Flora James

A Jewish childhood in Transylvania

A personal account of a young Jewish girl growing up in Eastern Europe, in the years leading up to World War II. (Illustrated with family photographs)

Chapters:

I-II **Ludus** (*Maros Ludas*)

III-IV **Diciu** (*Dicso-Szent-Marton*)

V **Cluj** (*Kolozsvar*)

Design by Francis James

I

Ludus

This brief chronicle contains recollections of the life of our family and of my own childhood from the age of six until the age of seventeen, in 1939, when I 'made aliyah'. Most of them are linked to one of the four places, situated not far from each other, in the province of Transylvania. The first is the village of Ludus (Hung. Marosludas), where our extended family settled sometime at the end of the 17th century (according to tradition they migrated there from Bohemia). Next in importance are two unprepossessing market towns called Diciu (Hung. Dicsoszentmarton) and Uioara (Hung. Marosujvar). The last place, no less important, is Cluj (Hung. Kolozsvar) , the capital of Transylvania, where I spent my teenage years.

The province of Transylvania is located in the northern half of present day Rumania. It consists of a fertile plateau criss-crossed by rivers, surrounded on three sides by the snow-capped, majestic Carpathian Alps. The natural wealth and beauty of Transylvania attracted several occupiers over the centuries. It was in turn: a Roman province; a Hungarian Kingdom; then, an independent principality, first under the Turks and later under the Hapsburgs.

In 1848, at the time of the Magyar uprising against the Austrian rule, the Jews in the province (in common with the rest of the Jews in Hungary) identified with the Magyar insurgents. One of our ancestors, by the name of Izsak is known to have taken part in the revolt against the Austrian rulers. The punishment inflicted on the defeated rebels was to make Transylvania into a separate crown land ruled directly by the Austrians.

A few years later, in 1867, the date when the Austro-Hungarian empire was created, Transylvania became, once again, part of Hungary. In the same year, the Jews, together with the rest of the minorities living within the borders of the newly created entity, were legally emancipated. But, unlike the rest, the Jewish

population were counted as Hungarians. With the inclusion of the Jewish minority as Hungarians, in the population census, the Hungarian government finally achieved the majority they hitherto lacked.

The rulers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire trusted the Jews as the only minority who had no nationalistic aspirations .The Jewish population, as a whole, basked in their new found opportunities for advancement. Not so the orthodox Jews, who regarded the liberalisation as a threat to the traditional Jewish way of life. In exchange for the freedoms bestowed upon the Jewish population, the ruling powers expected them to participate in the move towards 'Magyarization', which was being promoted at every level. Attendance in Hungarian-speaking schools was mandatory. Conscription in the army had been the law for sometime. Efforts to make the Jews 'more like the rest of the subjects' in the Austrian Empire, had begun much earlier. At the end of the eighteenth century, new legislation was introduced demanding that the Jewish population adopt secular surnames. (Not infrequently, the surnames bestowed on the Jews, by the local authorities, reflected the barely-hidden contempt they felt for these strange people in their midst.)

Following the emancipation of 1865, cultural assimilation began making rapid inroads into the Jewish way of life, affecting even the more remote conservative communities such as Ludus. Members of the younger generation were given Hungarian first names, in addition to the traditional Hebrew names. Hungarian was rapidly replacing Yiddish as the everyday language. On the Goldstein side of my family, for instance, acculturation and patriotism took the form of calling successive sons and grandsons either Jozsef, or Ferenc, in honour of the Emperor of Austria, Franz-Josef, who had been liberal towards the Jews.

But the elders of the family persisted in giving their children a Jewish education, which began with cheder at the age of five. Girls were taught to read their prayers in Hebrew and given a thorough grounding in the laws of kashruth, in preparation for their future role as Jewish housewives. Secular education demanded attendance at one of the newly opened Jewish elementary schools. Those wishing to continue their education were sent to one of the Jewish high schools where secular teaching in Hungarian was combined with a strict observance of the 'mitzvot'.

In 1910 my father continued his education at the Jewish High School in the town of Nagyvarad. Twenty-nine years later, mindful of his own children's religious observance, he enrolled my brother Yehezkel in the same school. Imagine his astonishment when he discovered that the headmaster was none other than the man who had been his own class teacher 35 years before.

