Cornelia Gatlan

Cornelia Ileana Gatlan
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Romania
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Cornelia Ileana Gatlan is a retiree who used to work as a nurse. She is a short woman who dresses very elegantly; her eyes are blue and her hair is short and dyed in a golden hue. She was glad to have a visitor, because she is all alone and her only living relative is a niece who lives in Craiova. She loved her mother very much and she stood by her in old age and sickness, giving up any prospect of getting married. She now lives on her own in a two-room apartment filled mostly with old pieces of furniture. The place is located near the Braila railroad station.

Family Background

My paternal grandparents were from Moldova 1, and they lived in Barlad. My grandfather’s name was Leon Gatlan, but he was also registered as Leone in some records, and people called him Leiba [Leibe]. This was a Hebrew diminutive form. He was born in Harlau, in Iasi County, but he later moved to Barlad.

My grandmother, that is, my father’s mother, was named Clara, but they called her Haia [Haile] – this was her Jewish name. She was born in 1876, in Vaslui. I don’t know what her maiden name was, because I never even met her. I know from old photos that she had two sisters, Pesy and Eufrosine, but their names are all that I know about them. All the members of the Gatlan family were Jewish.

I don’t know how they got to have this name, which is their initial name. It’s a Romanian name, but, since they lived in Moldova, it must have been the name they bore from the very beginning, because people didn’t use to change their names back then; this is something they do nowadays.

I don’t know the names of any other ancestors of mine. I know that they were generally located in Moldova and spent the last part of their lives in Barlad. They had been living in Barlad for a long time. The house in Barlad was rather large and roomy as far as I could see, but how it looked is something I don’t remember very well.

I don’t know if they were landowners, but they did have some land which was a sort of leasehold. I saw a photo of my grandfather on a horse: he must have been either a landowner proper, or a leaseholder who took care of the estate.

I don’t know much about my paternal grandmother. Frankly speaking, at my age, I feel sorry I didn’t really talk to my parents about my grandparents when I grew up. Maybe this was also my parents’ mistake. Now I have to make connections between the few things I heard and what I see in pictures. I try to make the best out of my few memories. My grandfather died before I was born, but I don’t know in what year – I believe it was in the 1930s. My paternal grandmother died in 1940-something, when I was very young.

My father had three brothers and a sister: Victor, Arnold, Izu and Luiza, whom we called Aunt Luta. She lived in Vaslui. Aunt Luta was a housewife, but I remember the boys ran a business – a clothes workshop and store – like all Jewish tradesmen used to, but they had no university education.

When I was four or five, in 1942 or 1943, when World War II came, my sister, Lolita, and I left on vacation: she went to Barlad, and I went to our aunt in Vaslui. This is how we wanted it: one of us at our aunt’s, the other – at our grandparents’. I remember one of the things I liked about the place in Vaslui is that they had some eiderdowns on the bed and I used to jump all over them.

I didn’t spend much time in Vaslui, because the war broke out and my poor mother rushed in from Braila, traveling all night in a freight car. She arrived in the morning and took me, and then my sister, who was in Barlad, and we all went back to Braila.

Our aunt left to Israel before my [maternal] grandparents did, but I think she went by herself and got married there. Her husband was a Polish Jew, so he wasn’t from Romania. I don’t know what his name was. I know my aunt brought him to Romania once, and we met him. At that time, my mother was still alive and was living with me. They only had one daughter, Corina, who lives in Israel. I don’t know her last name. She’s a lawyer and has two children of her own. I don’t know their names either. Aunt Luiza died about five years ago, in 1999 or so.

I only met Victor and Izu, the youngest brother. Victor was born around 1896, and Arnold – in 1901 or so. My father’s brothers left for Israel, but I couldn’t tell in what year. They said they were going to their country. No sooner had the State of Israel been formed 2 than all the Jews wanted to go there, to the place that is actually our country. The last of my father’s brothers who left was Izu. I kept in touch with the family in Israel for a while, by mail or phone, as long as my mother was alive. We weren’t too close though, at least not as close as other families, whose members came to the country once in a while.

They were all married. I don’t know what they did for a living, but I know they didn’t have a university education. I couldn’t say they were religious people, bigots – they were moderate. Of course, they kept the Sabbath and the major holidays, like any Jew, but they didn’t overdo it.

Arnold died at a rather early age, just like my father for that matter, at 60-something. He had diabetes. The ones who lived longest were Aunt Luiza and Izu. The latter was the last to die – it happened about ten years ago, in 1993. He got married on 22nd November 1942 and his wife’s name was Rica. I have the exact date of my uncle’s marriage on a photo from their wedding. I don’t know exactly what they did for a living: maybe they had a store, or maybe they worked for some company, like my cousin, Izu’s son, is working for now. This cousin of mine is named Leonard and has a daughter, Lili, who, in her turn, has a boy and a girl. Leonard’s wife calls me from time to time. Uncle Victor never had any children.

My father’s name was Noe. He was born in 1904. I look more like my father. He studied in Italy. His family sent him to medical school there – he studied surgery in Turin between 1924 and 1929. So he was a medical school graduate. He didn’t become a surgeon; he was specialized in skin and venereal diseases. Even the post on the practice our family used to have said that. I don’t know if my father did his military service, but I know he worked as an army physician in Braila. I don’t know for how long he did that, because I don’t have any papers. Had I had such papers, I might have got some aids, because I know they sent some from Germany. So he worked as a physician in the Romanian army for a while.

Here’s the story of how my parents met. They didn’t meet in Iasi, but in Barlad. My mother had breast eczema. My father was studying medicine – after the 2nd or 3rd year, they were already calling him ‘Doctor’ – and had the right specialization. Their parents already knew one another, because Barlad was even smaller than it is today, so his parents said, ‘Look, our boy, Nae – this is how they called him – is going to come to your place and examine the girl.’ In the end, my grandmother took my mother to my father’s for the examination, and this is how my parents met. My father treated her and cured her.

Of course, during the repeated house calls and the treatment, the two youngsters came to like each other; and, because their parents already knew one another, they decided to get married. It was a love marriage and they loved each other very much. She married young, when my father was in the senior year at the medical school. She was almost 18 when they got married, on 6th January 1929, on Epiphany. My father had to spend one more year in Italy, so he took my mother with him and they both lived there. After that, my maternal grandmother moved to Iasi.

There are other things that I can tell you about my maternal grandmother, whose name was Paula Perla. Her maiden name had been Scharf. I knew her pretty well. Grandmother Paula Perla lived in Braila, with us. She had several sisters, but I don’t know how many they were, or what their names were. Before saying anything else, I must say she was a beauty – and not just in the way in which we all speak of our grandparents. My grandmother was quite a woman. She was a perfect housewife. She was married twice: her first husband was a certain Iosif Feldman, and the second was called Iancu. She lived in Barlad when she was with the former. I know that man was my mother’s natural father.

My mother’s name was Rebeca Scharf – she bore my grandmother’s maiden name – and she was born on 16th October 1911. My mother was a gorgeous woman too. Grandfather Iosif Feldman left

for America – I don't know why – and didn't come back until my mother got married. I don't know the reason why Grandfather Feldman and my grandmother got separated, but I know he went to America, where he remarried. I know from a photo that his second wife's name was Anne Feldman.

After my mother's wedding had been announced, I know he came to Barlad and suggested to my grandmother to join him in America. I don't know why my grandmother stayed; by the time my parents had their wedding, my grandmother wasn't married to Iancu Haim yet – this happened much later.

This Feldman did what he was required to do by tradition: as he had a very good financial situation, he gave my mother a dowry – this is how fortune was called back then. So my mother got money from him, and my father used it to set up a medical practice.

Feldman had another daughter in America, but we didn't keep in touch with him or his daughter. After World War I, the bank whose stock he had bought or where he kept his money went bankrupt, and he lost everything. This happened in the period of the Great Depression 3, between 1929 and 1933. I heard that maybe he committed suicide.

I met my other 'grandfather,' that is, my grandmother's second husband, the one named Haim; I used to call him 'Uncle Haim.' Iancu Haim was the one I met last, so I considered him my grandfather. My grandparents lived in Iasi, in the Podu Ros quarter. Their house was pretty small – it wasn't elegant or luxurious. They had electricity and running water, both in Barlad and in Iasi. They may have had those, but the houses they lived in were modest. They didn't own them – they paid rent.

My maternal grandparents didn't have animals. They didn't hire people to help them with the house either, because they weren't rich people. As far as I know, their financial situation was rather modest and they didn't have servants.

They spoke Romanian. They also spoke Yiddish, because Grandfather Iancu Haim used to sing at the synagogue. But the language they used at home was Romanian. I know very few expressions in Yiddish. They observed the tradition, but didn't speak Yiddish. Of course, there were some expressions that couldn't be translated into Romanian, but the use of Yiddish was only restricted to those.

