

# Elza Fulop

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Cluj Napoca

Romania

Interviewer: Eموke Major

Date of the interview: May 2004

*Mrs. Elza Fulop is a short, slim person. Her face keeps the record of many years that didn't go easy on her; at first sight, she seems a rough, grumpy individual.*

*However, when one starts talking to her, she turns out to be quite the opposite of that: she has a friendly and cheerful nature, and she possesses a faith in people that can be rarely seen these days, and an extraordinary will to live.*

*And these are things that cast a spell on the others - people always return to her place, and it is difficult to find a moment when she is all alone.*

*Her house is modest, but well arranged, capable of securing all the comforts a person needs, and the door is always open for guests.*

*Welcoming them begins every time with the ritual of preparing the coffee. When it is ready, it is served, and, in order for the delight to be complete, a few teaspoonfuls of ice cream can be added to the hot coffee. No wonder her place is always full!*



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## Family Background

Unfortunately, I never met my paternal grandparents. When I was born, they weren't alive anymore. But I know that they lived in Huedin until the end of their days and that they died at a rather early age.

My father, Moricz Fulop, came from a large family: with him included, there were three brothers and four sisters. They were all born in the town of Huedin. The boys, my father's brothers, lived in Oradea. The oldest, Ichak Fulop, owned a kosher sausage and salami factory.

He was married to a woman named Sara and had four children: Erzsi, Iren, Margit and Zoltan. The boy, Zoltan, was the only one who survived World War II, after which he emigrated to Israel; it is there that his three children live today – they all have their own families and have already become grandparents.

The other brother of my father's, Naci [Nathan] Fulop, owned a restaurant. I can't remember his wife's name, but I know they had a son who was married and worked as a clerk. The oldest sister, Regina Fulop, had two daughters – Lenke and Matild – and a son, Dezso. Lenke was married to Moricz Simon, who died before the deportations. The two of them had three children: Didus, Ocsi and Babu.

Another sister of my father's, Eszter Fulop, was married to Jakab Marton; they didn't have children. My mother and Eszter were first cousins. The other two sisters, Mari and Zali, were widows. Zali, the youngest of them, had been married twice, but both her husbands had died. All these people were killed during the Holocaust; all except Zoltan, Ichak's son.

My father, Moricz Fulop, was born in the town of Huedin, in Cluj County, in 1873. His parents had a fairly satisfying material situation, so they could afford to provide their offspring, especially the boys, a good education, both religious and intellectual.

My father, like all his brothers, went to religious studies at a rabbinic institute in Czechoslovakia, in the city of Bratislava, which was called Pozsony at the time. That institute actually equaled college – it was considered a form of higher education.

So we could say that my father was an intellectual who had graduated from college. Apart from the religious studies, this institute also taught worldly sciences. My father lived in Huedin until he married my mother. Then they moved to Aghiresu.

My maternal grandparents were landowners and lived in a village called Nadasu, in the Cluj County. My grandfather, however, whose name was Avram [Abraham] Mandel, had been born in Cuzdrioara, in the Cluj County. My grandfather was a learned man too: he had studied a lot, mostly religion, but he was also cultivated. He was a very active and modern person, although Nadasu was a small village and there were only three Jewish families living there.

Back in those days, there were many Jewish beggars who came and went. Most of them were from Maramures, a region where Jews were very religious. Of course, they got to our village too, for being a beggar makes you resourceful and gets you anywhere.

My grandfather was very religious and it's worth mentioning that he would keep those beggars for weeks, providing them with food and shelter. This way, he could have a religious service, as, with Jews, you need at least ten men [a so-called minyan] in order to hold such a service. This was done in the house – there was no temple, since the Jews were so few in the village, so they couldn't afford a temple, and there were not enough people for it.

My grandfather had enough room for those beggars, whom he offered shelter, food, plus money. He could afford it. He kept all the necessary objects of cult in his house. He had prayer books. With Jews, it's much easier than with Christians.

With Jews, a room and two candles, or even a single one, are all that's required in order to recite the prayers. Of course, there are specific prayers, like in the Christian faith: the morning prayer, the afternoon prayer, the evening prayer, the prayer for the holidays, the Friday evening prayer, the Sabbath prayer.

Jews, especially those who are very religious and observe the real customs and rituals, have little respect for women when it comes to religion. Not one, not ten, not one hundred women can replace one man at the religious service. This is why my grandfather sheltered those beggars. Because of that, he had become famous in the entire country, and the word was out among the beggars: 'Go there, for there they will give you everything you need.'

My grandfather was a hard-working, energetic and intelligent man. He had no tolerance for what he found inappropriate. We, the grandchildren, had to obey him. We had a lot of respect for him. He didn't allow us to do what wasn't right. Beside that, he had his principles, and we generally borrowed these principles: honor, honesty and especially respect for the elderly.

My grandmother, Sara Mandel, had been born somewhere in the vicinity of Bistrita - Lechinta, if I remember correctly. My grandfather was her second husband. All I know about her first was that he drowned trying to save somebody when the River Nadas flooded the village. It was after this incident that my grandmother married my grandfather. In fact, the estate had been inherited from the first husband.

Grandmother was an extraordinary woman; she was kind and intelligent. As she came from a region inhabited by Transylvanian 1 Germans, she had learned their language. Not only could she speak German, but she could also read and write, which constituted a very rare thing back in those days. As for my grandfather, he spoke his native tongue, Yiddish, and also Romanian, Hungarian and German. I owe most of my foreign language skills to them.

Every morning, my grandmother would pray for one hour using a large prayer book. She would sit on a chair and say the prayers that were supposed to be recited while standing. Everything she did, she did like a man.

My mother only had one sister, Roza, who was much older than she was, as Roza had been the first-born child, while my mother had been the last. All the other children died very young, so my mother only knew Aunt Roza. Out of eleven children, only the oldest and the youngest stayed alive.

My mother and Roza were only half-sisters actually, because the latter's father was Grandmother's first husband, not my grandfather. The age difference between the two sisters was of 12-13 years, which meant that, even when my mother was still a child, her sister was already married.

Roza's husband was named Abraham Goldstein. The two of them lived in Izvorul Crisului and had four sons: David, Moricz, Vilmos and Zsiga. David was the oldest. He was a notary in Izvorul Crisului, had a large, beautiful house and a carriage with two horses. His wife, Malvin, came from the Somes region.

Moricz owned a store in Izvorul Crisului and wasn't married. Vilmos and Zsiga left the country even before World War II – the former went to Cuba, the latter to some place in South America – and I never heard from them again. All the others were deported.

My mother, Maria Karolina Mandel, was born in Nadasu, in 1880. In the spirit of those times, she was raised to become honest, respectful, and not rude in any way. She inherited more from my grandfather, who was a rigid, determined and independent man.

At the age of 16, she was already an independent person herself. She knew what she wanted. She was pretty and rich, she didn't lack anything, and she had a lot of suitors. She possessed the two qualities that were required by the suitors: she was both rich and beautiful; and she was also intelligent. In short, she had those things that any man would like to see in his wife.

I found out most of the things I know about my mother from my grandmother. It was my grandmother who told me most of the things I know about my mother, as she had five children and was too busy to tell us stories and make her autobiography. Like my grandmother used to say, my mother had four suitors in one single day. But, despite all of them, she chose the fifth, my father.

The Jewish religion, like other religions, allows for one to marry a relative. My mother and father were second cousins. My maternal grandmother and my paternal grandfather were first cousins. They had shared the same last name, Fulop, until my grandmother got married.

Of course, my grandfather was not very happy about this marriage, although it was not forbidden by the religious law. He wouldn't have my mother marry a cousin. However, he didn't object to my oldest sister's marrying our cousin David, Aunt Roza's oldest son. Anyway, my grandparents had little choice, and, of course, they gave their blessing to this marriage.

Neither my grandparents, nor my mother ever regretted this. It's how they say: had she worn out a pair of iron boots wandering in search for the right man, she still wouldn't have found a better husband than my father.

They lived a beautiful life together, in peace and understanding. They had five children: Bella, the oldest, Erno, Iren, Margit and myself, Elza, the last one. Hardships left aside, theirs was a successful marriage. And they both worked for that to happen.

Since my father was a tradesman, he worked for David Sebestyen, Grandfather Mandel's brother; they traveled throughout the country, but finally settled in Aghiresu. This was a small industrial center: it had two plaster factories, a chalk factory, chalk was made of plaster, a power station that even supplied the city of Cluj, and coal mines. It is a large commune – they are now planning to turn it into a town – and the peasants are cultivated and civilized; they are not illiterate.

The Jewish community in Aghiresu was a significant one. There were about 30 Jewish families and most of them had children. There are none left at the present time. There used to be a synagogue, with all that was necessary.

We had a hakham, a president, a secretary and some members of the council. There was a religious service every morning, every evening, on Saturday and on Friday night. All the customs related to the Orthodox faith were observed in this small synagogue.

Rabbis were only to be found in cities. The closest one to us was Cluj and they would send us a rabbi, Glazner Achiba. He was roughly my father's age. He was a very beautiful man who resembled the Christ from the paintings and icons of the Christian churches.

His beard and moustache were so black and his clothes were so neat and tidy, that the Christians respected him because he looked like Jesus. This rabbi thought so highly of my father, that he would often summon him to Cluj for certain religious studies and the two of them would discuss the explanation of the teachings.

These learned Jews master the Talmud – the Jewish higher science – which explains the Torah – the Ten Commandments – and all the other teachings. For each there is a chapter where different explanations are written.

My father was the kind of man who took up butchery at almost the age of 50. Him, an intellectual! Jews only eat the front part of an animal. The rear part is forbidden from consumption. Why is that? My father once explained to me that there are veins and arteries with blood and the Jews have to remove them, as they are not permitted to eat blood.

They can't be removed from the rear, where there are more of them than in front. In order for the meat to be kosher, clean, ritually pure, these veins and arteries must be removed without damaging the meat. It requires a certain technique, and it is actually an occupation. Imagine that my father was able to learn it. He had two Hungarian associates who sold the meat from the rear part. And this is how we had a butcher's shop.

Then we had a stone quarry in Nadasu, where my mother was born. All that was left from the estate was this quarry; its stone was good in constructions and for tombstones. We had a company, as they're called today, with one employee who had been an apprentice and had learned to make tombstones.

He worked for Jews, for Romanians, for Hungarians. He was very industrious, his name was Sos, and he was a Hungarian from Huedin. The Hungarians there were called Tartars – they were said to be the successors of the Tartars who had invaded our country, which might have explained why most of them were so rough.

My father would carve the Hebrew inscriptions without wearing any glasses. We weren't rich, but my father earned money and did everything he could so that we wouldn't go short of anything.

Of my two parents, my mother was more energetic. She was kind, but did not tolerate any mistake. Of course, she punished the children the way a child's mistakes should be punished – to the extent of his deeds, for an educational purpose, so that the child may remember the punishment.