The events of August 1914, the date the First World War broke out, affected anyone with sons of fighting age. The Jewish communities were no exception, and

the patriarchs of the Goldstein, Meisner, Heller and Paneth families in Ludus, watched in dismay, as their sons, strange in their new soldier's garb, were marched off to face dangers they could hardly imagine. Anxious about their sons' physical safety, they also feared the effect that army life would have upon their Jewish identity. A talith (prayer shawl) was habitually packed in the departing soldiers' kitbags. Some fathers, I heard, tested their sons' continued observance of the mitzvah of praying by packing in the talith bag a folder containing a few banknotes. The absence of the money, on the soldier's return, would serve to prove that the talith had at least been opened.

I don't believe my grandfather would have resorted to such a ruse. Nevertheless, the letter he received from Beri (my father's nickname) a few months later, requesting his father's consent to his son becoming a 'regular' in the Hungarian army, must have come as a real shock. (Consent was needed because Beri was still under age.) It must be said, in all fairness, that the suggestion came from Beri's commanding officer who had become so impressed with his soldierly qualities that he offered him the opportunity to become a regular officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army, even though he was Jewish. My grandfather, distinctly unimpressed , withheld his permission. 'Fighting in the war,' he wrote to his son, 'is a duty. But the life of the military is hardly a suitable career for a Jewish boy.' The matter was dropped. This was just as well since the Austro-Hungarian army ceased to exist when the war ended in 1918. Nevertheless, the mere fact that a young man from an orthodox family like ours could contemplate such an alien idea must have troubled my grandfather.

In November 1918, Germany and Austro-Hungary conceded defeat and surrendered to the Allies, who then dismantled the Austro-Hungarian Empire leaving each country radically shrunken in size. News of the defeat reached my father and his comrades at the Tyrolean front where they had been fighting for the previous four years. The news was all the more shattering because, isolated as they were, on the Tyrolean front in Austria, they were not aware of what was coming. Their four years of fighting ended unceremoniously. Each soldier was given his release papers, a free railway pass, and unceremoniously dismissed, to make his own way home as best he could.

The Dismemberment of the Kingdom of Hungary in Trianon, 1921

My father and his Jewish comrades, as much as the rest of the unit, mourned the humiliation of the Fatherland. Today, with the terrible hindsight of the Shoah, and the role of the Hungarians in it, the reaction of these Jewish soldiers at the defeat

of their country seems almost unbelievable. But it must be remembered that the years between 1865 and 1914, when these soldiers went off to fight, had been a golden period in the history of the Hungarian Jews. The Jewish population participated in every field of the newly developing country; they felt themselves to be simply Hungarians of the 'Israelite' religion.

In 1919, the Rumanians took possession of the province. The new rulers hastened to eradicate all signs of the past. Rumanian replaced Hungarian as the official language. Maps appeared proclaiming the province's new status, with not a Hungarian place name left anywhere. Having promised the Allies to respect the cultural freedom of the minorities in their midst, the Rumanians conceded the right of the Hungarian population to attend Hungarian-speaking schools. This right was denied to the Jews, whose mother tongue was also Hungarian, because, in the official view, they had no nationality of their own.

Under the new regime, the Jews of Transylvania found themselves caught between two contending cultural pressures, speaking Hungarian at home, but obliged to conduct all official business in Rumanian. Education in Rumanian schools was now mandatory. Ironically, even though the Hungarians and Rumanians hated each other they were completely at one in their antagonism towards the Jews. This then, was the new world in which my parents were about to build their future lives together.

II

In 1922, the year I was born, my parents were very young still, and very inexperienced. I have a picture of my mother, taken after she finished high school, at just eighteen. It's quite faded now because for the rest of their married life together, ignoring my mother's protestations, father insisted on displaying this picture in some prominent place, where he could see it. I can still discern her face, very innocent, wide open eyes, with a large schoolgirl bow in her long, chestnut hair.

While she was getting her education, he was fighting the war. In the first of the two pictures I have of him, my father, although seven years older than my mother, also looks very young. In this photo, taken when he joined up, he is not yet at ease in his uniform. The spectacles he holds in his right hand, look as if they had just been removed, giving him a slightly myopic gaze, and making him look vulnerable.

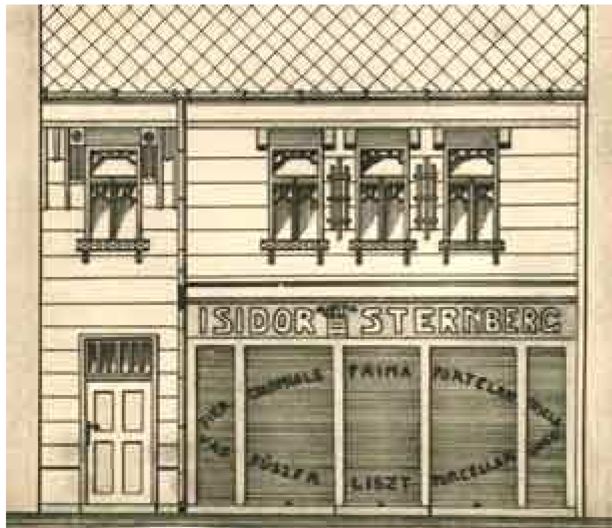
In the second photo, taken after four years in the war, he has metamorphosed into a confident, smart soldier, with a blond moustache, and a fashionable pince-nez, which makes him look severe. He, back from the war, she, from school, were yet to meet.