Neither of my grandfathers wore sideburns – only the ultra-orthodox Jews did. They did wear hats. My grandmother dressed in an ordinary fashion. Only the wives of rabbis used to dress differently. My grandparents didn't have any political orientation; that was also because my maternal grandfather was a very religious man. As for their education, I don't know anything about it. My grandmother didn't use to tell me much, and I'm now sorry I didn't find out more things. I remember my grandmother from Iasi with Grandfather Haim; they were already nearing old age when I met them.

Grandfather Haim went to the temple every day and kept all the holidays. They didn't eat pork. When we sat at table, he would grab a piece of bread, dip it in salt, and say a prayer. This is what he used to do before meals. My grandfather was the only one who said the prayer, because he was into religious things. Of course, they kept the holidays, and they ate kosher, just like they were supposed to. Back then, there was a slaughterhouse where they slaughtered cattle and poultry by

kosher rules. Grandfather served as a shochet at the temple.

My favorite place to spend my childhood vacations was my grandparents' house. I used to go to Iasi and I felt great there. When I stayed with them in my vacations, my grandparents used to take me out for a walk in Iasi. My grandfather would go to the temple every morning and he would come back with pretzels and all sorts of treats. They had a courtyard, and, in the morning, when he came with the buttered pretzels on a string, it felt like an entire ceremony – like kids feel when they're at their grandparents'. The city of Iasi was renowned for its pretzels. And, besides, you know how it is with kids – their grandparents spoil them. The food at their place tasted better than what my mother cooked.

They had a round straw table, with straw chairs, in the courtyard. I remember the garden had many flowers, especially flowering tobacco. We used to spend our afternoons sitting at that table and having sorbet with fresh water. Iancu Haim was a very good man, an exceptional man. I was there the day he died.

My grandmother remained in Iasi for some time after Haim's death, and then she came to Braila, to live with my parents. She stayed with us for a while – I don't know for how many years – but, around 1948, she signed up for Israel and she left there by herself. I don't know how old she was when she emigrated – she wasn't that old though – but she left nonetheless, because she had a daughter there – Frida Scharf, my mother's sister – and two granddaughters.

I know my grandmother lived in an old age home down there, but the conditions were good. She spent quite a number of years in Israel, but she didn't live at her daughter's. She suffered from diabetes, and she used to eat a lot of fruit and sweets in Israel, so she got into a diabetic coma at some point, and never recovered from it. She died in Israel, in 1959 or 1960. I don't know in what town she lived and I often blame myself for not having tried to find out more things from my parents. I now realize the importance of all this data that has remained unknown to me.

Frida Scharf – who we used to call Frisca and who was my mother's only sister – was born in Barlad too. The two girls spent their entire childhood and youth in Barlad. Then Frida moved to Iasi. Her husband, who was a very handsome man – tall and brown-haired – was seized in the street or in his store, and taken to the Death Train 4, which left Iasi towards an unknown destination. The 'passengers' weren't allowed to get out; they didn't get any water or food. They were crowded into a freight car where there was no air and water, and they ended up drinking their own urine. The man died there. He was her first husband, but I don't know what his name was. I heard his entire family was herded into that train.

Frida was a housewife, she had no occupation. She then moved to Bucharest. I also have two cousins, Nina and Dida. Their father was Frida's first husband, the one who died on the Death Train. What I know about her and her daughters is that they eventually left for Israel in dreadful conditions, after World War II. They got there way ahead of my grandmother, when the place was still called Palestine. All those who went there like that helped to create the State of Israel. My mother's sister was one of the pioneers who built the new country.

Here's the story of how she left. She got separated from her daughters and couldn't leave together with them. The girls were helped to get there by the Red Cross. Frida left clandestinely – she crossed the border, although she had recently had an operation, and she suffered many mishaps,

and I know she had a really hard time. She got to Vienna, where she stayed for a year. It was from there that she finally managed to leave for Israel, with the help of the Red Cross too. She was reunited with her daughters either in Vienna or in Israel, after they hadn't seen one another for a long time. They were among the first ones in our family who set foot on Israeli soil.

Aunt Frida remarried in Israel. My cousins, Nina and Dida, are younger than I am, but I haven't heard from them since then. I know one of them got married to an embassy diplomat, and so she got to see other countries as well. I know they once went to a third world country – Kenya or Somalia – where there was a riot, and all the embassy staff had to come back. I know they took that rather badly – they were in a state of shock because they had been forced to run for their lives. I know all this because Frida wrote to my mother about what had happened to her daughter. I don't know anything about my folks there anymore. And I feel the need to hear from them, because I'm all alone. The only thing I miss is my family, the little that is left of it.

My parents got married in Barlad. They didn't tell me about their wedding, but I'm sure it was performed in observance of the Jewish tradition: under the canopy, the man breaks a glass and says 'Mazel tov,' that is, 'Good luck.' 'Mazel tov' is also something people say to a woman who is expecting a child. Afterwards, my parents moved to Braila, because my father had an uncle there, Adolf Gatlan – a brother of my paternal grandfather – who was a dentist and owned a dental practice.

Adolf had been living in Braila for a while. He was younger than my grandfather, and he had been born in Vaslui, in the 1880s. It was this uncle who called my father to Braila – he probably told him about the possibility of opening a medical practice there. He was married and I remember my parents told me that his wife had a mental condition. I know for sure that they didn't have children. He died after my grandfather, because he was younger, in the 1930s or so. He was buried at the Jewish cemetery in Braila; he has a tombstone there, which I take care of.

Right after he graduated, my father came to Braila, where he started in fact his medical career, thanks to this uncle. His practice was where we lived. Generally speaking, the center of Braila was full of practices owned by Jewish physicians; there were a lot of Jewish doctors and druggists in Braila, and they occupied the central part of the town. One could even say that being a doctor or a druggist was a traditional occupation for the Jews in Braila, because there were so many of them. But this was back then; today, all the streets are full of all sorts of practices and businesses.

Before the War

I only had one sister, Lolita, who was my elder by seven years and a half. I was born on 1st September 1938. So my sister was born in 1931, in February. I was born in Braila and I totally belong to this place. When I was born, the war was about to break out. During my early childhood, my mother had servants: she hired a woman who did the laundry and the cleaning, cooked and went to the market place, but she also had a sort of nanny for us, the children. She kept them as long as my father kept his medical practice. And she couldn't afford a servant and a governess until my father opened that practice.

My mother didn't have an occupation. She was a housewife, but she wasn't anything like those ladies who just sit around doing nothing; she took part in the activities related to our household, she didn't spend her time having coffee in the living room. When she would go some place, she

would leave me with the nanny.

We didn’t have a nanny for a long time, she just stayed with us until we were nine or ten. When she left, I was still a child, and we were living on Galati Street. We also lived on Vasile Sasu Street, but not for long, and I don’t remember when. I still know where the house is located, but what I distinctly remember is the other house, the one at 5 Galati Street – in the center of the town, close to the kindergarten and the clock.

We lived on the second floor. There was no one living downstairs. The courtyard looked like the interior of a country inn. The entrance was rather ugly, through an archway, although the place was right in the center of the town. It opened onto the large courtyard; our quarters were the first thing you saw to the left, and then there was nothing else. At the back of the courtyard, there were several small houses, with apartments. The people who used to live there are no longer among us.

So our place was on the second floor and it was very nice. The hallway led to the main rooms: my father’s practice, the bedroom, and the living room, which was large enough to house private concerts, in the company of friends. The house was big and it had stoves. Heating it was a bit of a problem, because there were many rooms and the woodshed was downstairs; you had to climb four steps to enter the corridor that led to the courtyard and from that corridor, you could access the kitchen and the dining room. Back then, people didn’t eat in the kitchen, like they do now; they sat at table in a room next to the kitchen. We had electricity and running water. I can’t believe the kind of life we used to have.

Let me tell you about our furniture. The house on Galati Street had nice furniture, the kind that was fashionable in those days, with Moldova-type sideboards, as they used to call the pieces in the living room. It was some massive, quality furniture, with sculptures and crystal mirrors. We had delicate china, Persian rugs, a piano, a telephone, and everything else we needed. My parents were among the first people from Braila who were connected to the telephone network.

These candlesticks you see on my table are very old. Any Jewish family used to have some of those, especially the elderly. I have many things that belonged to my parents, including a tray and some china. But I don’t have silver. My parents didn’t really think about securing our future, because they imagined their children’s lives would be no different from their own.

My parents had paintings with landscapes on the walls. I am now more modern in taste, but the ones I have used to belong to my mother. At my age, there’s no point in getting new ones. My parents gave their older paintings to the first daughter who got married, that is, to my sister, Lolita. They were all about fruit and flowers, for this is what people used to hang on their living room walls. There were also family pictures. But no one hung icons on the wall.

My mother gave all the prettier things to my sister, when she got married. There was little left for me. Those things are now probably kept by my niece, my sister’s daughter. People didn’t have TV sets back then. Despite all those things we used to have, we weren’t considered really rich, because it was common for all the doctors to be rather well-off back then. We never owned real estate.

The living room of our house at 5 Galati Street had a balcony, which extended along the entire length of the room. In the summer evenings when a family or some guest paid us a visit, we would

place a little table on that balcony, which gave onto Galati Street and onto the Main Garden, and beheld the crowd of people who were taking a walk there, because the area was very beautiful.