My mother had this principle: the time for a child to acquire some qualities is the time when he is still very young and can be influenced. They say that the first seven years of one's life, those years spent at home, are very important. And my mother cared about this.

## **Growing Up**

Like all children, we had our little sins ourselves. But, half willingly, half out of fear, we had to get used to our mother's ways, lest we should be punished. And I will always think of that with gratitude, for, without that sort of upbringing, I couldn't have survived the things I had to go through in life.

Let's take the table, for instance. There were seven of us plus the maid sitting at the table. Like any other child, or even adult, we were picky eaters – we didn't like this or that. My mother would not have this kind of behavior.

When we refused to eat something, she didn't scold us, but she took the food away from us: 'That's all right; you're not eating now, but you're going to eat tonight.' If we still refused to eat at dinner, she'd go, 'No problem, you'll eat in the morning.' This way, you can imagine that the next day we would finally eat, because we were too hungry not to. This is how we got used to the idea that, no matter what was laid on the table, we had to eat it.

There was only one exception: my sister, Iren, who was into this negative habit of not eating beef. My mother went to see our family doctor about this, we had a family doctor, and he told her not to force Iren to eat beef, because that was bad for her health.

The only thing he allowed her to eat from a veal or beef soup was the bone marrow. So she had been under pressure for a while, it hadn't worked, and it wasn't her fault. Of course, the rest of us envied her because rules didn't apply to her. And she was very kind, or, in fact, very clever: she gave everyone of us a piece of the marrow, so that we wouldn't be angry with her.

Thanks to these habits, I was able to eat anything when the rationing came and we were entitled to 100 grams of bread per day, not to mention the lack of other foods. There were robust people, strong men who died of starvation because they couldn't eat that compulsory food. I, for one, could, and I can say that I owe my survival to this.

This sort of upbringing was based on a healthy principle, and I can say that I grew up a healthy person. I didn't have children of my own, but I did raise children, and I applied this method myself. The result was that they were always grateful when they grew up.

As we were four sisters at home, clothes were passed from one to another. Four years separated me from my oldest sister. I was the youngest, so I always came last. And I kept praying to God to grow up so that my sisters' things wouldn't fit me anymore and I could have some clothes of my own.

That, I did, but not as many as my oldest sister, of course. The worst part was that my sisters were very pedantic and kept their clothes in a very good state, so it was considered a shame to spend money on new ones. We had to save money.

I must admit that we had a certain degree of freedom. My mother never prevented us from going to enjoy ourselves. And she didn't accompany us all the time either. However, my brother, who was about 12 years older than I was, had to come with me.

My mother trusted us – these were her exact words: 'I trust you...' But it goes without saying that, before leaving us in charge of our lives, she gave us a lecture, so that we would know what to do.

Each sister of mine got this lecture, and I was no exception.

What's more, my mother was particularly thorough about it, given that I was the youngest of them all. It went like this: 'I trust you because you're an intelligent girl, and I'm telling you never to trust a boy, for boys tend to be liars when girls are involved. Just remember this: be careful not to put yourself in unpleasant situations, and you'll keep yourself [pure].'

Of course, back then, times were different and manners were different from what they are now. And I can honestly say that, although I was brave and friendly, and most of my friends were boys, I never forgot my mother's advice.

Thanks to what she taught me, I knew how to behave with boys and how to keep them at a safe distance. And I'm sure that few mothers could boast themselves with daughters who were as good-mannered and confident as we were. From this point of view, I can only praise my mother and her principles, and I assure you that I keep her memory alive even today.

We were a family that stuck together. As children, we did have our shortcomings, like any other children: sometimes we argued or fought. But there was always this sense of integrity, of togetherness, of love. We may have criticized one another, or fought one another, but, every time one of us was in danger, we would turn into beasts, like they say and we would defend one another.

In short, we were a model family, and we were respected not only by our relatives, but also by our neighbors, and - I dare say - by the entire village. We set an example by the way in which we had been raised.

My mother made sure we didn't go soft. She used to say: 'If you're lucky to end up living a life of plenty - and luck is something a mother cannot give her children - you will have servants, so you should know how to run them. If you should spend your life in poverty - and this is something I cannot guarantee against - then you must be prepared, so that you won't find things too difficult and will be able to cope with hardships.' This is why she had us do any kind of work.

Having a maid didn't make any difference, as we had to do everything that she did: 'The maid is no excuse for you to do nothing. The maid is just an aid to help me handle such a large family. And I consider her a member of this family.' This is how my mother always treated maids, like they were part of the family. I can say that most of them stayed with us until the time they got married.

We had one named Nastasia, who came from a neighboring village, my mother's native village, Nadasu. She spoke Hungarian too, because she had worked in a nearby village that was entirely inhabited by Hungarians. When she got married, I was about six years old.

I cried for one or two days, begging her not to get married. I was so naive, like any child. Until the day she died, she kept calling me 'my girl.' She would come to me after I was left alone in the world, bringing me all sorts of things, and we would cry together. This is how close she felt to me.

Last time I saw my mother was when we stood next to the freight cars. I respected her back then, and I will respect her and love her for as long as I live.

It would take me more than one lifetime to say enough about each of my sisters and my brother. I will try to render their most important qualities. My oldest sister, Bella, was born in Cluj, in 1900. She was kind-hearted, always ready to help those in need. We called her Belluci.

She went to high school in Cluj, where she lived with an aunt from my mother's branch of the family. People said Uncle David Sebestyen, my grandfather's brother, was the richest man in Cluj. It is in his house that my sister lived while she went to high school in Cluj. Since Bella was the oldest of the sisters and I was the youngest, I could say that most of my punishments were inflicted by her.

After graduating from high school, she moved to Dej. Before the war, her husband owned a hat factory; Bella ran the branch in Dej and her husband ran the one in Cluj. She was the only one who returned after the Holocaust. She was deported and went through terrible hardships. Poor her, she had kept her good humor, in a way that set an example for me, but her health had deteriorated in the camp.

We were deprived of everything during the Holocaust – houses, possessions. All we were left with were the things we were wearing. My sister had some friends of hers – who were Christians – store some of her things. They were very honest and kept those things for her until she returned, so we did have some basic items.

Since I was employed, I received a salary, which constituted a guarantee, an insurance, so I could afford a studio. In 1945, I got married, but it's not worth speaking about this: we divorced shortly after. In her turn, my sister re-married, but her second try wasn't luckier than the first: she divorced again. So, the two of us stayed together. I didn't let her work anymore – I thought it was the right thing to do considering what she had gone through.

Between 1944 and 1963, we encountered serious difficulties, economical and of other nature, but we never regretted the fact that we supported each other. In fact, I wish those times came back, but, unfortunately, this is impossible; and I got used to this idea. She was like a second mother to me – maybe a better one.

This is what she always said: you are my child. I don't think a real mother would have made as many sacrifices as she did for me. For instance, she would bring me food to the hospital every day. She died in 1963, poor her. She suffered from an incurable disease.

My brother, Erno, was born in Cheia, in 1902. He was a handsome boy. He went to school in Oradea, where he lived with one of my father's brothers. After graduating, he returned home and worked as a clerk. There was this doctor, Ede Schnabel, who was in charge of the miners; my brother helped him with administrative work.

The doctor lived in Cluj, but had been assigned to work at the mines in Aghiresu. He was a good friend of my brother's and he even ate at our place. My mother was a famous cook; she wasn't just good – she was famous in the entire region. So the doctor said that, if she didn't mind, he would very much like to eat with us. My mother said that where there is room for seven, there is also room for eight. So the doctor was like a new family member.



Erno was a gifted boy. He sang, he was esteemed, he looked good, he was the center of attention wherever he went, and he was single. He was a good man, and I remember he supported me when I was a child. But I did things for him too; when I grew up, at the age of 14-15, I began to iron his shirts. Back then, shirts were not made from synthetic fiber, but from poplin, which was a very sensitive fabric. For each shirt I would get 5 lei. That was a lot of money.

Then Erno married a widow from Dej who owned a store. She was a very nice woman and loved my brother a lot. As he was hard-working and intelligent, his wife wanted him to take over the store. He did such a good job running it, that the income doubled.

During the deportations, he was sent to forced labor in Germany. There he met a brother-in-law - his wife's sister's husband. The man was much more weakened than him. One day, the detachment had to go to work in another place, but this man couldn't walk. So my brother tried to carry him.

He didn't abandon him; this is how things went in my family - we liked to help one another. As a result, they were both shot to death. The sick did not receive any medical treatment; if they couldn't walk, they were simply shot. My brother was killed too, because he was carrying a sick man in his arms.

I learned about this from his fellow-inmates who made it back. He died because he wanted to save another man. He died like a hero, only an unknown hero. And there were many others like him, who saved lives.

There was a colonel in Baia Mare named Reviczky. He was a short man with a great soul who treated the members of his forced labor detachment like human beings. He wasn't even promoted afterwards. Most of those who returned moved to Israel, and they took this colonel there, they saved him and they made him rich.

My sister, Iren, was born in Baia Mare, in 1904. She was very intelligent. Like every one of us, she went to high school too, but she had something extra: she was a self-taught girl, she read all the time, she had an amazing general culture, and she spoke of things that were unknown even to college graduates.

And she owed all this exclusively to the books she read and to her ambition to know more. Had she lived in another environment, or had she had the material resources, she would have become at least a researcher, I think. She had a special personality. She resembled our mother, as she was determined and knew what she was doing. I respected her and her opinion weighed the most because of that remarkable inborn intelligence.

Poor her, she was unlucky in life: she married the wrong man. This is how fate had its revenge; my sister couldn't live with a man who was far below her level. They simply didn't manage to adjust to each other.

There was no room for argument, for she was very intelligent and told him, 'Look, the two of us can't get along, we don't think alike, so why torture ourselves?' He was rich and had everything he wanted, but he lacked the proper degree of intelligence. So they divorced. Then my sister moved to Cluj, where she lived with our sister, Margit. She got a job and she provided for herself.

Margit was born in Aghiresu, in 1908. She was a loving person and she was the frailest of us all, always ready to catch a disease. After she got married, she had a little baby boy and the whole family was watching over her. She married an employee from a store in Aghiresu, Jozsef Szinetar.

He was a hard-working and handsome man. He was sent to forced labor in Germany, but not to the same place where my brother was, and he died there. He sent us a standardized postcard: 'I'm well, I'm in Walsee', he had encrypted the name of the place. This is probably all they allowed them to write.

This young, robust boy was the same age as my oldest sister. He had been born on 31st December 1899, and she had been born on 2nd January 1900. We always made fun of that: they had been born only two days apart from each other, but in different years.

After she gave birth to her son, Margit became the strongest in our family. Her hands were very skilled. She learned the craft of tailoring from a very good lady tailor who lived in our commune. She was so good that, although no one had taught her – her 'teacher' was a women's tailor – she was able to make men's shirts and pants, underwear and overcoats.