To say that they didn't know each other at all would not be true. Ludus was only a largish village. No doubt they were both present at various family occasions. But the seven years difference in their ages meant that when twenty-year-old Beri went off to the war, Rozsa, a mere thirteen-year-old schoolgirl, would have not yet have been worthy of his attention.

The marriage of Beri and Rozsa was in a sense 'arranged', with my Aunt Fanny, Father's elder sister, playing 'Cupid'. It was this elder sister who took the returning soldier, suffering from a bronchial infection, to a sanatorium to recuperate. His presence attracted a great deal of interest amongst the Jewish families with unmarried daughters. But Fanny took matters in hand. She approached my maternal grandmother, Bertha Sternberg, née Heller, with the suggestion. Both

families assented and the young people were brought together. I understand that Rozsa found Beri very glamorous. He, in turn, having kept a vague memory of a gawky thirteen-year-old, now saw before him a charming young girl with large brown eyes, radiant skin and beautiful chestnut hair. According to the family saga, the day he called on my grandfather, Isidor Sternberg, to ask for her hand, she hid in the large apple tree in their garden. My grandfather consented gladly. The prospective bridegroom's lack of a settled occupation, which might have been a barrier at other times, was overlooked because of the war. My grandparents approved both of the bridegroom and, not surprisingly, of his family, with whom they were closely related.

The problem of what the young couple were to live on was, fortunately, solved by the bride's father. Isidor Sternberg had come to Ludus as an orphan sometime in the 1890's. He was obviously very smart, and what's more, he married Bertha Heller, a girl from a good family with no money, who was also very smart.



Their shop, of which I have a drawing done by my late Uncle Lajcsi when he was young, was the best all-purpose shop in Ludus and the surrounding villages. My grandmother, the canny Bertha, turned out to be a great help, and the business did very well. Between 1880 and 1911, seven children were born to them, four boys and three girls. These children turned out to be as industrious as their parents, and while still at school were expected to help in the holidays. So the question of the living for the young couple was easily solved. My grandfather, now grown quite prosperous, decided to start a new enterprise. He moved the family to Uioara, a resort town about fifty kilometres from Ludus, where he bought a flour mill with the help of his sons and continued to prosper. At the same time, the running of the shop in Ludus was handed over to his young son-in-law, my father.

My other grandmother, also called Bertha Heller, was, at least in material terms, less fortunate. She married Rav Peretz Goldstein, a much respected but very poor Talmudist, which guaranteed her a life of unrelieved poverty. They had eleven children. Beri was the last to be born, in 1894. I knew only five of them, three brothers and two sisters. The rest died very young from a variety of childhood ailments for which there was no cure in those days. As a young child I was conscious of the fact that the aunts and uncles on my father's side were older, more pious and poorer than my mother's family. Much later I adjusted these impressions, in their favour, realising that they were also kinder, wittier, and

possessed of a sense of humour, traits, which were rather lacking in my mother's family.

As I see now, the early married life of Beri and Rozsa was mapped out for them by the family. In 1920, immediately after they got married, my parents must have still been mere amateurs at the business of adulthood. While Beri was busy learning to be a shopkeeper, Rozsa took practical lessons in cooking and running a house, from my amiable Aunt Fanny. My aunt, much older than my father, had many fond memories of him 'as a sweet little boy', which she used to tell me about. As I myself was only about six at the time I found the notion of my father ever having been an infant very strange.

Anyway, in Ludus, surrounded by experienced female relations, Rozsa would have had plenty of support. Unusually for those days, her education in domesticity had been neglected in favour of acquiring a proper baccalaureate in commercial studies, at a reputable high school for girls in Kolozsvar. Similarly inexperienced, my father too would have had much to learn. Years at high school, and four years in the trenches, would have hardly prepared him for the task of running a busy grocery shop.