When I was young, I used to spend my spare time in the Main Garden, in Monument Park, or at Lacul Sarat, where I went bathing and sunbathing on the nudist beach. I was the first one to get to the beach in the morning. The Main Garden was very nice; it had a restaurant, and a terrace that gave onto the Danube, and fiddlers.

There was a lot of music playing going on in our house. My parents would organize small violin and piano concerts, where they would invite all the high-life of Braila. Our place had an intense musical life. My father had been playing the flute since he was young, and he mastered the notes perfectly. I don't think he had been to some special music school, but he must have taken private lessons as a child, since he could decipher the musical notes and play the flute. He even did some composing – he wrote modern tunes, like tangos, and foxtrots. He also played the piano, and his compositions were for this instrument. But his specialty as an instrumentalist was the flute.

Naturally, he was a member of the Composers' Union. I don't have his old partitions anymore; we left them at the house on Galati Street. We took piano lessons in our childhood. My father composed, and we played the piano; we studied this instrument for quite a number of years. I didn't enjoy it too much, but I did it anyway.

My father ended up teaching classes. I know he taught many renowned fiddlers in Braila, and they were really playing by the notes, not just because they had an ear for it. It was a people's school, as they used to call it in those days. When my father took my sister to Bucharest, he met Dimitrie Cuclin, who was a great composer and conductor – he wrote symphonies and concertos. [Dimitrie Cuclin (1885-1978): Composer, essayist, poet, playwright, translator (who translated some of Mihai Eminescu's poems into English, among other things), he represents a landmark in the Romanian art and culture.] I don't know how my father got to this great composer, but it was an honor for him, because Cuclin was an authority in music.

My father was into music for a long time. After being a physician, he was a musician. Doctor Teodorescu, a radiologist from Braila, wrote a book in which he mentioned my father, because he was one of the town's intellectuals who had a major contribution to the musical life. There were other physicians who did that, and there was even a physicians' orchestra at that time.

For a short while, my father worked as the physician of the State Theater in Braila, at the beginnings of this institution. Being his daughter, I acted in 'The Little Red Riding Hood' for some time. They needed children for the play. One of my acting partners was actress Vasilica Tastaman [Vasilica Tastaman (1933-2003) made her debut in 1949, at the State Theater in Braila; she was one of the founders of the Comedy Theater, and she played at the Giulesti and Bulandra theaters.]

I entered the theatrical world and I went on tours to Galati. I grew up in an environment filled with culture, art, music, theater. I was very young when I acted in those plays. My father was still alive, and I was going to elementary school. I earned my first pennies and I became familiar with that world – with dressing rooms, actors and tours.

My parents spent their vacations in the mountains or at the seaside [of the Black Sea], and they took us along. However, my sister got to go more often than I did, I think. By the time I was born,

their trips had probably grown scarcer.

I remember my parents took us everywhere they went, from an early age. This is why I loved art. I didn't miss one single performance. For instance, when Ion Dacian [operetta artist, head of the Operetta Theater in Bucharest] came to town with his operetta performance, I was there. We didn't have a nanny anymore, so our parents couldn't leave us at home, and took us with them to operetta and opera performances, and to the movies. They probably did that partly because they couldn't find anyone to baby-sit. As for us, we really enjoyed going out like that.

The way to acquire a musical education is to start going to performances at an early age. I was 'impregnated' with music and concerts in my childhood, and I know all there is to know about it. I can hum operas from the beginning to the end, because I listened to them many times. I don't want to brag, but I really have a musical culture, more than I have a literary one. I used to read and I still read, but I always felt more attracted to theater, cinema, and music. I didn't want to become an actress, but I would have liked to work as a movie set technician or something, just to be part of the artists' world, which is an exceptional world. Theirs is a totally different life than ours – it's as if they came from another planet.

Both our parents took care of our education. I couldn't say they told me what to read. I always read what I was required to read at school, so they didn't have to guide me. My parents didn't help me with my homework – I managed all by myself. I didn't have tutors either, like they have today. My sister and I were average pupils – we didn't excel in anything, but we never repeated a year. I didn't like math, but I passed.

We had books and a bookcase at home. Our library mostly consisted of medical books. I still have some of them, but they're all in Italian, because my father studied in Italy. We also had literary works. I remember the bookcase was large. There was a time when having a bookcase in a living room was a must.

Of course, my parents also read newspapers. I remember the years of the war, when they listened to the radio and read the press. I was very young, so I can't remember what kind of papers those were. My father's clinic kept him busy most of the time – he had to work hard, because he was the breadwinner of the family, my mother being a housewife. We belonged to the petit bourgeoisie.

Pre-War Jewish Traditions

My mother would light the Sabbath candles on Friday night. My father wasn't very religious, and people often told him he was an atheist. But he wasn't. Circumstances forced him to deviate from his faith a little. We kept the Sabbath, but didn't overdo it. We didn't eat the same special dish on every Sabbath, like Jews who really observe the tradition do; and we didn't use separate covers for dairy products and meat. However, my mother did have vessels that she used only for meat and fish, and vessels that she used only for milk.

I don't make this distinction anymore, although I'm an old woman now and I really should. I don't think the young ones observe this tradition anymore. Apart from that, I do light candles every Friday night and I do my best to keep the other traditions. On Saturday, I obey the rules of the Sabbath as much as I can. This day is like Sunday is to Christians. I don't go to extreme, but I avoid doing certain things that oughtn't to be done on Sabbath, which is a day for rest.

My parents were moderate in observing the Sabbath too; they didn't go to the synagogue on Saturday, because they weren't bigots. They only did it when the major holidays came. In general, they weren't very religious people. Their circle of friends mainly consisted of Jewish physicians. There were also Christian physicians, but most of the physicians were Jewish.

Our relationships with the Jewish families were very good, and holidays were observed as tradition required. I may be emphasizing this a bit too much, since I'm not a bigot. However, I remember when the great fast is – the black fast [on Yom Kippur] – and I go to the synagogue on certain holidays. I could tell you that the Jewish New Year, which everyone celebrated, was celebrated at our place. September marks the beginning of fall and announces the high holidays. On Rosh Hashanah, we didn't use to go to the restaurant, but we invited people over to our place. Everyone brought something: steak, cakes, wine.

For other holidays – as far as I remember, because I was very young – guests would only bring cakes. People used to call on one another on holidays before. They would send cakes to one another for Channukah and Purim – but especially for Purim, when all sorts of cakes were made. Everybody enjoyed themselves, but I was just a kid and couldn't be part of it.

When I was young, my parents didn't insist that I learn Hebrew, but they behaved in a normal fashion. Like I said, they were less religious people. They had relationships with all the Jewish families in Braila, and my father was renowned for being a very good physician, but he wasn't too much of a bigot. Religious traditions weren't kept by the book for as long as my father lived, because he was more or less an atheist.

My mother must have suffered because of that, for she wasn't like my father. After all, she was the descendant of some Jews who had settled in Moldova centuries ago. My mother tried to guide us on a religious path, but she didn't manage all the time, because our father was around. My parents weren't active members of the town's Jewish community. Their circle of friends may have been composed of Jewish families mostly, but religiousness was not their strongest point.

As far as religion is concerned, I think I'm more committed to it than my parents used to be. We went through times of war [World War II], some very troubled times, and people weren't at ease with admitting they were Jews. I'm not blaming my parents. They tried to refrain themselves for our sake, because they wanted us to survive and get an education. This is why they weren't very religious. But I, for one, do my best to observe the religious tradition by the book. I have no problem with the [Christian] Orthodox holidays, and if someone invites me over on such a holiday, I go. I have friends who aren't Jewish, but I make no discrimination.

My parents didn't use to go to restaurants. But there were charity balls and house visits, which are now gone. They used to receive two or three family at a time, not just one person. This is what social life used to look like: visiting other families and going to balls to meet the others. Balls were held at the Communal Hall, which now houses the 'Maria Filoti' Theater. The Army House also organized huge balls.

I remember the family of Doctor Bizamcer. They were Jewish and had a daughter, Gratiela. We used to pay visits to one another on major holidays. They left for Israel about 25 years ago. His wife is still alive, but he's not. The girl married a Romanian Christian-Orthodox, who had to adjust himself to the life in Israel. As I was growing up, the parties thrown by my parents were getting

scarcer.

During the War

I don't know whether there were any military parades, because I was born right before the war began. I can't remember any 10th May [5] celebration. My parents had witnessed such marches.

My father's clientele was multi-ethnic. During the war [World War II], he was very busy, especially after the Russians occupied us. As he was a gynecologist – he mostly practiced gynecology and had a gynecological table – Russians used to come to him to treat their gonorrhea. So many of my father's clients were Russian officers – they asked one another where they had their condition treated, and this is how my father's name came up.

There was also that dreadful period when Jews were sent to sweep the streets. But my father kept his practice for a while. He wasn't deported to Transnistria [6], like others were, but he did get sent to forced labor here, locally, in 1942 or 1943. They took white-collar and blue-collar Jews out in the street and made them do chores.