My oldest sister took her to Dej, so that she may improve her skills with the best tailor in town. She spent a few months there and learned what she had to learn. Our family had a friend here in Cluj, a luxury tailor, and she also taught my sister a few things. Margit was the one who did all the sewing and tailoring our family needed.

Her little boy, Tibor, was the only nephew my sisters and brother had. You can imagine how much love he got from all of us! He wasn't sure whom he loved most; was it his aunts, his mother, his father or his grandparents? However, his favorite was my father – at least this is what Tibor claimed.

At the age of 13, boys become members of the community. In Israel, girls celebrate this event too. The custom requires the child to hold a speech and say farewell to his childhood. So Tibor thanked his parents for raising him and, when he got to my father – even now, remembering this makes me cry – the poor child was overwhelmed with emotion: 'As for you, Grandpa – we all used informal ways of addressing in our family – I don't know how to say good-bye to you...' And the child was unable to go on; he hugged his grandfather and they were both crying, and the whole audience was crying, there were many people present, because my mother had organized a feast.

This was Tibor. He didn't try to flatter people; he just expressed his feelings as they were. He would come to us, kiss us, give us a hug, saying, 'Oh, I love you so much!', and he made sure everyone got an equal share of his love.

The boy was still in Aghiresu even when we were no longer there. He stayed with his grandparents and he went to elementary school there. We lived in the countryside, so we had hens, chickens, geese, dogs and the likes of them.

Tibor would stand in the courtyard and the chickens, geese and ducks would sit on his shoulder and on his head. He knew the names of every calf or cow our neighbors had, and he behaved no differently from those people when in their presence. The peasants loved him. If he was in the street and saw an elderly man, he would take his hand and help him get to the other side. He was

an extraordinary child!

When he got older, his parents took him to Cluj. He was 15 when they deported him. He got to a place where he met a schoolmate of his from Aghiresu, who's still alive today, in Israel, and a neighbor, who's now in Israel too. When the order was given to exterminate the children, they took them to the gas chambers. This boy who survived hid in a furnace and got away. All the others died.

I, Elza Fulop, was born in Aghiresu, in 1922. I was always the best in my class at school. I went to elementary school in Aghiresu. Then I attended the junior high school in Huedin for four years. The school was for boys, and there wasn't another one in town at the time, so I only went there for my exams. Finally, I went to high school in Cluj for four years.

After a while, towards the end of the 1920s, my grandfather decided to sell his estate and move to our village. Since Aunt Roza lived in Izvorul Crisului, and we lived in Aghiresu, my grandfather reached the conclusion that it was better for my grandmother and him to spend their old days next to their children and grandchildren. They didn't live in our house, but they lived nearby.

My parents decided that I should spend most of my time living with my grandparents, since they lived alone and I was the youngest of the children. I was to go to school from there. At home, I still had sisters and one brother. Despite my being only a child, I agreed, because I was very fond of my grandmother.

I respected her and loved her, and today I can say that, during my entire life, I never loved anyone as much as I loved my grandmother. She was cultivated and wise, and had a number of qualities that I was never to find in anyone else.

For instance, with her, it was as if I didn't have my own name - never did she call me by my name. Instead, she would say 'my little soul' or 'my dear soul.' But then again, I think anyone would have felt the same way, had they been in my shoes. Most of everything I know when it comes to wisdom, proverbs, household tips and cooking, I learned from my grandmother.

She taught me to how cook in the traditional way. Back then, the Jewish families, especially the older ones, mainly cooked traditional dishes. The Jewish law forbids eating pork. Dairy products must be separated from meat products. For instance, one cannot eat a dish prepared using cream and cheese and a dish containing meat from the same plate; once you put cheese in a plate, you can no longer put meat in it.

Generally speaking, the Jewish religion is very restrictive. But my opinion is that all these laws concerning food are actually based on hygiene. Back in the old days, people were primitive. The hot weather of the lands where Jews lived called for drastic hygiene measures - and what they needed was more bigotry and less explaining.

I believe that the learned used the Jewish faith in order to persuade the population to apply the rules of hygiene. I mean, think about it: they couldn't store pork, because they didn't have refrigerators. This is my explanation, and I remember how my father used to explain everything to us in the same way.

Take, for instance, the Easter holiday, Pesach, which celebrates the exodus from Egypt. In two evenings, the dinner ceremony lasts several hours and explanations are given as to why we eat bitter herbs and certain foods: in memory of the sufferings of this people, who, as far as I can see, has always suffered throughout history.

In my opinion, which is the opinion of a modern person who understands religion nonetheless, the meaning of the expression 'the chosen people' is that Jews were chosen by God to suffer more than any other people.

This people went through so many pains and miracles, that I doubt there is another people who has suffered quite as much as the Jews in the whole world. Yet, the Jews survived; all the terrors and sufferings were not enough to annihilate them. So many have tried so often to decimate them, to destroy them, to wipe them off the face of the Earth. But none succeeded, and the Jews are still standing.

This is why I think they were chosen – they were chosen to suffer. They couldn't do more. Think of the Phoenicians, the Tartars and of many other nations or ethnic groups that no longer exist today. Where is Babylon, where are all those biblical places? They are gone. All we know about them is that they lived once.

I went to Israel, to America, and to other places, and I am interested in these things. I couldn't think of any other people that was as humiliated and persecuted as the Jews were. In my life, I knew more suffering than happiness. Not to mention the others, for I may have suffered less than my parents and my kin. Take this as a personal opinion. This is the way I see things with my own eyes.

I've spoken about my grandmother and I think it was her who inspired me. I'm not sure I inherited all her wisdom, but I know that part of this wisdom remained within me. I got it from her – I mean, she planted this wisdom into my soul. I feel so excited when I speak about my grandmother! I can see her right before me – she was so tender and so patient...

Even before I could reach the kitchen table standing on my own feet, I had to stand on a chair, as I wasn't tall enough yet; she taught me how to make a cake, how to knead the dough with my own little hands. She had a lot of patience.

And this is something that makes me think she was very wise – having patience with a seven- to nine-year-old, explaining everything to me like I was ten or twelve is definitely a sign of wisdom! By the age of seven or eight, I already knew the things a ten- to twelve-year-old knows.

Since then, not a day went by that didn't remind me of her, even through the smallest things. I felt I was being watched upon, especially by my grandmother. My grandfather hadn't enough time and, besides, he was a man and had other things to deal with – family matters and a man's businesses. But my grandmother had more time to spare.

Let me give you just an example of her love that will let you figure out the rest. Every week, my grandmother had some poultry slaughtered. Of course, she didn't do the slaughtering herself, but she assigned the hakham to do it, he was called shochet; this man was the only one who was allowed to slaughter animals. He had gone through special training to learn how to do that, and this

was his job in a community.

Jews can't eat anything: game is forbidden, most wild birds are forbidden, except for the pigeon, and rabbits are forbidden, domestic and wild alike. They can eat hens, chickens, geese, ducks, pigeons, veal and beef. The rest is forbidden.

So my grandmother had a chicken slaughtered every week. How did she know it was kosher? Jewish foods are referred to as kosher, which means clean of any impurity. She would take the gullet out of the throat and, if it had the slightest impurity, the poultry was no good. It wasn't kosher anymore.

My mother and my grandmother always gave it to our neighbors in exchange for a live bird, or even for free, if the neighbors were poor. I remember one of them, Ana, who couldn't wait for something to turn out not to be kosher. It was a real bargain to change a skinny goose for a stuffed one. This is how strict my grandmother and my parents were when it came to tradition.

Then, after my grandmother had done all the preparations, she would take the chicken's liver and fry it for me in a little pan. She would add onion and pepper and cooked this as if it was a steak. This liver was my lunch when I came back from school. She knew how much I loved liver. And she kept it just for me. That alone was my Friday meal: liver and fresh bread, they would bake bread every week.

In the house where I grew up, the habit was to have a rather frugal lunch on Friday, usually only appetizers. Sometimes I got lucky, and the liver was larger than usual. I used to pray to God to make that liver as large and tasty as possible. My grandmother was so fond of me that no one was allowed to touch that liver - not even herself or my grandfather.

My poor grandparents, they probably have no peace in the grave, because I mention them too often. Jews are forbidden to visit the graves of their dead on Saturday - they say it's a holiday and the dead must be allowed to rest.

Both my grandparents were in good health and they lived to celebrate their golden wedding. My grandmother was 92 when she died, in 1935. My grandfather died one week ahead of her. They are buried next to each other - Jews are forbidden to bury more than one person in a grave. Their resting place is in Aghiresu.

My grandmother died in my hands - this is how it happened. But, mind you, I wasn't afraid. It was then that I saw a dead person for the first time. She remained conscious till the last second. In her last moment, she told me, 'My dear little soul, I'm dying...' And she passed away that instant.

Like I said, that was the first dead I had ever seen in my life, but I wasn't afraid. Maybe this is what made me choose my profession, as it seemed I was inclined to looking after the sick. I noticed how happy a sick man is when there is someone next to him to give him love. It's something that can't be put into words and can be fully understood only by one who has experienced it.

Let's change the subject now. My father was fond of fishing and all the Jews in our village ate fish on Friday evening thanks to him. My brother had gone to school, to Oradea, so I had to accompany my father when he went fishing, since I was the youngest child.

I used to take fish for Friday evening to every Jewish family. I was very happy because, this way, I had my own income! Of course, everyone gave me something: a coin, or a cake, or some candy. So I would get rich on Friday evening

## **Judaism**

Friday was the day for cleaning and that was the rule. Even the laziest wives would clean their house for Saturday. All the family bathed and put on clean clothes and underwear before the Sabbath. Everybody did that, regardless of their material situation – those who didn't have a tub would use a wash basin. No one could sit at the Friday night table unless they were clean and had changed their clothes. This was the law, and it was more compelling than a court decision.

For Jews, Friday night after sunset is the most religious moment of the week. Women light candles and men go to the synagogue. My father would bless us all when he left for the synagogue and when he returned. And he said good-bye to our mother. He would put the handkerchief on our heads and say a prayer. Then he would kiss us and leave. These were great traditions and, even if one doesn't observe them any longer, one can never forget them.

The appetizer on Friday night was fish. It was cooked with vegetables, just like the meat jelly, and spices. After the fish, my father would have a strong drink – when we grew up, we were allowed to do that too – then he would say the Friday evening prayer.

After that, we had chicken soup, boiled meat with a sort of farfel, it was called farfelakh, made of roasted pastries. For desert, we had either cakes or compote. My father and grandfather had a glass of wine or of spritzer. We, the children, drank what was allowed: straight soda or soda with syrup. This is what a religious Jew's ritual Friday dinner generally comprised.