Despite their seemingly shaky beginnings at adult life, my parents' marriage turned out to be extremely happy. Theirs was one of those serendipitous unions where husband and wife totally complement each other. They shared the same puritanical ethos in which hard work and duty figured highly. In temperament they were quite different. Beri was warm, sociable, charming and endowed with a great sense of humour. Rozsa, on the other hand, was shy, reserved, serious and almost totally lacking in humour but what she lacked in that field she made up by remaining his most appreciative audience throughout their life.

Sixty years after they married he could still make her laugh. In fact, the chemistry between them generated a love which enhanced the special talents each possessed. Rozsa, shy and inexperienced at the beginning, soon revealed her special talents as a very skillful homemaker. She ran our successive homes with skills which would have done a 'time-and-motion expert' proud. Over the years she developed what must have been an innate talent for cooking. I can still almost taste those lovely aromatic soups, wonderful hot and cold meat dishes, delicious dairy dishes (of which

I was particularly fond), and an endless variety of cakes and pastries. I remember female relations, slightly envious of her success, would regularly ask for the 'secret' of this or that dish, and find, to their disappointment, that her recipes were identical with their own. However, what she could never quite remember was the exact amount of spices or herbs she had used in a particular dish because, as she told me once when I quizzed her on the subject, she 'did it on the spot'. Praised for the lightness of her cakes and pastries she found it equally difficult to explain why they turned out like that. In fact, my mother's inability to reveal her secrets was because she had none. What she did have though was genius in all that pertained to preparing food. Being excessively modest, she dismissively waved away the compliments showered on her by those who had tasted her food. I am not sure to this day whether she herself appreciated the gift she was born with.

While mother was serving her apprenticeship in the kitchen, Beri spent his days dedicated to learning how to run the large grocery shop, which, I have no doubt, he did with the same energy he later used to tackle a variety of careers as breadwinner. Parenthood followed soon after, with all three of us born within three and a half years. I was the first to arrive, in January, 1922; Ferko (Peretz) was born in July, 1923; and Ernoke (Yehezkel) followed in September, 1925. That was also the year our family, two parents and three small children, moved to Diciu.

III

Childhood in Diciu

Moments of happiness — and apprehensions of disaster

Our house and the mill beyond it dominated the plain around with little else to distract the eye as far as the horizon - where the town began. To get to Diciu you just followed the dirt road which ran past the house. If you crossed this road you found yourself on the bank of the river Kukullo, a stretch of land densely covered with reeds and water lilies, a perfect place in the summer for catching dragonflies and butterflies. But that was to come later.

At the time we moved there, in 1926, when Ferko was but two, and I, just eighteen months older, we were confined to the area in and around the house and the garden which surrounded it, usually in the company of some adult. For a while there was a strange woman we were told to call 'Freulein'. She was the German governess engaged to look after us, probably at the time my little brother Yehezkel was born. I remember neither her name nor what she looked like, but I do remember that she used to boast that before coming to us she had been looking after the children of a 'mayor', who was 'so important that the people in town would spread a red carpet before him, whenever he set foot outside his house'. I didn't know what a 'mayor' was. All the same, I sensed in her story an implied insult to my father. I had frequently watched him in the mornings as he left our house to go to the mill, and never saw anyone spread anything before him! But she didn't last long. She was dismissed, I learnt later, because she started to behave strangely after developing an unrequited passion for my father's bachelor business partner.

At first, Ferko and I were content just to roam the length and breadth of our house and garden, and, for a while, the mysterious world of the home farm and mill, beyond our house, remained a mystery. The house, an elongated building painted white, was built on two levels. You entered the kitchen through the side which faced the vegetable garden. From there you could go into the small room we used for our lunchtime meal. Next to it was a large pantry which my mother kept locked. The pantry was a real Aladdin's cave where much of the food was stored, to feed us during the long, cold winter months. The notion of tinned food, if it existed at all, was totally alien to my mother, and indeed to most other housewives. Throughout the summer and autumn months, when fresh fruit and vegetables were plentiful, the kitchens became hives of alchemy where the bounty of nature was preserved in a variety of ingenious ways. My mother's zeal turned aromatic apples, pears, purple plums, golden peaches, bright berries, beans, cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, into: jams, preserves, pickles, sauces, and much

else, until the shelves which lined the pantry walls were covered from end to end. By the time winter arrived, the pantry was crammed from floor to ceiling. The ceiling too was used, to hang hunks of beef, which had been smoked in a special oven built into the wall of the mill. Bread too was baked there. Round loaves of rye bread with gleaming brown crust, smelling of heaven, and white challah for Shabbath.