Jews had a really hard time in Bukovina [7] and Transylvania [8]. Those in the Regat [Kingdom] weren't forced to do hard labors. [Editor's note: 'Kingdom' was used by Transylvanians in everyday speech when referring to the Romanian Kingdom, before the unification of 1918. It remained in use after the unification, designating the regions of Moldova and Wallachia that had formerly composed the Romanian Kingdom.] They were sent to sweep the streets. But they knew that Jews from other regions were being sent to Auschwitz or to Transnistria, so, of course, they were afraid not to end up there themselves.

I was very young – only three or four – and I didn't really know what kind of talks took place in my family. My father was very affected by what was going on; he was afraid they would seize him and he was worried about what might happen to us, so he almost went as far as to deny he was a Jew. He did it all for our sake, lest something bad should happen to us. And we survived.

Growing Up After the War

Afterwards, because he had had a cold attitude towards the Jews and he had tried to deny his being Jewish, the town's Jewish community looked down on him. But everyone knew he was a Jew after all, and, eventually, they all understood what the situation had been during the war. There were Jews who gave in, and Jews who didn't. My father was among the former – because he got scared, as they'd put it.

In 1948 or so, my father took down the sign on his practice. It read 'Dr. Noe Gatlan, specialized in skin and venereal diseases.' Had he not done that, my sister would have never been admitted to college, because she would have been considered petit bourgeois, which would have dramatically diminished her chances. So my father took the sign down. My sister had just graduated from high school, having completed the eleven years of education of the old-style theoretical education system. That was right at the time when there was no room for the petit bourgeoisie.

The new regime didn't confiscate my father's practice, but he was forced to close it. He later took an exam in Iasi – while I was there myself – and was certified as a generalist physician. He got a public job. He worked at the Hospital no.1 on Calarasi Street, in Braila, and at a precinct clinic.

When he became very ill – because he had a hemiparesis and had to use a walking cane – he served as a physician at the former 'Balcescu' High School, because he couldn't stand not being active.

All the friends my parents had were Jewish physicians. Of course, we had relationships with other ethnic groups too, but I remember from my childhood that many Jewish physicians gathered at my parents' place. For instance, they were friends with the doctors Grunberg and Nutescu, and their families. One of the reasons why they had relationships with them is that they were doctors. There weren't many physicians in Braila at that time.

My father also had relationships with Romanian doctors. He died at an early age, while the others were still alive and well. He worked at the Hospital no.1 on Calarasi Street and he had friends there: Doctor Vintilescu, who came from a Christian family, Doctor Hercica, and other Romanian doctors. He had many friends because he worked both at the Hospital no.1 and at the high school. He was a very communicative man, and I'm like him.

When the State of Israel was created, in 1948, I was still young. My grandmother left for Israel because her daughter was already there. And, besides, she really wanted to get to Israel. She felt all right here too, but she wanted to go. I wanted to go too, with my parents [at the end of the 1940s], but our application was rejected and my father wouldn't file another. I was 12 or 13 back then and I would have been better off if I had left.

Now it's difficult for me to do that. But I would like to spend a month or so in Israel. Of course, I'd like to go there. What we can see [from here] is nothing compared to what really is there – and we should see it with our own eyes. Although it's a small country, it's very beautiful, and people work really hard there.

There's a lot of fighting going on there, because Israel is surrounded by enemy states. Naturally, their security forces are unequalled – the Mossad is the best of all the secret services. Life goes on there. But, things have got quite unpleasant lately, because you never know what might happen to you if you get on a bus or enter a club. The situation has worsened these last years, but still, life goes on. I don't think there is one single family who didn't lose someone because of what's going on, because of the Palestinians. I hope it will all end once and for all, in peace.

After my father got a public job at the hospital, my mother was the one who did the shopping and the cooking. Our situation was pretty good until my father got sick, which happened about the time I turned 18. As long as my father was alive, he had a clientele and a reputation – he was renowned in our town and we didn't lack anything. My father died before my mother. His views were different from ours: he told us to have his body cremated, and put the ashes in an urn. But it didn't happen like that. We buried him in the Jewish tradition, at the town's Jewish cemetery, with everything that tradition required. He was only 59 when he died, in 1963.

At a funeral, a prayer is recited both in Hebrew and in Romanian. There is only one God above all of us. The prayer is recited by the rabbi. There is now a rabbi in Galati, who comes to Braila too. I don't know his name. What's special about Braila and the surrounding area is that the deceased Jewish men are not dressed in the traditional way – in the white shirt they wore when they got married. Here we take a few meters of cloth and make a pair of pants with no holes for the feet, like the ones babies wear. We also dress him in a blouse, and pull a hood over his head. We wash

the deceased with wine and hot water, then we get him dressed. A small pillow is put under his head, but it is filled with clay instead of down. There are no blankets or anything underneath the dead. The little pillow with earth signifies the fact that the dead is buried in earth.

The deceased isn't kept in this outfit for three days, like Christians do. The funeral takes place the next day. We don't keep our dead in the house for three days. The casket looks different from the typical Christian one – it is nothing more than a box made of planks joined together with nails. We put sawdust and the little pillow with earth. Everything is very simple. Of course, one may be buried in a more modern fashion, but those who really care about the tradition would never do that.

We don't give alms immediately after the funeral, because people are really upset at that time. One may hold a commemoration of the deceased every year. You go to the synagogue and prepare a traditional meal, with fish – not steak – with cheese and cakes. Serving 'rachiu' [strong liquor obtained generally by distilling fermented sweet fruit juices or by diluting distilled ethyl alcohol with water] used to be considered a Jewish tradition. But nowadays brandy or vodka will do. In the morning of the commemoration, twelve men come to the meal at the synagogue.

After my father died, difficulties began for my mother, my sister, and me. We didn't own our house – we never had any real estate. We paid rent. We exchanged the place for an apartment in an apartment house. My sister worked at the 'Progresu' Enterprise. A family there had been assigned an apartment. But, since there were many of them – with grandparents and children – they needed a larger place, so they agreed to the exchange. It's not this apartment, but the one on the opposite side of the hallway. It was a newly-built house that had just been opened.

We hastily moved out from the house on Galati Street, and we had to leave the bookcase behind. This was not the only piece of furniture we didn't take: in fact, we gave up a lot of furniture, because it didn't fit in the new apartment. We sold the old furniture and the piano, because we didn't have room for them anymore. I should have gone with my mother and retrieve the books, or, at least, sell them. My father's old gynecological table and all the instruments were carried in the attic, and this is where they stayed. We grabbed what we could take, and sold the rest. I have almost nothing of what we used to have. I still have some books, but I keep them inside the sideboards.

My mother was the housewife's type. After my father died, she began to read a lot – as she was getting older, you'd say. Not a single morning went by without her reading something. We both slept in the same bed and she kept the lamp on, which bothered me a little.

My parents kept in touch with our relatives. After my father died, my mother only exchanged letters with her sister in Israel, and, of course, with my grandmother, until she died.

I went through all the states of education: kindergarten, elementary school, then the others. I first went to school at the age of seven, because I was born on 1st September. There was a Jewish school in Braila, but they didn't send me to that one. I have Jewish friends who went there. In the first years, until I got to the 4th grade, I attended a Catholic school for nuns, 'Sancta Maria.'

It was a boarding school run by Catholic nuns, and the teachers were nuns too. They had all the classes, from the 1st elementary year to the senior high school year. It was located on the spot

where the old maternity on Campiniu Street used to be. My sister went for more than four years at this school. Eventually, it was dissolved – I believe it happened during the Dej 9 regime, when the Communists came to power. My sister completed her secondary education at the Theoretical High School.

I went to the 'Sancta Maria' School for a few years, but I didn't go to high school there. Although we were Jewish, the nuns admitted us. Tuition was really high, but my father was a doctor and could afford it. So, he paid, and we got in. Classes were held in Romanian. Then I went to the Elementary School no.4 on Galati Street. Afterwards, I went to the theoretical high school on Calarasilor Street, today's 'Murgoci' High School. I got my graduation certificate – which was called 'maturity diploma' back then – in August 1955, while at the Secondary School for Girls no.1.

My favorite subjects were history, geography, Romanian literature, logic, and psychology. I didn't like math and grammar. Among my favorite teachers was Miss Hinkes, who taught history; she died a few years ago, at the age of 80. Then there was Miss Filipescu, the geography teacher. We didn't have a close relationship with our teachers, like nowadays – we only had a student-teacher relationship. I remember Mrs. Popescu, who taught math, and was a Sorbonne graduate. I never sensed anti-Semitism from the part of my teachers or classmates.

I had some Jewish classmates in high school, but most of them left for Israel. Miriam Schroner, Isabela Goldschmidt, and Bertha Solomon, whose father was a tailor, are all in Israel. My friends emigrated rather late, in the 1960s; most of them had left by 1970.