On Friday night, after the holiday had started, even tearing a piece of paper was forbidden. It was supposed to be a real resting day, like Sunday is for Christians. For instance, in the morning, when you wake up, you can't make more than three steps without washing your hands. You can't put anything in your mouth until you have brushed your teeth.

This is why I said religion is based on hygiene. I figured this out knowing what I know from my job. You may not have a glass of water until you have washed your mouth. You may not touch the bread until you have washed your hands. This washing had its own ritual: you grabbed a jug and poured water three times on each hand, and then you wiped them.

At a Jewish funeral too, there is a bucket of water with glasses or cups that people use to wash their hands as they leave. I think this religious ritual was intended to make people learn the rules of hygiene. And I could give you many other examples.

We don't eat blood – it's forbidden. The meat is kept in water for half an hour, and then in salt for an hour. After that, it is washed using three or four loads of water. Every piece of meat must be washed nine times once it's removed from the salt.

Such rituals can only make you wonder. For instance, if something melts on the stove, it must be washed away. If it's milk, one has to wash the stove thoroughly before putting other foods there – this is the religious law. Now tell me, doesn't this make you wonder? It's all about hygiene.

On Saturday, Jews eat a special dish called chulent. It is put inside the oven in a heatproof pot on Friday night, before the holiday starts. Jews who lived in villages, where there weren't any bakers, used to prepare it at home; those who lived in towns took the pot to the baker's. It contains a mixture of beans - white or striped - barley and goose meat or veal or beef cooked with goose fat. Nowadays, they use oil; but back then, oil was only used for certain foods, such as fried dough. For the rest, they used goose fat.

My mother, for instance, would stuff 40-50 geese with food, and she used their fat, like Christians do. The goose's back and thighs were smoked and they tasted more delicious than the best bacon. I know the difference now, because I eat anything these days.

Then, there was a sort of cake that was prepared in a small pot. It contained the goose's neck, an egg or two - depending on the size of the family - corn flower, sugar and pepper, and it was put in the chulent pot. This cake was called kugel.

A co-worker of mine who's a doctor remembers eating such a cake at a Jewish family in his childhood. So the cake is put amidst the beans, then the pot is filled with water and is inserted in the already heated oven. The door is closed hermetically. The pot is removed the next day.

The chulent can end up dry or juicy - you never know. But in both cases, it can be a success. This is why they say 'as successful as chulent.' This is an interesting Jewish tradition. Many Christians know how to cook it and they enjoy it.

Aghiresu was what they called a 'streng' kosher village. 'Streng' means strict, by the book. This is how they say in German, 'streng kosher.' This was a line that couldn't be crossed. Apart from that, we were allowed to go to balls, dance, and do all the things normal people do. But the laws related to food, drinks, prayers and the likes had to be obeyed literally. This is how things went. On Saturday, we weren't even allowed to tear a piece of paper or to light the fire.

As a child, I was a bit... crazy. I'm not saying that I didn't behave myself, but I was very frisky, more than a boy. I liked to climb trees and I only enjoyed playing with the peasants' boys. I didn't like girls - I thought they were too chicken.

Actually, I was more like a boy. My parents had expected their sixth child to be a boy, and I disappointed them by being born a girl. But I behaved like a boy, and that should have been some compensation for them... And, by God, I used to do the wildest things!

We had a large orchard. I loved apples and plums that were still green. But I wasn't allowed to pick them, and I didn't want to break the rules, as I was a religious child. However, I wanted that fruit so much! So guess what I did! I came up with a trick. I climbed the tree with no fear - I exercise even today - and with a clear conscience, for no one had specifically forbidden me to do that.

Then I reached for the branches, pulled them close to me - they bent easily - and grabbed the fruit with my mouth. So, technically, I didn't pick the fruit - I just ate it. And that was no sin, because we were allowed to eat on Saturday. This was my first innovation, as far as I remember. I played with religion too.

On Saturday night, when the day was almost over – this was a symbolic moment – my father used a special glass to pray, the same that he used on Friday evening too. It was a silver glass that we, the children, had bought him for his silver wedding. It had a monogram, an inscription, and it was gilded on the inside.

A special, plaited candle was used on Saturday night, which was called Havdalah in Hebrew. It was held by the youngest member of the family or by a boy – if there was any. When my brother was away, I was the one who held it. Holding the glass of wine in his hand and with all of us gathered around him, my father said the prayer that marked the end of the holiday.

We, the Jews, have a different prayer for bread, for water and for many other things. My sisters, my brother and I all knew these prayers. So everyone gathered around the candle and said the prayer which sounded like a blessing: from that moment on, we were once again allowed to do what had been forbidden, because the holiday was over. That's a very interesting symbol.

I also have a Christian religious culture, as I liked finding out things about other religions than my own. It was my father who taught us Judaism. I said taught, because we never did anything automatically. We didn't speak Hebrew – it was a very difficult language – but my father translated it for us.

Before making us do something, he would explain it to us. He was so wise that he wouldn't have us grow up doing things automatically, like cattle. He thought we should know why we were doing this or that. This is how I learned all these things.

My father wasn't a bigot. The Jewish faith has its own fanatics, just like the Christian one – people who are all about religion, miracles, fasting and the likes. My father was a cultivated man and he was religious in the sense that he observed the traditions. But one could discuss literature and sciences with him. He read.

We had a newspaper in our house every day. We got the newspapers and magazines of the time. There was a Hungarian magazine called Tolnai Világlap which had articles about artists and the cultural life. What I'm trying to say is that we were also connected to the cultural, international life – we weren't confined to the Jewish traditions only.

We learned to sing. Of all the things that could be done in the countryside, we didn't miss one. My father knew how to draw the line between the social life and the religious life. We acquired a general culture. My parents wanted us to learn how to behave in society.

For instance, we had to use a knife and a fork at table. Every child had his own cup, plate and covers. We weren't allowed to drink from someone else's cup. This is general culture, don't you agree? Peasants just place a jug or a cup and they all drink water from it. And this isn't right: out of five children, one may suffer, God forbid, from tuberculosis or some other contagious disease, and they may all get sick.

My life unfolded like any youngster's life: with its ups and downs; I had my share of love and of hardships. I got engaged in 1939. He was such a handsome lad, that any girl of my age would have fallen for him. I didn't have enough experience to seek his inner qualities; I was blinded by the exterior.



So he was handsome, and I was inexperienced, and I was very much in love with him. But I was in for a big disappointment, so I had to break the engagement. What I learned from that was never to say what you shouldn't say; it's better to keep your mouth shut, and, whatever you do, you mustn't lie.

My sisters and brother got married, so I remained the only one who didn't have a spouse. I stayed home for a while, but I got tired of a housewife's life and decided to build a future for myself. My mother didn't approve of my going to work for at a hospital. She was afraid I would become immoral. Back then, rumor had it all the nurses were hooked up with the doctors, so they were safe in case something unwanted happened... It's no wonder my mother was afraid.

But I gained a different reputation. Doctors would say to one another: 'The little one will never fall for that.' I was a savage creature, because, you know, I had been raised like that. It's not that I didn't understand those things. I didn't condemn anybody, but I stuck to what I had learned: a girl is allowed to give in to a man only if they get married. I repeat, this is how I was raised.

Nowadays, the civilized word for concubines is 'friends.' Back then, 'friend' had its real meaning for us. I had so many male friends that I lost count! They loved me so much! Perhaps some of them loved me not just as a friend, but I knew how to handle them. I never offended them and I never lost their friendship - but I knew where to draw the line.

Should I have met the right boy while I was still living at home, I may have slipped into sin. But no one I met tried to lure me into that direction, although I was in love, like any other girl. I never got to that level - my upbringing held me back. I cared so much about my parents and their righteousness that I didn't want to upset them like that.

Apart from this, I did everything a Christian or a modern person did - dancing at balls, letting boys put their arms around my waist as we walked etc. In fact, let me put it in more civilized terms: I simply observed the dogma requiring that a girl keep herself pure until she gets married.

In 1940, I went to Cluj. For a while, my mother was unaware that I had got a job there. My sisters supported me. The oldest one told me she would provide me with board and lodging. Next to the Jewish Hospital, where I worked, there was a school for nurses that was attended by girls from respectable families. I went there for two years.

After that, I attended various trainings and schools. I studied psychology and resuscitation techniques; I worked in several medical specializations, including surgery. I attended the course for chief medical assistants and reached the highest level of my career. You see, we too had a hierarchy: paramedic, nurse, medical assistant, and chief medical assistant. And I went through all these stages.

The name of the hospital was the 'Jewish Public Hospital David Sebestyen & Wife.' It had been founded by my grandfather's brother, who was a very wealthy man. The doctors were all Jewish, but the supporting staff - the cook, the cleaning ladies - was Christian.

So were some of the paramedics too. Jewish doctors were not allowed to work in State clinics, so they came to our hospital. Similarly, Jewish medical students came here for their internships, as the other hospitals turned them down. As far as the patients were concerned, the hospital made no

discrimination – Christians were admitted too.

The manager was my uncle's niece's husband, which made me the cousin of the manager's wife. But I kept this a secret, because I wanted to succeed thanks to my skills, not to my family ties. I had my pride. Many years later, when I finally did tell the manager this secret, he looked surprised as to why I hadn't turned this to my advantage. Well, I didn't have to. I worked very hard to meet the job requirements, I studied a lot, and I succeeded. I was regarded as one of the best employees.

What made me choose this career was my feeling attached to the sick people. The results were obvious. The sick would become very attached to me. A psychological bond would develop between us and, in most cases, I also did psychotherapy. This is how I did my job. I felt very close to it, and I didn't do it out of obligation, but willingly.

I saw my occupation as a pleasure, not a burden. We didn't work eight hours per day, but twelve. We had to work twelve hours out of 24 and we only had half a day off every week. But I didn't find it too difficult, because the hospital had become my second home.

## Early Persecution

I worked there from 1940 until 1944. Meanwhile, the racial persecutions began; certain laws [see anti-Jewish laws in Hungary] [2](#) had already been passed by the beginning of the year 1944. The Jews were being encircled. They lost some of their freedoms and started to be separated by laws from the rest of the population.

We were soon referred to as Jews, not Hungarian citizens – this happened during the occupation of Northern Transylvania [3](#). We were forced to wear a yellow star [4](#) that had to distinguish us from the majority population. We, those from the hospital, had to wear the white gown even in the street. It had a big [red] cross on it, and a yellow star, so that people would recognize us and there would be no chance for us to escape. The entire Jewish population was forced to wear the star.

But this, and other petty or serious insults, was only the beginning. They considered us outcasts that the country could well do without. Words cannot truly express how humiliated we actually felt. It wasn't degrading only for the Jews, but for the entire human race... They simply didn't consider us human beings anymore.

I couldn't say this applied to the whole population. There were indeed some honest and fair people who were revolted by the attitude of the government. And I can give clear examples. We used to have a Hungarian neighbor back home who was known to be rather chauvinistic.