The kitchen was simply furnished. One wall was almost entirely taken up by a tall sideboard for dishes and cutlery, divided into separate dairy and meat sides according to the laws of the kashruth. In the opposite corner, next to the large iron cooker, stood a curious piece of furniture. The top was covered in zinc used as a worktop. But the lower part held a concealed bed, where our maid, Erzsi slept, as well as a deep drawer in which she kept her modest belongings. Erzsi's figure is inextricably mixed up with all the other images I have preserved of our life in Diciu. I can see her now: red hair, a round reddish face, blue eyes and a kindly expression. Later, I learnt that she had a little child of her own, who was being brought up by her parents, in a nearby village. Many years later, I heard from an acquaintance who visited there in the 1970's, that Erzsi's later life had turned out well, when her son rose to be a an important official in the local communist party, which was then in power. But at the time she looked after us, I assumed, with the natural self-centredness of small children, that she somehow belonged to our family. I recall her presence during our daily rituals, including the times for our morning and evening prayers, which she also learnt to recite while mother was teaching us to say them. True, she didn't understand a word of what she was reciting, but then, neither did we.

To reach our room and the rest of the house from the kitchen you went up some wooden stairs. By present day standards the children's room was fairly sparsely furnished. It had two beds and a cot for Ernoke, a big square table in the middle, and a white painted wardrobe opposite, which contained all our clothes and toys. Next to it stood a tall Russian stove made of green tiles, which, like the rest of the house, was heated with gas. The white china lamp attached to the ceiling was also lit by gas. One of the doors led straight to the bathroom where, for a while, before hot water was installed, we bathed in a wooden laundry tub. My parents' bedroom was next to ours. Invasion of their bedroom was frowned upon - unless one had 'a bad dream'. This alone entitled the sufferer to seek instant refuge in the reassuring warmth of their bed. These interludes didn't last long. Soon, sleep would overtake one, and the sleeper would be returned to his or her bed. In the morning, the previous night's incident would seem like a dream.

During weekdays the mill claimed my father's time, though before leaving the house he would always stop first in the nursery to give us each a kiss. I remember him, dapper in his plus fours, smelling faintly of aftershave and 'Odol', a mouthwash that came out of a white and blue china bottle. On weekday mornings, while she was cooking, Mother wore a crisp white apron over her dress, but always removed it before Father returned for the midday meal. After lunch there was a compulsory period of rest - which I hated. The tall wooden shutters closed, I lay in bed fidgeting until reprieve came an hour later. At about five, just before our supper, we would sit around the table listening to the children's hour on the radio. The sound came out of a brightly coloured papier-mache loudspeaker connected to the radio, which was kept next door in my parents' bedroom.

But our daily routine stopped before the onset of Shabbath. The preparation for the arrival of Shabbath was a slow, ritualised affair. First, the rhythmic boom of the mill engines, which never stopped during the week, would slowly die down. Indoors, the preparations for Shabbath assumed their festive order. Father, elegant in a dark suit, went off to the synagogue; our dinner table, now splendid, dressed in a white damask tablecloth, bore, at one end, the white challah baked that day in our own bakery; facing it at the other end stood two silver candlesticks with white candles, ready for my mother to light them as soon as Shabbath set in; her open palms hovered briefly over the candles as if gathering their light, then covering her face she would quietly recite the blessing, welcoming Shabbath into our home. Father's return from the synagogue, soon after, was always a lively affair. He kissed each of us, starting with my mother, wishing us a Shabbath Shalom. The dinner which followed was always a joyful mixture of the zemiroth he intoned in honour of Shabbath, before and after the meal, alternating with lavish compliments to my mother on her wonderful cooking, and expressions of satisfaction for having such 'good children'. The angels of Shabbath, invoked in father's 'zemiroth', saw to it that Shabbath was a time of sweet harmony. Sitting around our festive table, the three of us and my mother seemed to be entirely enveloped in the sense of joy which emanated from him. At such times, the outside world, which, as I grew older, seemed less and less beneficent, ceased to exist for a while. I remember thinking how elegant my parents looked. In fact, the most enduring aspect of my parents' appearance, was indeed their bandbox neatness, which persisted throughout their lives, regardless of the circumstances in which they lived, right into their old age. According to the accepted family wisdom, all matters to do with the appearance of her husband, and her children, were in my mother's domain. But her magic touch endowed us, as well as our

home, with a special lustre. Her unique talent to recreate a life of order and harmony, wherever we lived, miraculously survived everything, even the Shoah, and was just as evident in our new homes in Tivon and Kiryat Eliezer, all those years later.