I didn't play many games when I was a child. I have admiration for today's young generations, who are clearly superior to us. It's only natural to evolve. We didn't have computers. In kindergarten, we used to write on a slate first, and then we moved to a pen, not a fountain pen. I couldn't say we didn't learn back then, and I did acquire a general culture, but that was nothing compared to what youngsters learn today. We were into old mathematics, geometry, algebra, and trigonometry; now everything is done using modern techniques. It's not my fault, it's not that I wouldn't study – but this was all they taught us back then.

There were cars in Braila when I was young, of course there were. I don't remember what kind of cars. My parents didn't have a car; they didn't go after such things – owning a house or a car. I didn't ride in a car when I was a child. Even today, I avoid riding in cars, because I have a fear of that. I traveled by train in my childhood, and think I was braver as a child than I am now. I used to travel to Iasi, to my grandmother's, all by myself, without my mother accompanying me. I sometimes went with my sister, when we were really young.

Adult Life

While I was an employee, I used to go to the spa on my own. Now I need to have someone to come with me on the train; it's years since I haven't gone to a spa, because there's no one I can go with. I find it difficult to get on a train all by myself.

My sister's name was Lolita Leoni Gatlan. After her marriage, her last name was Dumitrescu. In the beginning, my sister attended the Charity Nurses School – these were similar to today's pediatric nurses – after which she attended the Institute for Economical and Commerce Studies in Bucharest, as it was called in those days. After graduating, she became an economist and worked in Braila for

quite a number of years. After her marriage, she worked in Craiova as well.

My mother insisted that my sister and I marry Jewish men – I know that she wanted us to marry Jewish men. And my sister's first marriage was to a Jewish engineer from Iasi whose name was Weissenberg. But they were not married for long, only for a couple of years. I went to visit them during the period when I worked at Sfantu Spiridon Hospital in Iasi. Yet they didn't get along well and they separated.

Afterwards, my sister returned to Braila, where she met her second husband, Dumitrescu, through my father. Dumitrescu was a Christian-Orthodox Romanian. But religion is not important in choosing your spouse, what matters is education, social standing, character. What one does is not important, what matters is that one receives a good education. They and my niece lived together in Craiova. My niece's name is Manuela Dumitrescu, and she's also married in Craiova, to a certain Ifrim. My sister died in 1981, when she was 50. She died at an early age, but she had a brain tumor that could not be operated.

Before I took the admission exam at the School for Nurses, I also sat for an exam to enter drama school – because I wanted to become a movie actress. I got a passing grade, but it wasn't high enough to get me admitted. I would have liked to go in this direction, because I was always fond of art. I still like music, opera, theater – everything that means art. What I didn't like was math.

When my mother went to Bucharest to withdraw my admission file, she met an actor who was from Braila and worked in human resources in the movie sector, and the man asked her, 'Why didn't you look for me to tell me about Cornelia?' But how was my mother supposed to know that this man worked there? It was too late, I failed my entrance, so I went to the nurses' school. This was my destiny. I would have loved to become an actress. I still have an inclination for beauty and for arts. I am a sensitive being. I'm not into exact sciences and foreign languages. I'm an old-fashioned person.

So I hadn't been admitted to drama school, and I took an entrance exam for the Law School in Iasi, where I wanted to be a part-time student, in 1955 or 1956. Back then, a worker's or a peasant's child had more chances to succeed than the child of an intellectual. In order to become a part-time student, one had to hold an employment in order to prove that he or she wasn't able to attend courses on a daily basis. I wasn't employed, but I managed to provide the required certificate for a while, until it didn't work anymore. I went to Law School for two years, but had to quit. In that period, I would only go to the faculty at certain times.

Then, in 1958 or so, my father met some doctor named Calciu, who was the manager of the Medical Technicians School in Braila – back then the job was called medical technician, not nurse – which had just been founded, and the man asked my father, 'If your daughter is not in college, why not send her to the nurses school?' I was about 20, and medical science didn't really appeal to me, but I did register, and I got to like it. The medical technicians school was what we call a vocational school today – a school for nurses. It lasted four years.

I also have a head nurse certificate; I got it to improve my qualification, and I had to pass an exam for it. I graduated from the Medical Technicians School in Braila, in 1959. I took the exam to move to head nurse between 1st and 7th September 1971, in Galati.

I worked as a nurse in Iasi because I had been appointed there. Of course, it was very nice, because there were all those university clinics, and we had a broader opening. On Sabbath, a friend of mine, whose name I've forgotten, and I went for a sort of tea party at a family of old actors, the Friedmans.

The first Jewish theater was at the 'Pomul Verde,' in Iasi. [Editor's note: The first professional Yiddish theater in the world was founded in the 'Pomul Verde' Garden, on the spot where the park in front of the National Theater in Iasi lies today. It was targeted to the Jewish audiences, whose members lived predominantly in the Podu Ros quarter.] I really lived near the 'Pomul Verde'; my landlady was an actress who played at that theater. So I frequented the world of actors and of the theater, and it was really nice, because I had a lot of fun.

This lady was named Rene – I've forgotten her last name. Actors used to come to her place to play poker. I had a circle of friends made up of artists and I used to go to this Friedman family. They were elderly actors who had a very prosperous material situation. Many young people used to visit them. I don't know if any Christians came there, but I know there were a lot of Jews. There must have been Christians too, because there was plenty of room in those large parlors. I made friends with a painter. There was music – piano playing. The attendance was refined. I really had a great time while in Iasi.

After finishing my studies at the School for Nurses, I worked for two years as a nurse at Sfantu Spiridon Hospital in Iasi. I had asked to be appointed to work there, because Iasi was the city of my childhood. I worked in the maxillofacial ward in the beginning, and afterwards, I obtained a transfer at the skin and venereal diseases section of the same hospital, which housed several clinics. The job was good and, since our class was the first to graduate from the Nurses School, I was appointed head nurse.

However, although things were going pretty well, I was feeling homesick and wasn't comfortable with being away from home. I had a good job, I had a lot of fun; in these respects, my life here in Braila has never been as good as in Iasi. But most of my former classmates were returning home at that time from where they had been appointed to work, and my father managed to obtain some sort of transfer between me and a nurse from Braila, who wanted to go to Iasi, where her parents lived.

Her name was Duduta Ionescu, and she married Doctor Ionescu from Braila, who was the manager of the Hospital no.1. My parents had rented Duduta my old room in Braila during my stay in Iasi. She wanted to go to Iasi, and I wanted to return to Braila. She didn't leave in the end, because she fell in love with Doctor Ionescu; as for me, I did return home to Braila, and initially worked for about five years at the Hospital no.1 on Calarasi Street, which is still there today.

After that, I got transferred to the newly-founded Hospital no.3, in the Hipodrom quarter, where I worked until my retirement. I was employed there for many years as well. I don't want to boast, but my work was highly esteemed everywhere I went. I spent 31 years working in hospitals.

I can say I sensed some anti-Semitism at work, but not from the part of my close coworkers. They loved me and esteemed me, and looked forward to Pesach, because I used to bring them matzah. I always had to keep a box just for them, because they liked it. They literally fought over it. I didn't sense an open anti-Semitism. They knew I was Jewish, because I had never tried to keep this

secret.

One day, when I was nearing retirement, I brought them matzah, as usual. I distributed shares of it to everyone and, of course, I gave them to drink of the quality wine I had brought along with the matzah. The head of the section, Doctor Georghe, now a retiree, didn't touch the matzah or the wine, and I think he said something about the matzah and the wine – which was allegedly made with Christian blood. I hadn't expected that from him, especially since he was the head physician of our section. But every time I noticed something like that, I just pretended not to hear and kept my mouth shut.

I couldn't say that I simply wouldn't marry; but it wasn't meant to be. Although I didn't get married, I can't say I was as innocent as a nun, because I did have my share of relationships, more or less. I am a very difficult person and I admit that things would have been easier for me if I hadn't been so picky. I wanted to have someone to talk to, I didn't care about the material aspects, and I rarely came across someone who had any idea about music and who didn't sneer if we went to a concert or an opera performance, or if we just talked about music. I didn't meet too many boys like this.

The ones I got close to marry were all Jews, because mothers used to talk to one another and there were the matchmakers too. There were matchmakers in Bucharest, and Timisoara, and they even had catalogues with the Jewish bachelors. This is how one found a boy in those days. I had suitors from Timisoara, from Bucharest, from Botosani. There was a suitor from Petrosani to whom I even became engaged; but that was all. This is how things happened.

Now I'm sorry I didn't get married – there must have been someone among all those suitors who would have been good for me. They all liked me, but I didn't really like any of them. I don't know what was in my head at that time, but I wouldn't do it again. Although those seemed to be acceptable matches, I'm not sure a marriage would have lasted. Time erodes a relationship and both spouses have to be diplomats. They must communicate, in order for each of them to understand what the other wants. I put my faith in my destiny.

First of all, I really wanted to be with my mother; I had my sister in Craiova indeed, but she was married. I was also a nurse, and I had to stay close to my mother, because she was getting old. I always had an important condition for all my suitors: either to let my mother stay with us, or to live at her place. I wouldn't have it any other way, and none of my suitors was enthusiastic about this.