This man came from Aghiresu, looked for me at the hospital, let me know he had kept some of my parents' domestic items, and assured me they would be safely stored with him. Back then, this incident gave me the courage to believe there were still human beings in the world.

In the old village, my parents were generally very popular. When the Legionary movement began [5](#), regional support movements were organized in our area too, even before 1940. The very leader of the local movement said he would evict all the Jews of the village and kill them, all except my father, who had always been humane and honest. I had to mention this because I wanted to

emphasize who my parents and my entire family were. And in case you wonder why my voice shivers, well, you know, it doesn't feel good to remember these things.

Of course, what came afterwards cannot be compared to the Legionary movement. The Legionaries didn't have the guts to resort to really dangerous deeds. But they were the beginning of the sufferings of an innocent people. I'm not saying there were no sinners among the Jews.

Any people is made up of several kinds of men: good, evil, sinful and so on and so forth. But Jews were always used as a weapon against one's enemy. They were always at the middle – the guiltiest of all peoples. This is why many innocent people have suffered and will suffer, if you look at things as a whole.

## **Occupation**

I never liked this point of view. For instance, I met a German soldier who knew I was Jewish. He came to the hospital courtyard with the other troops, when the invasion began and the Germans arrived. This German soldier would accompany me to my sister's place at night, in order to protect me...

In May they began to deport us to the ghetto, which was on Chintaului Street, in a former bricks factory. They sent there all the Jews who were to be taken out of the country. Of course, after the persecutions began and they drove the Jews out of their homes and deported them, they sealed all the Jewish houses. The Jewish possessions that could be rescued were brought to the hospital's synagogue. Many things were gathered there.

Since we're at it, I would like to mention that, after the liberation, I found there a kilim table cloth that had been embroidered by my sister. After the liberation, we didn't have anything.

Those who returned to their devastated homes were allowed to choose a number of necessities from among the things stored in the synagogue. It was then that I discovered that table cloth made by the hand of my sister, Bella. I cannot put into words the way I felt when I discovered that table cloth. These are emotions that simply cannot be expressed...

Difficult times would follow for us. We had people who were seriously ill. For instance, my first cousin, Zoltan Fulop, got sick before the deportation and I had to hospitalize him. He had two children back then, and his wife was in her eighth month of pregnancy. He suffered from melena – a perforated ulcer, to be more precise. This is how he escaped the deportation. We had many sick people in the hospital that couldn't be transported. They were our salvation.

After the Fascist regime came to power, all the people we knew were deported. So we were waiting, all prepared and packed up, for our turn to come. According to the plan, the Jewish employees of the hospital were the last to be deported. But they transferred some of us to the former epidemic hospital, whose patients could not be transported.

They had us work without any payment, with a ration of 100 grams of bread per day. It was forced labor, but our situation was a lot better than the one of those who had been forced inside freight cars together with some other 50-60 souls, with children and sick people that could be transported. We went on waiting for the day of our deportation to come too.

In the years of the Hungarian occupation, our hospital was taken over by the Hungarian Railways Company [MAV], but some of us still remained to work there. The new manager, who's not among the living anymore, poor man, was a very decent and simple man.

As far as I know, he didn't have any family. Most of us had already been transferred, but the administration personnel had stayed behind to help this manager, who was so humane that he ordered that the Jewish employees be treated just like any other employee.

Unfortunately, the rest of us, at the epidemic hospital, belonged to no one. Whenever an inspection came, no one bothered to ask us anything. Life wasn't easy, but, compared to what others went through, I can say that we were somewhat spared.

The Hungarian law enforcement had a police doctor named Konczwald. He was a special man. All of us who had been transferred were under his command. There were three Jewish doctors among us; they were elderly men – the other Jewish doctors had been sent to forced labor. This police doctor was so humane, that someone quite like him would be hard to find even today.

What happened to us was a miracle. The few of us – about twenty people – who had been left behind [of the hospital's staff] escaped deportation solely thanks to this doctor, who couldn't stand the inhumanity of what was going on. He had to watch us and deliver us to the authorities in charge of deporting the Jews to the ghetto when our turn came. Well, this doctor from the Hungarian police, who was supposed to have no mercy and to make our days a living hell, was the one who saved us.

He submitted a report to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, stating that there were patients who couldn't be transported and that the staff of the hospital, the Hungarian, Christian staff, was outnumbered and couldn't cope with the situation.

So he asked the Ministry to issue an order that would allow them to keep us [the Jewish staff] there, under a severe program of forced labor. This is how we stayed alive until the liberation. Of course, it wasn't easy for us. We were forced to wear a yellow star and a red cross, and to walk the streets dressed in our gowns.

The ghetto was established at the bricks factory. Those were open buildings that only offered protection from the rain. Apart from that, it was as if they were staying in the open air; they were vulnerable to all the other changes in weather, for they had a roof, but no walls. However, there were volunteers who carried food to the ghetto – Christian people with a soul. We, the staff of the hospital, would bring milk for the children in the ghetto.

The first time I saw my father in the ghetto I had a shock that still reverberates today, I think. My father, a religious man who hadn't done anything wrong, but had always been everything a righteous man should be, was now in the ghetto. 'Where is God?' I asked myself.

That moment altered all my faith and trust. How was that possible? Why was such a tragedy happening to a man like my father? And he wasn't the only religious man in there. How could they all be condemned to suffer like that? How could they all be treated like animals, which only need food in order to survive? How the representatives of the authorities treated them cannot be described! However, even among those despicable creatures, there were some who made things

easier for the Jews, if only just a little bit.

I once walked inside the headquarters of the Hungarian police. They were so surprised to see my yellow star that they even forgot to kick me out. I went to ask for the permission to move a sick man to our hospital, and I had the guts to take my request before the commanding officer.

This is why I went to the police. My courage simply baffled them. But they didn't do anything to me. I think that what surprised them was to see that there were still Jews walking around freely. It appears to me that one of them even said, 'Do these people still exist?'

I avoided walking the streets, because I didn't want to expose myself to insults. But I was once out and I had to cross a lady who was having a walk with an officer. Seeing me, the lady said in Hungarian, 'Do we still have some of these?' It was as if she referred to a special kind of animal. The officer blushed, grabbed her hand and objected, 'How can you say that? They're human beings.' This is exactly how it happened. Imagine that: an elegant, nicely-dressed woman!

What I know from my experience is that women are generally meaner than men, and I'm not afraid to say that, even though I am a woman myself. When a woman is mean, she is much meaner than a man. I could go on and on about my sufferings. But remember that the thing that made me suffer most was the humiliation. They simply didn't think we were human beings. They regarded us as yoked animals. One has to live with the taste of this humiliation their entire life.

There was a very limited category of Jews who received a special treatment. It comprised the war veterans and the Jews with certain scientific merits. Of course one's merits had to be very high in order to fit the category.

These Jews were not deported, but they were relocated from the countryside to the towns, or suffered some other form of persecution. They were called 'kivetelezett zsidó,' meaning Jews with exception [6](#). Very few were those chosen ones who were exempt from deportation.

There were others who fled to Switzerland, a few Jewish leaders whom Switzerland accepted - being a neutral country, Fascists could not go there. There was this Jewish journalist here in Cluj, Rezso Kasztner [7](#) was his name.

He had connections within the Gestapo that went all the way to the top of the hierarchy - he had a schoolmate or a friend who served there. He arranged - in exchange for a lot of money, of course - for a few Jewish families to leave for Switzerland [with the Kasztner Group] [8](#).

I met him in person - he was the youngest of four brothers and had an aunt who lived in Aghiresu. This is how I got to meet him. He worked for the Hungarian-speaking newspaper Uj Kelet [9](#), founded in Israel. He did save a number of Jews, but most people were mad at him.

Of course, he had put at the top of his list his mother, who was a widow, and one of his brothers, the other two were already in Israel. However, he never got to save his aunt and cousins in Aghiresu, for they had already been deported.

Few of those who made an escape to Switzerland returned home. Most of them left to other countries or to Israel, like the ones this boy had saved. Eventually, Kasztner got to Israel too, where he was shot by a Jew in the middle of the street. This is how he died... They were mad at him,

despite the fact that he had tried to do a good thing...

Life is very strange, and what often matters is the point of view from which we look at a situation. But I also know people who were saved without being well-off at all. Among those who were saved there were both rich people and ordinary people. Nevertheless, one couldn't save the entire Jewry...

This is what I say to myself when I think of Kasztner, who was a very intelligent boy. Before 1940, there was this Peasants' Party leader - not Maniu, but the one who came right after him in command - and this man particularly enjoyed talking with Kasztner.

In fact, Kasztner was his favorite, and one mustn't forget that this party was not the Jews' best friend. And there was also a Legionary leader who liked this boy. And, being a journalist, he had access anywhere, and this is how he made contact with that Hungarian official. Every man wants to save his skin - we can't be all heroes. We're common people, and we have our fears and our flaws. We can't be all geni and scientists - someone has to work down here. We all do what we can.

Anyway, in 24 hours, I lost all my beloveds. I didn't see them again until after the liberation. I didn't know what had become of them, whether they were dead or alive. I didn't know anything. I once got a postcard from my brother-in-law, who was to die there. It read: 'Dear Elza, we're in Walsee - he had encrypted the name of the place - we're fine, and I hope you're fine.' That was all - it was probably as much as they had allowed them to write. This is the only piece of news I ever got until the liberation.

My sisters, Iren and Margit, happened to be taken to the same camp. My oldest sister got to another place. Bella was very resourceful and became one of the favorite inmates of the camp's leaders, because she was hard-working and cheerful. Her privileges included the permission to go to the kitchen and eat the food there, which was thicker than what the people in the camp got. Because she played her cards right, she was able to save many. But she couldn't save our sisters.

I saved people too, but not from my family. This is the irony of fate. When in Israel, I was very surprised to meet people who would call my name in the middle of the street - I felt embarrassed because of all that gratitude. And it surprised me because people are ungrateful in general - I've had my share of such episodes involving ingratitude.

I was told about Iren and Margit by a girl from Nadasu who had been deported to the same camp with them and had returned. There was this ship that was supposed to carry girls for labor to one of the Baltic countries - Estonia or Latvia, I'm not sure.

Germany had ties with these countries, and whoever volunteered to leave the camp and go there was sent there. My sisters, this girl told me, thought things would be easier over there, so they boarded, the poor them. Well, the ship ended up just like the Titanic [it sank].

There was another ship, the Struma [10](#), which left Romania and headed for Israel. I don't know what went wrong, but they were stuck in the middle of the Black Sea. No harbor allowed them to disembark, no country would have them, so they died of starvation on board. A cousin of mine from Bucharest died on that ship. The passengers were all private individuals who had paid for the ship, and the crew was Greek.

