front of the barracks, I should hide or sneak into another barracks. The safest place I could find to hide was in the yard near the bathrooms where all the dead bodies were brought and piled up … I would get on the pile, lie down next to the dead bodies and pretend I was one of them.

They gave us food in barrels. When the barrel was empty, I could get inside and scrape the leftovers from the bottom. In that way my dad and I got extra food.

I remember the chimneys with dark, thick smoke rising from them; dogs barking all the time. From Auschwitz, they moved us to Birkenau, then to Mauthausen-Gusen. Every morning there were dead bodies along the barbed wire fences around the camp. The electrified fences instantly killed anyone who touched them. Perhaps these were simply acts of suicide.

When we were in Gusen penal camp, my father, who was 50, one day just gave up and said he couldn’t continue. From that moment I was totally alone. In February 1945 they moved us to Gunskirchen, Upper Austria. It was here that I witnessed starving people eating human flesh. We were liberated by Americans and Canadians in Gunskirchen. The Germans had simply left the camp, and with an absence of drama we just walked through the gates. The first thing I did was to knock on a local resident’s door and ask for permission to take a shower. Somehow, I managed to meet up with my brothers, David and Shuli. We had no desire to return to Dej, to the people who had betrayed us.

I wanted to go to Israel, as that had been my father’s dream, but it wasn’t easy to get there. There was no independent Jewish state then and it was run by the British, who wanted to limit immigration.

In Italy I joined the Irgun, the Zionist underground organisation fighting for Israeli independence led by Menachem Begin (later prime minister of Israel), and travelled with an arms smuggling ship, the Altalena, to Tel Aviv. All the time I kept with me my prison uniform, as proof of what had happened to me. We arrived on the shores of Tel Aviv on 20 June 1948 and I found myself at a pivotal moment in Israeli history, in a boat full of weapons that Ben-Gurion would not let on shore. It could easily have turned into a civil war. I was shot at by Israel Defence Force troopers as I jumped into the water and the Altalena was set ablaze and sunk by the IDF. With it sank my suitcase of clothes and my striped prisoner uniform, including my hat, coat, shirt and a knife.