I was told that my mother could also spend a few months at my sister's every year. It wasn't about that – for starters, my mother didn't have money to support herself, because she only received a successor's pension, as a widow. I said I wouldn't abandon my mother in sickness, and, since I was a nurse, I would know how to help her.

This is why I emphasized the importance of fate: my mother died in my arms. She fell down, because she had a large-scale heart attack. I was home, in the living room, on the night of 24th August, and I had returned from hospital, after ending my shift. My mother fell down in the kitchen. I rushed in, but all I could do was apply pressure onto her body. She didn't recover. She had arthrosclerosis and high cholesterol, and she died in my arms. I always claimed I couldn't leave home because I had to take care of my mother, and my mother died with me by her side. When she died, in 1977, she was 65.

I could have had children – you don't have to be married to give birth to a child. My mother wanted me to have a baby, but she wanted it to be within an official framework. Later, as she grew older, she began to tell me, 'It would be good to have a baby anyway.' I am sure this was my fate, for this is how God works. Some things are hard to explain. I didn't have children, but my sister died and left behind this niece of mine, who's like a daughter to me. She is a college graduate, but suffers from schizophrenia and receives a small sickness pension. Although she graduated, she couldn't work; and her husband is unemployed.

Communism

During the communist period, I kept some of the holidays. For instance, when there was the commemoration of the dead, I took some hours off from work, or I arranged with a coworker to fill in for me, so that I could leave a few hours earlier. I went to the synagogue to commemorate the death of my parents, and then I went to their graves, for both of them had been buried in a most appropriate way.

I listened to various radio stations under the communist regime, including [Radio] Free Europe 10. I know my parents used to listen to the Voice of America 11. I became a fan of the Communists at an early age. When I was just a girl, I was already a supporter of Petru Groza 12. I wasn't fully aware back then, because I knew very few things about how life had been before.

During Gheorghiu-Dej's regime, I was very young, and didn't know what had happened before World War II in Romania. My parents knew about these things, they had lived through them, and they could make comparisons, whereas I couldn't. They told me that, a number of people who had been in politics were arrested during Dej's regime.

My parents had nothing to do with politics – they were intellectuals. They weren't arrested, like others were, for being members of the Peasants' Party 13 or of any other party. As I grew up, I had my own moments of rebellion; but I wasn't the only one who suffered under the regime of Ceausescu 14. I reached adulthood in the communist period, and I can say that the last 10-15 years of Ceausescu's 'reign' were the worst.

At the beginning of the 1980s, things changed dramatically. I don't consider Communism to be a good thing and I couldn't say what I agreed to. This is how laws were back then. I can't adjust myself to today's new reality, but the youth can. We, the elderly, are to blame, because we hold on to too many things that belong to the past. I had got used to Communism and couldn't tell what was really good for our country. I have no regrets though – there is no point in that.

I doubt people really regret Communism – what bothers them is that most of them are now unemployed. Enterprises were set up, but they went bankrupt at a certain point. They are now living better than how they used to live before, but providing the daily bread is what puts them in difficulty. A part of the retirees still work, on the black market or on their own. One who really wants to work is bound to find a job, even if it's poorly paid. What we need is working, not sitting around doing nothing. It's high time we made a distinction between work and spare time; but I believe it's going to take us another 20 years to learn that. People don't regret Communism, but only the stability which came with it.

In 1989, I was all alone already, because neither my mother, nor my sister was alive anymore. I saw what was happening on TV, and heard about it on the radio. I was preparing to go to work when everything started. I spent the days of the Revolution 15 in the hospital, as a nurse, because I wouldn't want to stay home all alone. Everyone advised me not to go back home and return to work as long as there were still shootings in the street. Wounded people were brought to the hospital; corpses too. It wasn't about surgery anymore – it was about everyone going downstairs and giving a hand.

I was very happy, because I thought everything would take a turn for the better. But the others laughed at me, especially the elderly. I was delighted because the TV program became more diversified, I could watch movies and listen to the radio at home. I had never realized we could attain this degree of freedom. TV and radio made me understand that things are beginning to change. I'd like to see them improve further.

It's hard to change mentalities – it takes several generations. The influence of the 45 years of Communism is not to be neglected. However, everything one accumulates should come from clean, honest sources. Today, it's 'every man for himself,' but no one seems to care about the country. In Israel, they put the country first. Education received the most generous funds. In all the civilized states, with an old democratic tradition, like Israel, the money went first to education, research and military. Anything else came after these three.

Of course, my life changed after the Revolution. After 31 years of work, my retirement pension was very small, because salaries were very low back then. If someone who earns 5 million retires today, his or her pension will be better than what I got – the money won't be great, but acceptable. As for me, I haven't even reached the 3-million threshold.

Jewish Life in Romania Today

However, the Community is helping us both financially, and through packs with gifts and clothes – new clothes, not second-hand. There is, for instance, the Joint Organization 16, a large contributing Jewish organization, and there's another one, whose name I don't remember. Their contributions have diminished lately – affecting our Community – because the Joint and the State of Israel especially help the Jews from Russia – there are a lot of Russian Jews.

In the last 10-15 years endless convoys of Russian Jews left to Israel – they spread everywhere and became ubiquitous. All the Jews from Ethiopia left the country in 48 hours, in two planes, a number of years ago. Jews are to be found in all the countries of the world. The support funds diminished, because the Israeli economy weakened at some point. Compared to ours, theirs is a strong economy, but they don't see things like that; they claim their pensions are lower and they can't help us anymore. I hear they recovered, to a certain extent.

I had both Jewish and Romanian friends. Miris Schreiner and Isabela Goldschmidt, for instance, have been my friends for a long time. They are now in Israel, but they call me every now and then – once a year – they write to me, they visit me and we talk. I had some Christian friends, but, after they retired, our relationships got colder, because they became grandmothers and had other kinds of problems than my own. Although we had promised one another to spend more time together after retiring, we never got to.

I noticed I have no friends anymore. Even my oldest friends stopped visiting me, isolating themselves from the world. All I expect from them is to lend me their ears and a shoulder to cry on. I never argue with anyone and don't end relationships in arguments or insults. But a wall of silence has been building up between us. The people I meet and with whom I exchange casual remarks – that's something different than my friends. I wish I had a close friend; I don't need material help, but I would have liked to hear her tell me, when I'm not able to walk anymore: 'Relax, I'll come over and bring you your bread and yogurt.' One can't make friends in old age. Only young people can make friends.

The apartment I'm living in was bought rather recently, after my mother and her sister died. In fact, the one who paid for this apartment was the Community. They helped me buy it. They gave me a donation, through a notary. It cost me 92,000 lei 12 years ago [in 1992]. I will spend the remaining years of my life in this apartment.

When I die, the apartment will go to the Community, like I have already stipulated in my will. I don't regret being all alone. My niece from Craiova lives in an apartment left by her mother. I decided to give my apartment to the Community, because they help me so much. Hadn't it been for the Community, I think I would have starved to death. I bought the furniture I have here, by installments.

An elderly, rather lazy person like me would find it difficult to get used to living in Israel. I have never been there. I would like to go, but they never specifically invited me or provided me with the means to get there. They probably have their own problems, because that is not a land of milk and honey. They all work hard there, and don't have time to entertain guests. I almost lost contact with the people I know in Israel.

A number of years ago, a cousin of mine from Israel, who's a lawyer, came to Romania with her husband. She's the daughter of a sister of my father's, Aunt Luta, that is, Luiza. They didn't stay long, but my mother took her to the hospital where I worked. Three or four years ago, this cousin returned to Bucharest, but didn't call on me anymore. She phoned me, we talked, but we didn't see each other. My contacts with my relatives are very scarce. I sometimes get a call from a cousin of mine, son of Uncle Izu, but he only calls every ten years of so. He is probably a great-grandfather by now, if he is still alive.

Many years ago, I tried to maintain a correspondence, but I didn't stick to it. When my mother was alive, she and her sister wrote to each other from time to time. After my mother died, this connection was lost. I have no idea if my nieces are still alive, if they still live in Israel or not. I don't know anything of anyone anymore. This is why I'm sorry. Some people who are just friends manage to keep in touch, while I, with close relatives there – cousins by my father's brothers and by my mother's sister – wasn't capable of maintaining a relationship with them. Well, I suppose I'm to blame for this. Now, it's too late, because I don't know their addresses.

The Jewish community life in Braila is very active. Ours is one of the most active communities in the country, despite the low number of members. The president of the Community is a man named Esrich, an engineer by trade. The secretary of the Community is David Segal. Most of the members are elderly, and some of them are unable to play an active part.

The rest of us, the ones who are still more or less all right, often come from inter-ethnic families, but we get along well with one another and observe the religious tradition. The Christians who are married to Jews are ‘sympathizers,’ and some of them enjoy coming to the synagogue for the holidays. Those who are still young, that is, under 40, are the ones who have an active life within the Community.

We have the Talmud Torah classes, the Hebrew classes, the choir, the dances; they organize seminars and are invited to all the seminars held in Bucharest, Timisoara, Brasov. Many of the younger members took trips to Israel, touring the country, visiting various places, getting to know how people study there.