When the war was at its peak, the city of Cluj was bombed [on 2nd June 1944]. On the spot where the ambulance service is now, close to the station, there used to be a Reformed church.

A bomb fell there. There were no victims, but the building was destroyed. It was rebuilt, then nationalized [11](#), and, eventually, it became the headquarters of the ambulance service. The bridge on Horea St. was bombed too, and traffic across the River Somes was blocked. Those bombs were called 'Stalin's light' - 'Sztálingyertya' in Hungarian [Stalin's candle]. They called them like that because they spread light. A bomb fell in our courtyard too, but it didn't damage anything.

## **Liberation and Post-War**

The 3rd of May was the day of the liberation. [Editor's note: The liberation of Cluj Napoca was in October 1944.] Shootings were in progress; there was a lot of fighting before the city of Cluj fell. We couldn't see anything, because we were isolated from the world. After the Russians came, we were reinstated in the old hospital. They needed us and they brought us back so that we could be together.

Changes could be sensed almost immediately. A normal life began for everybody, a new era was born, and people were glad because, finally, their lives were no longer in danger. Of course, the change was significant - we were once again considered human beings. We all kept our jobs, began to receive salaries like any other, and were eager to fit into society. It took us some time to get used to being human again.

So I was working at the Jewish Hospital again. I gave a hand at the storing place where all those items had been gathered and were now distributed. For a while, I worked with Dr. Varso, who was a famous dentist and fixed everybody's teeth for free. I came into contact with a lot of men who came by the hospital, and most of them were young and probably orphans.

Now, I was neither ugly, nor pretty, and I had my strong points and my weak points. But, believe me - this is no exaggeration - I must have got at least one hundred marriage proposals! Out of the one hundred men who had proposed, I picked the one hundred and first, who was the one I shouldn't have married.

I made a mistake and I married the wrong guy. But these are things you can't control. I had fallen in love with him. He was quite the opposite of my former fiancé - he wasn't handsome, but he was solidly built. I didn't like short, skinny men, because I am short and skinny myself.

I got married in 1945. My husband was named Andor Braun and he had been born in Cluj, in 1918. During the deportations, he had been sent to forced labor, I believe it was somewhere in the countryside. He was a cultivated and intelligent boy. One could clearly see he was a good man.

But he did what he wasn't supposed to do. And it was then that I said to myself: that's it, no more trying for me! You know what the peasants say: he, who is unlucky at day, is equally unlucky at night. We divorced. He died a few years after.

So I had decided to stop trying to find someone. Things just didn't seem to work out for me. I thought that, since I couldn't be a spinster anymore, and my decision wouldn't harm anyone, there was no problem if I didn't remarry.

So I had to fight the hardships of life all by myself or almost. I had good friends and I had relatives. Now I have no relative here anymore – those who didn't die left the country. Life hardened me.

Gradually, I came to a stage where I wasn't afraid of anything anymore. I tried to stay honest, and, generally speaking, I didn't hurt anyone deliberately. Of course, I made plenty of mistakes, but so did anybody else – we're not supernatural creatures, and I am not an extraordinary human being. I feel superior to no one. I always felt responsible for my acts, and this is how I went through life.

The nationalization came, and the Jewish Hospital became the Polyclinic no.1 on Berthelot Street. Back then, it was the only polyclinic in the city, apart from that of the Romanian Railways Company. After three years, I was appointed chief medical assistant. Previously, I had to pass some exams.

A nurse could be promoted to medical assistant. A nurse with a high school degree could be promoted even higher in the hierarchy. I did have a high school degree, but I had to pass an exam to catch up. A commission was formed with the support of the nurses' syndicate, and there I was. I became chief medical assistant.

The polyclinic was huge. Being the only one in the city, the flow of patients was very high. There were medical facilities for various specializations distributed on three floors, and I was in charge of 30-35 people. It wasn't easy at all, but I tried to cope with it. I worked twelve hours a day and my only spare day was Sunday. I liked order and cleanliness and I insisted on these things.

The average flow of patients was of 50-60 people in eight hours for a single facility. Each facility had two doctors. One was on duty in the morning, the other in the afternoon. Each of them spent about six hours there. Double the number of patients and you get over 100 people for a single facility.

And there were three floors of them. So you realize there was a lot of cleaning to do for the poor them [the cleaning ladies]. Before the second shift started, there was a break, and all the facilities had to be cleaned. I specifically insisted that the toilets be always kept in perfect condition.

The syndicate held some elections and they proposed me as secretary of the block syndicate. This 'block' consisted of the Polyclinic no.1, the 3rd Medical Clinic, the Orthopedic Clinic, the Stanca Hospital – 2nd Gynecology – and the medical facilities of the enterprises located in that part of the city. The other block comprised the Epidemic Hospital and the Neuropsychiatry Clinic. It was an open vote election, and two of the cleaning ladies didn't raise their hand for 'yes.' They didn't vote against me, they just didn't vote.

The chairman of the meeting had to ask them what they had against Comrade Fulop, to which the braver one of them replied, 'Well, it's nothing personal. We think she's a great lady. She shares everything with us, lets us take time off, so we can't complain about that. But she never stops bugging us about the toilets.' The whole audience burst out laughing and couldn't be stopped.

That was my great flaw: I insisted that the toilets be clean. The woman had spoken her mind, and then she was afraid I would get even. But I told her: 'Don't be afraid. In a way, you're right, but I have no choice. What would you say if you went to someone's place and saw a dirty toilet? You'd say that the mistress of the house is lazy, wouldn't you? Well, the same thing applies to us. Here,



we are the mistresses of the house.'

They were nice to me afterwards, and they apologized. Of course, I had to report to my superiors too. I had my differences with them, like in any other job. I didn't always agree to what my bosses wanted and, what's more, I always defended my subordinates. This was something my superiors didn't appreciate too much. So there were some differences - not fundamental, but important enough to prevent me from sleeping at night from time to time.

In 1956, I got transferred to the Clujana shoes factory. A new hospital and a new polyclinic were opened there. They would later become the 4th Medical Clinic. In 1964, I returned to the 2nd block and I served in the dental facility for children, then at the Dental Clinic on the street next to the park [Pavlov Street], by the River Somesul Mic. I had had enough of being in charge. Medical assistants could only work at the Dental Clinic or at the other clinics. I chose the Dental.

## **Retirement**

I retired in 1976, but I kept on working for the Fee-based Polyclinic until 1999, when I had an accident. When leaving for home, I used to cross the street with some co-workers who took the bus, the bus-stop was right opposite from the polyclinic, and we actually jaywalked to get to it. After they got on the bus, I would walk home on that side of the street, as I lived on Horea Street back then - I've only been staying here for four years.

On the evening of 20th June 1999, there was heavy rain, and we couldn't go outside the building. We had to wait for it to stop, which happened around 10pm. But the lights were on in the street and visibility was very good. I was sitting in the lobby, reading some newspaper.

I was so focused that I didn't realize my two co-workers had stood up and headed for the door. I only heard them as they were exiting the building. I was upset because they hadn't let me know they were leaving, so I told myself: 'Well, since you didn't bother to call me, I'm going home the right way.'

So there I was, legally crossing the street for a change, when a car came at great speed from the direction of the station and knocked me down. It was moving so fast that I didn't have the time to see it. Surely, I'm to blame, because I didn't look around. But, since I was at a pedestrian crossing, I didn't think about it. The car was driven by a young lady from Huedin. The other occupants were her parents and a man sitting next to her.

My leg was fractured in two places. I could have stayed there out cold. I was carrying a heatproof tray which I used to bring my co-workers and the doctors some refreshments. Hitting the pavement, it made such strong noise, that even those in the bus-stop heard it. My co-worker, Vali, was about to get on the trolley-bus, when she heard the racket. She said to herself: 'I wonder if that's not Elza...' She came running and picked me up, for I couldn't stand up on my own. When she pulled me up, I felt a terrible pain. I didn't faint though.

The 28-year-old girl, who was in divorce and who might have been distracted by something as she was driving, stopped and began to cry. I couldn't think of anything better to do than to comfort her: 'Don't be afraid, I won't do anything to you...' Then I had some trouble with her.

She didn't act appropriately and we had to go to court. I wasn't able to touch the ground with my leg for three months. I couldn't eat anything right, as I had no appetite, and I fed on orange and lemon juice. But I never get any pains from my leg. The head doesn't bother me either, although the skull had a serious crack and had to be stitched. The only accident I had after that happened this year: when I fractured my right arm and wore plaster for five weeks.

More than five years have passed since I stopped working. I felt very sorry about it. I still miss the activity and I still feel very fond of my former occupation. I do housework and the likes, but this gets me more tired than 12 hours at my job used to. The reason is that I enjoyed my job and did it out of pleasure.

I didn't have any children. Nor did I want any. It would have only made my situation more difficult. I don't regret not having children. I have seen how much trouble they bring, I have seen too much misery, and I told myself that it is better to fight life on my own than to suffer for my children.

I did raise other people's children though - I'm talking about two distant nephews in Vatra Dornei. So I wasn't completely childless after all. I didn't adopt them; I just let them stay at my place while they were going to the Medical School.

That was a rare pair... They were both 17 when they entered college. They both got A's at the admission exam. The younger one worshiped his brother, who was two years and a half older. The former thought his elder brother could never be wrong.

Because of that, he had chosen the Medical School. He had gone to a science high school and was very good at Math and Physics. We never thought he dreamed of becoming a doctor. But that was all he wanted. 'My brother is going to be a doctor, so I want to be a doctor too,' he said.

Their father died while they were still very young; it was the year when the younger brother entered college. They had their share of tragedy in their lives, the poor them. But they were such good boys! I'm still very proud of them, because I played a part in their upbringing too, and they admit it.

There were so many things they had to learn in life! And I'm not talking about school - they were always the best in their class there. The elder brother, Arie Fleischer, had an inborn intelligence. The other, Adiel Fleischer, was very industrious. So they both got good grades - the former thanks to his genetic heritage, the latter thanks to hard work. Their father was a chief accountant and was a very intelligent man. Their mother had been to college in Cluj, where she had studied English.

I know it's not nice to brag, but I have to say this: when it came to social and cultural education, the boys got it more from me than from their mother, who had a college degree. They simply didn't know how to behave. Their manners were provincial. Their mother hadn't had the time to look after them properly.

She had to go to work to support them. At my place, we had three plates on the table. At theirs, they ate all the dishes from the same plate. They were used to tasting the food directly from the pot, which was something forbidden in my family. So I had to be rather strict and make them obey some rules.

They didn't have a bathroom in Vatra Dornei, where they came from. At my place, before going to bed, they had to take a bath. They had to change their underwear and socks every day. When they ran out of socks, they had to wash some in the evening and leave them to dry.

The underwear always had to be clean. In the evening, they had to make the beds, which included my bed. I would make them in the morning, when they were in a hurry to get to school, and the young gentlemen made them in the evening.