Outings to town at this time were rare, and a big treat. The two horses harnessed to the barouche (a vehicle with two large wheels) had to be specially released from their more mundane employment of delivering flour. The greatest treat was a visit to Magda, the sole patisserie in town, where we had multicoloured ice cream. On one, never to be forgotten occasion, Ferko and I were taken to children's play. It was a melodrama. It started with a scene showing an evil witch stealing the heart of a sleeping princess. In the following scene, a distressed king and queen, having discovered their daughter's lifeless body, break into loud sobs and appeal to the audience for help: 'Does anyone know who stole our daughter's heart?' The audience remained silent. With the exception, that is, of four-year-old Ferko. Moved by the distress of the king and queen, he suddenly clambered onto his chair and, as loudly as he could, shouted: 'It was the witch!' Some people in the audience began to titter, but the king and queen, ignoring my little brother's intervention, went on lamenting. Confused by the lack of interest on the part of the grieving parents on the stage, Ferko burst into tears and the two of us were hastily removed from the audience.

But these occasional outings did nothing to alleviate our growing curiosity about the world, just beyond, which had been forbidden to us. After a while, when the chance offered, Ferko and I would steal through the side gate, which led straight into the adjoining home farm. Half the area was occupied by the flour mill with its constantly noisy engine room. The cottages of the mill hands stood on the opposite side, next to the cowshed and the stables. The whole area was surrounded by high wooden walls with a huge gate at each end, which were only closed at the weekends. But on ordinary weekdays, the whole area was a noisy mêlée of carts and animals. The traffic of carts pulled by horses or oxen cluttered past each other, in at one gate, carrying wheat or barley about to be milled, and out the other, piled high with sacks of newly-milled flour. Atop each pile sat a red-faced. sweating drover, whip in one hand, urging on his charge, with a mixture of curses and endearments. To cross the yard you had to pick your way between cowpats,

horse dung, and pools of urine. Over this symphony of smells and noise, the deep rhythmical boom of the mill rose in counterpoint. Ferko invariably headed for the stable, where, if he was lucky, he would be lifted up and set astride either Csezar or Bator, the two horses used for our outings. Or else, allowed to wield a big broom of twigs to help the stable hand sweep the yard. I can't remember when it was that little Erno began to join our outings. But one scene, which survives, is the sight of my two brothers inside the poultry yard, which was forbidden territory, chucking newly-laid eggs at a crowd of indignant, squawking hens.

Every now and then, a musical treat was provided by the band of the local police, which practised at an open ground nearby. On one such occasion, a rickety cart, drawn by an old horse, entered the gate just as the band began to play. At the sound of the military march, the old nag pricked up his ears and, whinnying joyously, rose on its hind legs, and minced forward in time with the beat of the march. The drover, pleased at our astonishment, pretended to scold his charge: 'The old fool! Every time he hears a march he thinks he is back in the circus.'

My own days of innocent mischief ended abruptly in the spring of 1927 when the Rumanian educational authority caught up with me. My father received an official letter to say that it was time for me to attend the local Rumanian kindergarten. I refused immediately on the grounds that I didn't know Rumanian. My father was sanguine: 'You will pick it up in no time.' Likewise, my objections to meeting strange kids were also brushed aside. The dreaded day arrived, and so I, dressed in my new fashionable check coat with its 'Sherlock Holmes' cape and red silk lining (our clothes were specially made for us by a seamstress who came to the house), and carrying my new lunch box, was driven by my father to the kindergarten in Diciu. After introducing me to the teacher, he left me there, promising to be back at midday. The experience turned out to be every bit as bad as I feared. Used to bossing my brothers, who were younger and shorter than me, I was now facing, for the first time, a bunch of strangers who were either my size or even bigger. Noon came, and I found that I still hadn't 'picked up' any Rumanian! On the way home I told my father that one day was enough and that I would not be going back. His reply was more than usually terse: 'You have to go, it's the law, and everybody has to obey the law.' 'Even you?' I asked incredulously. The discovery that even he had to submit to this thing called 'the law' was a great disappointment. Up till then, he and my mother were the only lawgivers I knew. They laid down the law, and we obeyed. I was greatly looking forward to the time when it would be my turn to lay down the law to others. Now it seemed this was not to be, or at least, not yet. The clash about the kindergarten was the first occasion, but by no means the last, when my parents and I differed about what was best for me.

IV

Ludus, 1929

My year at kindergarten ended successfully. I did 'pick up' some Rumanian and even mastered all the steps of Calusari' a folk dance imitating horsemen, which involved much noisy stamping and kicking. This dance became my piece de resistance, my sole social accomplishment for some years to come.