Like I said, Jews in Braila have a very active life; and so do those in Timisoara, I suppose, where there’s a rabbi, but also those in Oradea or in Brasov. Compared to us, Jews in Galati have a less active community life. This is true for Focsani too. I can say that in this particular part of the Kingdom, in Braila, the Jewish community is very much alive and interested to stay connected to what is going on. We like what we do.

Of course, there aren’t as many weddings as there used to be. I haven’t seen a traditional one in ages. But we still have bar mitzvahs and circumcisions, scarce as they may be. Once in many years, a young woman gives birth to a boy, and the baby is circumcised. I don’t know if they used to have a bat mitzvah for the girls, but I’m sure about the bar mitzvah tradition.

At the bar mitzvah, they use those mantles and the boy then becomes a man, and enters manhood. I don’t remember exactly the year, it was about ten years ago, around 1994, when I went to the bar mitzvah of Itak Bulikovici, the son of some friends of mine; I also went to the bar mitzvah of the son of the Ustinescu family. His mother is a member of the Community’s council, too. Her name is Nadia Ustinescu, she has two sons, and she organized bar mitzvahs for both of them. One of her sons has already graduated from college in Bucharest, and the other lives in Braila.

They are both active members of the Community. There are many young people active in the Community. I am no longer in my prime, but there are young people who sing in the choir in Hebrew. There is a conductor, who comes from Bucharest, and they all sing using their partitions; the words are in Hebrew. They sing beautifully, on holidays. They bring accordions and violins and they play beautiful songs.

For example, traditional cookies are baked on Purim; they are called hamantashen, are made with walnuts and honey, and have a three-cornered shape. I’m not very good at baking these cakes, and so, I go to another lady to bake them together with her. On Purim, they are distributed in the synagogue, because some are baked to be taken to the synagogue, too. The hamantashen are placed inside a little bag together with a small slice of sponge cake, called lekakh. [Editor’s note: Lakakh is honey cake, eaten generally on Rosh Hashanah.] These cakes with walnuts and honey are traditional on Purim. This year [2004], Purim will be celebrated on 7th March and will last for a couple of days. At the Community headquarters, there are a few elderly ladies who are better at baking these cakes.

Years ago, I used to go and lend a helping hand, but now, there are other ladies who bake many cakes. Jews aren’t the only ones who come to the Community – there are also our ‘sympathizers.’

So, there are plenty of people, and many cakes have to be baked. There is this story about Purim, with King Ahasuerus and Esther. ‘Pur’ means ‘lots,’ and people wear masks.

As for the Talmud Torah, I enjoyed it a lot and went to classes. Rabbi Sucher, who comes to Braila from Galati, is the one who teaches these classes today. Mr. Sucher is not very old, I’m not sure he turned 50 yet. He doesn’t hold the actual title of rabbi, but he attended some special courses. He is the representative of the religious Jews in Galati. He lives in Galati, but he also comes to Braila. There was no one left to teach religion here in Braila, because the ones who could do it were very old. Before him, Mr. Berenstein taught these classes, but he underwent a heart operation and gave up performing the service, because he was no longer able to do so.

Some four years ago, there were classes for learning the Hebrew alphabet, writing, and phrasing. I attended them for one year, but it was very difficult for me and I gave them up because of my old age. I am currently attending a class for reading, learning, and interpreting the Torah. I started going to this class last year. It is taught by Nadia Ustinescu, and it is held once a week, on Sunday. Most of those who attend are young people, especially in Sucher’s class of grammar and language. I chose to attend the class for the study of the Torah, which lasts two hours a week. It is a continuous process, because it isn’t so easy, and it is done every year, yet you do not receive a diploma after graduating.

I attended these classes and I even enjoyed them, but lately – and may God and the community forgive me for this – I haven’t gone there because of the bad weather. It is also true that I didn’t attend the classes because I am going through a bad period from an emotional point of view; but it also snowed, and there was ice in the streets, too.

As a child and a teenager, I used to stroll more than I do now, when I’m retired, and even more than I did when I was working. Now I no longer have someone to go for a stroll with, and I don’t usually do that on my own. In the summertime, I walk downtown especially, to the historical center of Braila, not the modern one. I take a detour in order to see all the old buildings; there are in quite a bad state, but they bring many memories to my mind: here was the library; there was the shooting range, and all the side streets coming from the Main Garden.

Now, even though I’m retired, I wake up at about 7am in winter, and around 6am in summer. I open the windows and the balcony door, I air the bed sheets, I make my coffee, smoke as much as I can, especially when I am very upset. I clean up my apartment, because I am a person who likes order, and then I go to the marketplace. In the morning, I cook in my little pot, so that everything is fresh.

Glossary:

1 Moldova

Historic region between the Eastern Carpathians, the Dniester River and the Black Sea, also a contemporary state, bordering with Romania and Ukraine. Moldova was first mentioned after the end of the Mongol invasion in 14th century scripts as Eastern marquisate of the Hungarian Kingdom. For a long time, the Principality of Moldova was tributary of either Poland or Hungary until the Ottoman Empire took possession of it in 1512. The Sultans ruled Moldova indirectly by appointing the Prince of Moldova to govern the vassal principality. These were Moldovan boyars

until the early 18th century and Greek (Phanariot) ones after. In 1812 Tsar Alexander I occupied the eastern part of Moldova (between the Prut and the Dniester river and the Black Sea) and attached it to its Empire under the name of Bessarabia. In 1859 the remaining part of Moldova merged with Wallachia. In 1862 the new country was called Romania, which was finally internationally recognized at the Treaty of Berlin in 1886. Bessarabia united with Romania after World War I, and was recaptured by the Soviet Union in 1940. The Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic gained independence after the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and is now called Moldovan Republic (Republica Moldova).

2 Creation of the State of Israel

From 1917 Palestine was a British mandate. Also in 1917 the Balfour Declaration was published, which supported the idea of the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Throughout the interwar period, Jews were migrating to Palestine, which caused the conflict with the local Arabs to escalate. On the other hand, British restrictions on immigration sparked increasing opposition to the mandate powers. Immediately after World War II there were increasing numbers of terrorist attacks designed to force Britain to recognize the right of the Jews to their own state. These aspirations provoked the hostile reaction of the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab states. In February 1947 the British foreign minister Ernest Bevin ceded the Palestinian mandate to the UN, which took the decision to divide Palestine into a Jewish section and an Arab section and to create an independent Jewish state. On 14th May 1948 David Ben Gurion proclaimed the creation of the State of Israel. It was recognized immediately by the US and the USSR. On the following day the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon attacked Israel, starting a war that continued, with intermissions, until the beginning of 1949 and ended in a truce.

3 Great Depression

At the end of October 1929, there were worrying signs on the New York Stock Exchange in the securities market. On 24th October ('Black Thursday'), people began selling off stocks in a panic from the price drops of the previous days - the number of shares usually sold in a half year exchanged hands in one hour. The banks could not supply the amount of liquid assets required, so people didn't receive money from their sales. Five days later, on 'Black Tuesday', 16.4 million shares were put up for sale, prices dropped steeply, and the hoarded properties suddenly became worthless. The collapse of the Stock Exchange was followed by economic crisis. Banks called in their outstanding loans, causing immediate closings of factories and businesses, leading to higher unemployment, and a decline in the standard of living. By January of 1930, the American money market got back on it's feet, but during this year newer bank crises unfolded: in one month, 325 banks went under. Toward the end of 1930, the crisis spread to Europe: in May of 1931, the Viennese Creditanstalt collapsed (and with it's recall of outstanding loans, took Austrian heavy industry with it). In July, a bank crisis erupted in Germany, by September in England, as well. In Germany, in 1931, more than 19,000 firms closed down. Though in France the banking system withstood the confusion, industrial production and volume of exports tapered off seriously. The agricultural countries of Central Europe were primarily shaken up by the decrease of export revenues, which was followed by a serious agricultural crisis. Romanian export revenues dropped by 73 percent, Poland's by 56 percent. In 1933 in Hungary, debts in the agricultural sphere reached 2.2 billion Pengoes. Compared to the industrial production of 1929, it fell 76 percent in 1932 and 88 percent in 1933. Agricultural unemployment levels, already causing serious concerns, swelled

immensely to levels, estimated at the time to be in the hundreds of thousands. In industry the scale of unemployment was 30 percent (about 250,000 people).

4 Pogrom in Iasi and the Death Train

During the pogrom in Iasi (June 29-30, 1941) an estimated 4,000-8,000 people were killed on the grounds that Jews kept hidden weapons and had fired at Romanian and German soldiers. Thousands of people were boarded into two freight trains 100-150 people were crowded in each one of the sealed carriages. For several days, they were transported towards Podul Iloaiei and Calarasi and 65 percent of them died from asphyxiation and dehydration.