I talked to them about many things, including school, for I was in the same field of activity. I was the one who taught them how a syringe should be held or some primary rules of health and certain diagnoses.

Food was never served until they had arranged the table. They had to put all the necessary covers on the table: for soup, the second course and the appetizers; and the knife, fork and spoon had to be placed in the right order.

One day, the younger one came home and he was starving. The elder was more disciplined. But no sooner had the younger entered the house, than he started to complain: 'Oh, I'm so hungry!' 'Go on and lay the table then,' I said. As he knew he wouldn't get any food if he didn't obey, he started to arrange the table, rather reluctantly. 'You're not finished, the table is not ready,'

I noticed. 'What do you mean?' he asked me, and he was a bit irritated because of the hunger. 'I put glasses and everything!' - 'No you didn't. Take a closer look. You missed something.' I was very strict when it came to these things. 'Let me check... Oh, God damn it, I forgot the napkin!' This is the kind of episode in your life that you never forget.

The younger, Adiel, married a Jewish woman from America, who came from Panticeu, a village near Cluj. This girl was the relative of an acquaintance of mine, who came back to Cluj with her husband in a very bad condition. I looked after him at the hospital, together with Adiel, who was an intern there; he was in the sixth year of Medical School. The lady told him about her niece in America and put him in contact with her. They started talking on the phone and they ended up marrying each other.

After they got married, he had to spend one more year in the country before he could leave for America. He became an exceptional gynecologist. His department occupies two floors of the hospital. He takes care of the difficult births. He also holds conferences.

He was invited to Mexico and to many other places. He has three daughters, and they are all brunettes. One of them is a college graduate and is now going to a second college. The youngest girl was six when I went to America, in 1994. And she tried to teach me English. That little girl!

Arie left for America after his first wife died in a car crash. His brother was already there. He has two daughters. He is a doctor too. He remarried. His wife is a very nice and refined German lady. They say Germans are rough, unsophisticated, mean and violent, just like Hungarians.

But this German woman is very nice and she treated me very nicely. She's twice as better as Adiel's wife, who's Jewish. She is far superior to the other, who's a teacher of French and English. Arie and his wife have two daughters, who are both blonde. Five daughters for two men. Not one

single son.

The boys took me to America in 1994. I liked the country, but it didn't leave me with my mouth wide open in amazement. I didn't have to take a bone. This is how they say: if you go to a new place and things are out of the ordinary there, you can't help keeping your mouth wide open. The only thing you can do is put a bone in your mouth that will make you remember to shut it.

There was only one thing that I really liked. I had seen tall buildings in Israel, Germany, Bulgaria or the Soviet Union. I went abroad every time I had the opportunity, because I liked to widen my horizons, I liked changes, and I was able to say a few words in several languages. It was nice. So what really impressed me in America were those twin towers [the World Trade Center] that were destroyed.

I counted 105 floors. We took one elevator up to the 80th floor or so, and then we had to take another elevator. And I counted 105 floors. Imagine that. Reaching the top floor was a matter of seconds. The elevator went so fast that you couldn't read the numbers of the floors on the display. I can still remember that. We reached a terrace that covered the whole roof. There was a pair of binoculars in each corner.

That was my only trip to America. I didn't want to disturb them anymore. They came to see me. The last one to come was the elder, in 2002. He brought the girls with him.

I went to Israel three times. After my sister Bella died, I felt very lonely and I went to work in a hospital in Haifa. I spent nine months there. I was helped by a doctor who had been born in Cluj, but had emigrated and worked in that hospital.

I lived with acquaintances and relatives, trying to switch places as often as possible, so as not to disturb anyone. I couldn't complain - in one month, I earned my salary here for one year. Nevertheless, I didn't like the relationships between people, the system as such. They aren't as close to people as we are here in Romania. If I went there, I would be alone too.

My sister is dead; as for my remaining relatives who live there, I don't feel close enough to any of them so that I would dare disturb them with my presence. They all have their own family problems, so I would have to take care of my own. But what's the point in going to another country and start all over again, after a lifetime of work in a country where you have your rights and where you live out of your past work? So I think it's better to stay here than to go beg for help somewhere else.

From a material point of view, it is true that they live in better conditions than we do - this is why so many of us go to work there. But I'm the kind of person who always spends as much as she has. Unfortunately, my income has diminished. But I can always give up this or that. And someone living alone finds it easier to manage than someone with a large family to support.

In the first years after the liberation from under the Fascist yoke I had no reason to emigrate. First of all, I had a job that I enjoyed, I had my sister by my side, and I had all the things that were necessary to survive. Besides, I loved my country. I still do, with all my heart.

I love this country as it is, with its miseries and worries, with good people and bad people. I love them as they are and I love everything that surrounds me. When I go out, I feel as if even stones

know me. And I know them. I am a patriot in the real sense of the word.

## **Communism**

I was one of the first who joined the Communist Party. The Party's program included some essential things that greatly influenced my decision, given the persecutions I had just suffered only because I had been born a Jew. The program read: there are no differences between people, we are all the same, regardless of our nationality, and we all have the same rights.

I had never heard such things before the liberation. During the Holocaust, I was exposed to racial discrimination and persecutions and I had lost my entire family. Equal rights for everybody, regardless of sex, age and nationality, people being judged according to their capacities and to their contribution to society – these points of the program were a novelty for me, and a reason to be happy.

I had been racially persecuted and I hadn't been able to complete my education because my material situation was poor. After the liberation, I was able to develop myself professionally and to do whatever I wanted in life. My being a Jew didn't matter anymore, and I finally found my place in society, doing what those around me were doing too.

The Fascist regime had stolen my most precious things. The new Communist regime gave me the opportunity to live my life. These principles alone made me join the Party. I had no hidden interests; I didn't want to start a career, become a manager or get rich. I never had the ambition of getting rich, of raising a fortune.

I still had some problems because of my faith, but I knew how to defend myself. I always did that in a civilized way, using retorts that could convince my opponents or the anti-Semites that they were wrong. I never lowered myself to their level, but I stuck to my status of human being, not only of Jew.

And I never regretted that. I didn't become assimilated in the sense that I denied my Jewish origin. I never denied my identity; I had the courage to assert it and, by doing this, I became an example that contradicted my opponents by its mere existence.

In the conscience of peoples, Jews have always been considered cowards. They said you could do anything you want to a Jew, because he's too afraid to react. This and many other untrue attributes are all weapons of anti-Semitism and chauvinism. The Jews have proven themselves in the great wars.

They behaved as bravely as any other nation; they proved they weren't chicken. Think about that child who sneaked in the soldiers' camp carrying bread and water – this is how he had been raised. Our generation was taught that the Jews must always bow their heads, that they could be insulted by anyone, that they should degrade themselves.

I, for one, belong to the category of those who always had the courage to stand out. I had a lot to suffer from the Fascist regime and so did all the other members of this ethnic group. Other nationalities were discriminated against too, but Jews were the main target.

I used to kid about the Jews being God's chosen people so that the entire world might strike upon them. But this is not just a joke, it's a reality. Too often had I taken blows that affected my dignity, too often had I been insulted and suffered from acts of injustice.

Anyone who judges me for joining the Communist Party might as well mind his own business. As a party member, I never did anything harmful that I should be ashamed of. I even kept my faith, as I had been raised in a religious spirit that was neither devout, nor nationalistic, being proud to be a Jew.

You mustn't be ashamed of your identity, you must have faith, but you mustn't hate or insult your neighbor for being a Christian. This may have been the way I was raised, but this wasn't the way I was treated in life. They humiliated me, and they had me wear a yellow star so that they could recognize at once that I belonged to the lowest race.

As a student, I went to the Christian church every week. But I kept my faith. I can recite 'Our Father' better than a Christian in Hungarian, French and Romanian - I learned it from my schoolmates. You can either respect the other's religion, or you can hate him for it. The man stays the same.

Why should I be ashamed for joining the Party when they had those points in their program? I didn't have a Party activist's career. What I did at the beginning of my professional life, I also did at its end, so I don't feel ashamed at all. Others threw away their party membership card, or tore it to pieces, as if that were a miracle. These were not people of strong character. You can't just erase certain periods from your life - people will still remember them.

I've already stated my case: I joined the Party out of conviction. Nobody forced me and I didn't do it out of interest. And I'm telling you now that the Party was not responsible because things went wrong. The party leaders were to blame, because they didn't stay loyal to the Party's beliefs. Had they guided themselves after the original principles, things would have turned out fine.

Hitler was the one who started anti-Semitism in Germany. But, apart from him, there were theoreticians who introduced race hatred. He wasn't the only one to blame; all those around him were responsible too. Ceausescu [12](#) can't be blamed for everything either.

There was no way he could see what everyone was doing. Why didn't his henchmen stop him? I blame the people around him, who were intellectuals, more than I blame Ceausescu, despite his being a dictator and despite the mistakes he made.

He was a simple man, with no general culture. But he knew how to talk. But why did everyone obey him, why did they perform whatever they were told? Why didn't any of his advisors bother to tell him, 'Comrade, you're not doing the right thing.'

If you love your people, think about their well-being and stop selling everything this country has.' Why did they let him do something as silly as emptying the country? Why? So that he may beat America? Had he thought about it a little, he would have realized that a small country like ours could not compete with a country like America. Why pay our foreign debt at any cost? Even the richest countries in the world have debts.

## Contemporary Politics

I think the entire country is going through a very difficult situation right now. We are no longer Communists, but we're not a democracy, in the real sense of the term, either. In my opinion, we haven't overcome the transition period yet.

I couldn't say which country has a real democracy. One must experience democracy in order to understand it. The real democracy can't be found in America, or in England, or in any of the developed countries. Mistakes are made even there.

In America, the battle for presidency looked a lot like the one we see here. I couldn't say that I don't want us to become a democracy. I wish we did, but, in order to achieve that, every one of us must help this regime turn into a democracy.

The main difference between Communism and democracy is that the former doesn't allow you to raise a great fortune, while the latter lets you become rich as long as you do it through honest ways. If you're more capable than the others, go ahead and be rich!

However, a democracy controls fortunes and asks you to prove where you got the money from. I totally agree on that. Unfortunately, our expenses exceed our income, and I wonder if that day will come when we will be able to afford living exclusively from our income. Maybe this is why we have so many dishonest things going on - an honest work just doesn't pay enough. But speculations do.

Communism has this doctrine too: people should earn according to their abilities. I, for instance, can't earn more than a minister, whose responsibilities are far greater than mine. But those who had the ability to make money in an honest way should be allowed to enjoy it. I'm a fan of democracy from this point of view. The one who thinks about those who have less than he does and helps them does the right thing. The idea is not to treat them as beggars, but to help them make some progress and get somewhere near your level.