The thought that I was about to start 'real' school in the autumn no longer frightened me. But when we returned from our holiday another shock awaited me. Apparently, the local primary school would not accept me because, at six-and-a-half, I would be too young. 'I don't mind waiting,' I said. But they had other ideas. Apparently the Jewish primary school in Ludus was prepared to take me. I was dumbfounded. They had arranged all this without asking me? My father tried to placate me: 'You would be staying with Granny.' True, I did like my Ludus granny. And I quite looked forward to spending time with my two cousins Peretz and Esther who were great fun. Peretz, who was eight at the time, was full of jokes. (His ability to make people laugh never deserted him. It was still in evidence fifty years later. The occasion was the funeral of an elderly relation we hardly knew. To while away the time he insisted on telling those standing next to him, one of his jokes, in sotto voce. The effect was quite devastating. The sombre silence which precedes such service was suddenly broken by the sound of hysterical suppressed laughter, much to the disgust of those further away who hadn't heard his joke.)

But what upset me most about my parents' decision to send me to Ludus was the suspicion that they might not miss me. The suspicion that this might be true, revived from time to time, usually when they were leaving after one of their visits. But my morbid suspicions were soon forgotten in the company of my two mischievous cousins. During the week, when adults were busy, we were left free to roam far and wide in the dirt streets of Ludus. School over, we were off, in search of fun. Our wanderings would often begin at our granny's house. Her modest cottage, with its four plain rooms held little of interest. But after the weather turned warm we discovered behind the cottage, in what had been my late grandfather's garden, a great place for hide-and-seek. Left untended for years, the garden had become a wild meadow of tall grasses and wild flowers. An old garden shed stood in one corner, and next to it, the remains of an outside privy. In the summer-heat, overgrown with sweet-smelling climbers, the remnants of the loo became an aromatic bower of fragrant jasmine and morning glory, and the favourite meeting place of every insect in the neighbourhood. It was a good place for catching butterflies for our collections.

But, of the preceding winter spent in my granny's cottage I remember very little.

All that survives is the memory of afternoons, when, seated at the kitchen table, I would do my homework, while from next door came the sound of a clock ticking in unison, with the gentle snoring of my granny taking her afternoon nap. Having to look after a six-year-old, at the age of seventy-seven, could not have been all that easy. In spite of her age, she usually bore our rowdy presence with good humour. On the rare occasions she got angry, it was when we wanted to know the name of some dish or other that she had set before us. Her formulaic answer, delivered in a terse voice, was always the same: 'It's called, "Eat me!" ' I imagine this was the reply she must have given to similar enquiries from her children - her own children in the distant past. Feeding five of them, on the meagre earnings of her Talmudist husband, would have been a struggle. She had borne him eleven children, but six died in infancy from various ailments, for which there was no cure then.

My grandmother's cottage was in a side street, just two minutes walk from Uncle Alexander's grocery, a place full of possibilities for discovery and mischief. The grocery faced the main street just opposite the Catholic Church. The rest of the house and various outhouses were hidden from view behind a tall fence. Outside, the street broadened into a shapeless area, with the Catholic church at one end and the apothecary and paper shop opposite. To get to my uncle's place we had to cross the main street which meant negotiating our way among the puddles of animal urine, green cowpats, and piles of black horse manure which marked the progress of the buffalo wagons and horse carts, the most frequent mode of transport at that time.

On Thursdays, however, Ludus swelled from a sleepy village into a self-important market place. Our vantage point for watching the goings-on was in front of the apothecary's shop, which stood on the elevated side of the uneven street - whose whole length was taken up with peasant carts full of produce. Cages full of cackling poultry, with carts piled high with fruit and vegetables, sweaty rounds of white cheese wrapped in vine leaves stood next to churns of sour cream. Market day was also for other business, for calling on the notary for legal advice, or visiting the dentist to get rid of a troublesome tooth. On market days my uncle's shop was full of customers, mainly the peasants, who, flush after a successful sale would call in to celebrate with a glass or two of 'tzuica', a particularly lethal form of plum brandy, which my uncle brewed on the premises. But the shop contained a large variety of goods - enough to supply most of the needs of its rural customers. From hooks embedded in the rafters hung iron buckets, scythes, large honing stones, oil lamps with tin shades, side-by-side with cones of sugar wrapped in blue paper The floor was almost entirely taken up with sacks of pickled cabbage, rice, beans, salt fish, and even foreign delicacies such as black olives. On market days the capacity of the shop seemed to expand to make room for the many customers. During the week we were forbidden to enter the shop. But on Shabbath, while my uncle and his older sons went to the synagogue, we would sneak in by the back door making straight for the glass jar of boiled sweets. Then, with pockets bulging, we would hide our booty in a dark corner in one of the still rooms where Uncle Alexander

brewed his plum 'tzuica'.