5 10th May (Heroes' Day)

National holiday in the Romanian Monarchy between 1866 and 1947. It comprised three major events of the establishment of the Romanian Monarchy and state-building: on 10th May 1866 the first Romanian King, Carol I of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen swore on the Romanian laws; on 10th May 1877 it was also him who announced Romania's independence; on 10th May 1881, after the Great Powers acknowledged Carol I as king, the Romanian Monarchy was proclaimed. The greatest emphasis was laid on the celebration of 10th May under the rule of Carol I (1866-1914), the greatest festivities were organized in 1881 (in honor of the Monarchy's proclamation) and in 1906, when they celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Monarchy's proclamation and the 40th anniversary of Carol's accession to the throne. The commemoration of 10th May was repealed in 1948, following the overthrow of the Romanian Monarchy in 1947.

6 Transnistria

Area situated between the Bug and Dniester rivers and the Black Sea. The term is derived from the Romanian name for the Dniester (Nistru) and was coined after the occupation of the area by German and Romanian troops in World War II. After its occupation Transnistria became a place for deported Romanian Jews. Systematic deportations began in September 1941. In the course of the next two months, all surviving Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina and a small part of the Jewish population of Old Romania were dispatched across the Dniester. This first wave of deportations reached almost 120,000 by mid-November 1941 when it was halted by Ion Antonescu, the Romanian dictator, upon intervention of the Council of Romanian Jewish Communities. Deportations resumed at the beginning of the summer of 1942, affecting close to 5,000 Jews. A third series of deportations from Old Romania took place in July 1942, affecting Jews who had evaded forced labor decrees, as well as their families, communist sympathizers and Bessarabian Jews who had been in Old Romania and Transylvania during the Soviet occupation. The most feared Transnistrian camps were Vapniarka, Ribnita, Berezovka, Tulcin and Iampol. Most of the Jews deported to camps in Transnistria died between 1941-1943 because of horrible living conditions, diseases and lack of food.

7 Bukovina

Historical region, located East of the Carpathian Mountain range, bordering with Transylvania, Galicia and Moldova. In 1775 it became a Habsburg territory as a consequence of the Kuchuk-Kainarji Treaty (1774) between the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empire. After the fall of Austria-

Hungary Bukovina was annexed to Romania (1920). In 1939 a non-aggression pact was signed between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union (Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), which also meant dividing Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of interest. Taking advantage of the pact, the Soviet Union claimed in an ultimatum from 1940 some of the Romanian territories. Romania was forced to renounce Bessarabia and Northern-Bukovina, including Czernowitz (Cernauti, Chernovtsy). Bukovina was characterized by ethnic and religious pluralism; the ethnic communities included Germans, Poles, Jews, Hungarians, Ukrainians and Romanians, the most dominant religious persuasions were Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. In 1930 some 93,000 Jews lived in Bukovina, which was 10,9% of the entire population.

8 Transylvania

Geographical and historical region belonging to Hungary until 1918-19, then ceded to Romania. Its area covers 103,000 sq.km between the Carpathian Mountains and the present-day Hungarian and Serbian borders. It became a Roman province in the 2nd century (AD) terminating the Dacian Kingdom. After the Roman withdrawal it was overrun, between the 3rd and 10th centuries, by the Goths, the Huns, the Gepidae, the Avars and the Slavs. Hungarian tribes first entered the region in the 5th century, but they did not fully control it until 1003, when King Stephen I placed it under jurisdiction of the Hungarian Crown. Later, in the 12th and 13th centuries, Germans, called Saxons (then and now), also arrived while Romanians, called Vlachs or Walachians, were there by that time too, although the exact date of their appearance is disputed. As a result of the Turkish conquest, Hungary was divided into 3 sections: West Hungary, under Habsburg rule, central Hungary, under Turkish rule, and semi-independent Transylvania (as a Principality), where Austrian and Turkish influences competed for supremacy for nearly two centuries. With the defeat of the Turkish Transylvania gradually came under Habsburg rule, and due to the Compromise of 1867 it became an integral part of Hungary again. In line with other huge territorial losses fixed in the Treaty of Trianon (1920), Transylvania was formally ceded to Romania by Hungary. For a short period during WWII it was returned to Hungary but was ceded to Romania once again after the war. Many of the Saxons of Transylvania fled to Germany before the arrival of the Soviet army, and more followed after the fall of the Communist government in 1989. In 1920, the population of Erdély was 5,200,000, of which 3 million were Romanian, 1,400,000 Hungarian (26%), 510,000 German and 180,000 Jewish. In 2002, however, the percentage of Hungarians was only 19.6% and the German and Jewish population decreased to several thousand. Despite the decrease of the Hungarian, German and Jewish element, Transylvania still preserves some of its multiethnic and multi-confessional tradition.

9 Gheorghiu-Dej, Gheorghe (1901-1965)

Leader of the Romanian Communist Party between 1952 and 1965. Originally an electrician and railway worker, he was imprisoned in 1933 and became the underground leader of all imprisoned communists. He was prime minister between 1952-55 and first secretary of the Communist Party between 1945-1953 and from 1955 until his death. In his later years, he led a policy that drifted away from the directive in Moscow, keeping the Stalinist system untouched by the Krushchevian reforms.

10 Radio Free Europe

Radio station launched in 1949 at the instigation of the US government with headquarters in West Germany. The radio broadcast uncensored news and features, produced by Central and Eastern European émigrés, from Munich to countries of the Soviet block. The radio station was jammed behind the Iron Curtain, team members were constantly harassed and several people were killed in terrorist attacks by the KGB. Radio Free Europe played a role in supporting dissident groups, inner resistance and will of freedom in the Eastern and Central European communist countries and thus it contributed to the downfall of the totalitarian regimes of the Soviet block. The headquarters of the radio have been in Prague since 1994.

11 Voice of America

International broadcasting service funded by the U.S. government through the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Voice of America has been broadcasting since 1942, initially to Europe in various European languages from the US on short wave. During the cold war it grew increasingly popular in Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe as an information source.

12 Dr

Groza, Petru (1884-1958): Romanian statesman. Member of the Great National Council of Transylvania (1918), parliamentary deputy (1919-1927), state minister (1921; 1926-1927), vice-president of the Council of Ministers (November 1944-February 1945). He was the president of the ‘Frontul Plugarilor’ [‘Ploughmen’s Front’] Organization (1933-1953), which activated under the guidance of the Romanian Communist Party. Under Soviet military pressure, King Michael I. consented to the appointment of Petru Groza as prime minister. On 6th March 1945, Groza formed a new cabinet, in which the key positions were held by Communists. Acknowledged and validated by Great Britain and the US (February 1946), the Groza cabinet took a series of measures, including the trial and execution of Marshal Ion Antonescu and his main lieutenants, the falsification of the results of the parliamentary elections in November 1946, the annihilation of the opposition and of the historical parties, the arrest and extermination of the leaders of these parties, the forcing of the abdication of King Michael I. etc. Between 1952 and 1958, he was the president of the Presidium of the Great National Assembly (an office equivalent to that of head of the State). At his death, national obsequies were held.

13 National Peasants’ Party

Political party created in 1926 by the fusion of the National Party of Transylvania and the Peasants' Party. It was in power, with some interruptions, from1928 and 1933. It was a moderately conservative and staunchly pro-Monarchy party. Its doctrine was essentially based on the enlightenment of peasantry, and on the reform of education in villages, where teachers were to become economic and social guides. Its purpose was to give the peasantry a class conscience. The National Peasants' Party governed Romania for a short period of time, between 1928-1931 and 1932-1933.

14 Ceausescu, Nicolae (1918-1989)

Communist head of Romania between 1965 and 1989. He followed a policy of nationalism and non-intervention into the internal affairs of other countries. The internal political, economic and social

situation was marked by the cult of his personality, as well as by terror, institutionalized by the Securitate, the Romanian political police. The Ceausescu regime was marked by disastrous economic schemes and became increasingly repressive and corrupt. There were frequent food shortages, lack of electricity and heating, which made everyday life unbearable. In December 1989 a popular uprising, joined by the army, led to the arrest and execution of both Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, who had been deputy Prime Minister since 1980.

15 Romanian Revolution of 1989

In December 1989, a revolt in Romania deposed the communist dictator Ceausescu. Anti-government violence started in Timisoara and spread to other cities. When army units joined the uprising, Ceausescu fled, but he was captured and executed on 25th December along with his wife. A provisional government was established, with Ion Iliescu, a former Communist Party official, as president. In the elections of May 1990 Iliescu won the presidency and his party, the Democratic National Salvation Front, obtained an overwhelming majority in the legislature.

16 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish committees of assistance, which were alarmed by the suffering of Jews during World War I. In late 1944, the Joint entered Europe's liberated areas and organized a massive relief operation. It provided food for Jewish survivors all over Europe, it supplied clothing, books and school supplies for children. It supported cultural amenities and brought religious supplies for the Jewish communities. The Joint also operated DP camps, in which it organized retraining programs to help people learn trades that would enable them to earn a living, while its cultural and religious activities helped re-establish Jewish life. The Joint was also closely involved in helping Jews to emigrate from Europe and from Muslim countries. The Joint was expelled from East Central Europe for decades during the Cold War and it has only come back to many of these countries after the fall of communism. Today the Joint provides social welfare programs for elderly Holocaust survivors and encourages Jewish renewal and communal development.