Unfortunately, not everybody enjoys working. Some would like to get rich just like that, over night. It is unfair to hinder the other's efforts only because you can. If you already have enough, why not let him make a living? This is how I understand democracy. But we're not there yet. No one can be blamed, really.

We haven't made it yet because there was too little time. Our youth was raised in a certain spirit that's different from what the youth from other countries was taught. Then it is said that we inherited poverty. Many people were born in poverty, but they knew what to do in order to become somebody: they worked hard and made it happen.

This also applies to a country. We don't have the experience of richer countries yet. Nevertheless, Romania is not a poor country. We just don't know how to use its assets. Many things that shouldn't have been destroyed were destroyed after the Communism fell. Now we blame corruption, theft, this or that.

I traveled abroad and I saw poverty, corruption and thieves in other countries too. I went to America, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary and the Soviet Union. I couldn't say people are more honest there than here. They are no better than we are. They make the same mistakes, only they're more

experienced.

As far as religion is concerned, I told you that something broke inside me when I saw my father in the ghetto. I am not as religious as I used to be. In my childhood and my youth, I observed all the holidays. I still have respect for religion now, but it's not the same thing as it was when I was a child.

Times change and people must adapt themselves to the given conditions. For starters, it's impossible to observe the Jewish faith here in Romania, because you should only have ritual foods. In Israel, this can be done, because possibilities exist.

But here in Cluj, we don't even have a hakham. All we have is a Jewish canteen. Someone comes from Bucharest from time to time to inspect if the meat is kosher. But not everybody can afford to eat at this canteen. I sometimes go there too. I mainly do it out of respect.

I celebrate Pesach – and I go to the canteen on that occasion – and the summer holidays: Chanukkah and the New Year [Rosh Hashanah]. On Yom Kippur, Jews must fast from dusk till the stars appear the next day. They can't even drink water.

People make up with one another and should spend their day in the synagogue praying while dressed in white. Well, nowadays, only the ones who officiate dress in white – the rest of us can even carry purses. The Prayer for the Dead is recited and alms are given in memory of the departed in the synagogue.

I also commemorate the dead, but, unfortunately, it's only my sister. All the others died in the camp and I couldn't know the dates. There is a prayer for all – my mother, father, brother – which is said then. When I commemorate my sister's death, I give alms in the synagogue too: cakes and something to drink. These are the traditions that I keep.

## **Glossary:**

**1** 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.

**2** Anti-Jewish laws in Hungary: Following similar legislation in Nazi Germany, Hungary enacted three Jewish laws in 1938, 1939 and 1941. The first law restricted the number of Jews in industrial and commercial enterprises, banks and in certain occupations, such as legal, medical and engineering professions, and journalism to 20% of the total number.

This law defined Jews on the basis of their religion, so those who converted before the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, as well as those who fought in World War I, and their widows and orphans were exempted from the law.

The second Jewish law introduced further restrictions, limiting the number of Jews in the above fields to 6%, prohibiting the employment of Jews completely in certain professions such as high school and university teaching, civil and municipal services, etc. It also forbade Jews to buy or sell land and so forth.

This law already defined Jews on more racial grounds in that it regarded baptized children that had at least one non-converted Jewish parent as Jewish. The third Jewish law prohibited intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, and defined anyone who had at least one Jewish grandparent as Jewish.

**3** Hungarian era (1940-1944): The expression 'Hungarian era' refers to the period between 30th August 1940 and 15th October 1944 in Transylvania. As a result of the Trianon Peace Treaty in 1920, the eastern part of Hungary (Maramures, Partium, Banat, Transylvania) was annexed to Romania.

Two million inhabitants of Hungarian nationality came under Romanian rule. In the summer of 1940, under pressure from Berlin and Rome, the Romanian government agreed to return Northern Transylvania, where the majority of the Hungarians lived, to Hungary.

The anti-Jewish laws introduced in 1938 and 1939 in Hungary were also applied in Northern Transylvania. Following the German occupation of Hungary on 19th March 1944, Jews from Northern Transylvania were deported and killed in concentration camps along with Jews from all

over Hungary except for Budapest.

Northern Transylvania belonged to Hungary until the fall of 1944, when the Soviet troops entered and introduced a regime of military administration that sustained local autonomy. The military administration ended on March 1945, when the Romanian administration was reintroduced in all the Western territories lost in 1940 - as a reward for the fact that Romania formed the first communist-led government in the region.

**4** Yellow star in Hungary: In a decree introduced on 31st March 1944 the Sztojay government obliged all persons older than 6 years qualified as Jews, according to the relevant laws, to wear, starting from 5th April, "outside the house" a 10x10 cm, canary yellow colored star made of textile, silk or velvet, sewed onto the left side of their clothes.

The government of Dome Sztojay, appointed due to the German invasion, emitted dozens of decrees aiming at the separation, isolation and despoilment of the Jewish population, all this preparing and facilitating deportation. These decrees prohibited persons qualified as Jews from owning and using telephones, radios, cars, and from changing domicile.

They prohibited the employment of non-Jewish persons in households qualified as Jewish, ordered the dismissal of public employees qualified as Jews, and introduced many other restrictions and prohibitions. The obligation to wear a yellow star aimed at the visible distinction of persons qualified as Jews, and made possible from the beginning abuses by the police and gendarmes. A few categories were exempted from this obligation: WWI invalids and awarded veterans, respectively following the pressure of the Christian Church priests, the widows and orphans of awarded WWI heroes, WWII orphans and widows, converted Jews married to a Christian and foreigners. (Randolph L. Braham: A nepirtas politikaja, A holokauszt Magyarorszagon / The Politics of Genocide, The Holocaust in Hungary, Budapest, Uj Mandatum, 2003, p. 89-90.)

**5** Legionary Movement (also known as the Legion of the Archangel Michael): Also known as the Legion of the Archangel Michael. Movement founded in 1927 by C. Z. Codreanu. This extremist, nationalist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic movement aimed at excluding those whose views on political and racial matters were different from theirs.

The Legion was organized in so-called nests, and it practiced mystical rituals, which were regarded as the way to a national spiritual regeneration by the members of the movement. These rituals were based on Romanian folklore and historical traditions.

The Legionaries founded the Iron Guard as a terror organization, which carried out terrorist activities and political murders. The political twin of the Legionary Movement was the Totul pentru Tara (Everything for the Fatherland) that represented the movement in parliamentary elections. The followers of the Legionary Movement were recruited from young intellectuals, students, Orthodox clericals, peasants. The movement was banned by King Carol II in 1938.

**6** Exemption from Deportation in North Transylvania: In March 1944, the Germans occupied Hungary and North Transylvania. After the occupation, the openly Nazi-friendly and anti-Semitic Dome Sztojay formed a government, and a series of anti-Jewish laws were introduced.

The law for ghettoization of Hungarian Jewry made exceptions in certain cases. The sphere of exemptions was defined in a decree on 10th May 1945. The widows and children of those Jews who received a high commendation for bravery in World War I, or those widows and children of Jews who disappeared or died a hero's death in World War II as soldiers (not during 'work service' in the Labor Battalions) were exempted. Foreign Jewish citizens living in Hungary were also an exception. There were other modes of escaping deportation.

Rezso Kasztner, Zionist leader from Kolozsvár, exemplified this when he secured the release of 1300 Hungarian Jews (250 of which were Kolozsvár families) as a result of negotiations with Adolf Eichmann. The North-Transylvanian Jews' other means of escape was to flee to Romania, and hide there with Christian help.

Three doctors played a major role in hiding Kolozsvár Jews: Imre Haynal, Dezso Klimko and Dezso Miskolczy, offering help through their exaggerated diagnoses and extra-extended treatments. In spring 1944, the clinic of Imre Haynal hid and sheltered a number of Jews, the greater part of his 'intensive care' ward were Jews fleeing deportation, since the expulsion of the seriously ill was often overlooked by the authorities.

**7** Kasztner, Rezso (1906-1957): Hungarian Zionist leader during World War II. Rezso Kasztner and Otto Komoly headed the Relief and Rescue Committee of Budapest in 1942. In efforts to save Hungarian Jews, they maintained contact with Jewish organizations abroad and with the occupying Nazi authorities.

Kasztner negotiated with the Nazis the rescue of more than 1,500 Hungarian Jews - although the Germans interned them in Bergen-Belsen instead of sending them to a neutral country, as originally agreed, and only let them go to Switzerland after 4 months.

After the war Kasztner was accused of betraying Hungarian Jews and of collaborating with the Nazis. Kasztner was murdered in Israel, while his case was still in process in court. The court later cleared him.

**8** Kasztner group: Named after Rezso Kasztner, a Zionist journalist from Cluj Napoca, who considered aliyah to Palestine the only possible solution of the so-called 'Jewish problem'.

In April 1944, Kasztner - as one of the leading members of the Hungarian (Jewish) Salvation Committee - contacted the occupying German authorities in order to save as many Jewish lives as possible. As a result of his 'negotiations', he succeeded to save the lives of about 1700 Jews, most of them from Budapest.

This number also included 387 people from Transylvania (mostly from Cluj Napoca), such as Akiba Glasner, the orthodox chief-rabbi of Cluj and Jozsef Fischer, the leader of Erdelyi Zsidó Nemzeti Szövetség, then Erdelyi Zsidó Part. The Kasztner group arrived in Bergen-Belsen at the beginning of July and left for Switzerland in August and December.

After the war Kasztner was criticized by the Jewish community because of his methods of selection. In 1952 he was declared a traitor in Israel, in 1955 the court of justice found him not guilty. Two years later he was murdered.

**9** Uj Kelet (New East): Transylvanian Jewish political daily in the period between 1918-1940. The paper was published under the direction of Erdelyi Zsidó Nemzeti Szövetség (Transylvanian Jewish National Federation), and promoted Jewish nationalism, Zionism, culture and interests. It has been published in Tel-Aviv since 1948.

**10** Struma ship: In December 1941 the ship took on board some 750 Jews - which was more than seven times its normal passengers' capacity - to take them to Haifa, then Palestine. As none of the passengers had British permits to enter the country, the ship stopped in Istanbul, Turkey, in order for them to get immigration certificates to Palestine but the Turkish authorities did not allow the passengers to disembark.

They were given food and medicine by the Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish community of Istanbul. As the vessel was not seaworthy, it could not leave either. However, in February 1942 the Turks towed the Struma to the Black Sea without water, food or fuel on board. The ship sank the same night and there was only one survivor. In 1978, a Soviet naval history disclosed that a Soviet submarine had sunk the Struma.

**11** Nationalization in Romania: Nationalization began parallel to the development of the communist regime in Romania after WWII. The industry, show business, medical and financial institutions were nationalized first.

A year later, in 1949 Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, general-secretary of the Romanian Communist Party, announced the socialist transformation of agriculture. The process of collectivization ended in 1962. More than 90 % of the country's arable land became the collective property of either state farms or co-operatives.

**12** 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.