Sometimes, if threatened with discovery, we would take refuge at the house of my Aunt Bozsi who lived nearby. My beautiful Aunt Bozsi from Ujvar had just married Jakob Berkovits, a handsome young landowner. 'Going to see Bozsi' was at the top of our favourite activities. She always welcomed us, three slightly scruffy seven-year-olds, greeting us with honey cake and other delicacies. Best of all, she allowed us to paddle in the shallow stream which ran across the far end of the garden.

Eventually, my first school year came to an end and I found that I knew how to read and write, and even a little arithmetic. At first, just as I expected. I was thrilled to be home. But something had changed. My stay in Ludus, and the companionship of my two daring cousins, had given me a taste for independence. Then I had a great idea: 'I shall spend the summer with Grandfather at my grandparents' home in Uioara.' My idea was not entirely strange. Previous visits there made me conscious that my grandfather, unlike my grandmother, was very glad to see me. When I informed my mother, she protested: 'But you have just come home'. 'Never mind,' I consoled her grandly, 'You'll see lots of me when school begins.' The truth was that life at home, with only my two little brothers for company, seemed too quiet after my school year in Ludus. I craved variety and entertainment, and knew that in Ujvar, in the company of my young aunts and uncles, I would find both.

Holidays in Uioara became, for the next nine years, a regular event. My two aunts still in their and four batchelor uncles were still at home. I have a photograph of all of them together,including me aged six, taken in 1928, by my eldest uncle Jozsi, with a Kodak camera very popular at the time. The one incongruous element is the presence of a young man in officers uniform, called Dian who was an army friend of my uncle Gyula. My mother presence means that she was on one of her occasional visits to the family home. While she enjoyed the company of her siblings she was on the whole reluctant to leave her own family. But we three, with the typical heartlessness of our age rather enjoyed these occasions because of the various privileges we were allowed to enjoy as a compensation for her absence. The novelty of being allowed to sleep in our parents' bedroom plus the lovely bedtime stories father told us night after night were a special treat. As a rule the two boys slept on either side of my father in the big bed, while I being the eldest

slept on the sofa. at the foot of the bed. Once begun the stories went on punctuated only by father calling out 'halt' to which, we his listeners replied to indicate who was still awake. I was usually the last.

But after acquiring a taste for adventure the prospect of being around my young aunts and uncles whose life appeared to me as a never ending round of fun, beckoned. To start with, Uioara, being a proper health spa boasted hot and cold salt pools, where we swam during the hot summer afternoons. On Sundays, a band would play in the centre of the pretty park around the spa. Frequently, I would wheedle someone to buy me an ice cream in the Italian pastry shop. In the evenings, the friends of my aunts and uncles would come, and there would be dancing to the sound of the gramophone or the radio - and if I kept 'very quiet', I would be allowed to sit in a corner and watch. Sometimes my aunts' admirers would bring gypsies to serenade them. Things went wrong on one occasion, when the serenade began under my grandparents' window.

At this time, my two aunts, Lilli and Bozsi, still in their teens, were my role models. To me, they were the prettiest and most accomplished young women imaginable. My uncles married one by one and grandfather set each of them up in their own homes. As I grew older my relationship with Lilli became very close. She became my guide and the counsellor of my teenaged year. My presence in the many snapshots of Lilli and her friends taken over the years prove how often I was allowed to tag along when they were having fun.

But the house itself, where I roamed unsupervised offered many distractions. Particularly those room which held the charm of the forbidden. On a high shelf, in the 'girls room' there was an album which contained, according to the fashion of the time, pictures of film stars. Standing on tiptoes on a chair I could just reach this album.Ignoring all injunctions to the contrary I would regularly take it down to gaze at the images of those wondrous creatures. In the room next door, called the 'salon' there was a tall Gothic style chest of drawers, where my grandmother kept mysterious objects: old fans, faded lace, and framed 'silhouettes', profiles of her and my grandfather, cut out of black silk and framed as a picture, made, probably, by some artist at one of the Italian seaside resorts they frequented as a

young couple. In a picture taken at that time, he sits, legs casually crossed, suit fashionably narrow, shirt collar high, as worn by men in Europe before the First World War. She, next to him, [sits very straight, in a high-bosomed dress.By her side stand my uncle Gyula aged about eleven holding a large hoop they used to amuse children with. The whole picture an epitome of up-to-date elegance. Another photograph of that period shows grandfather in the company of four equally prosperous looking men, one of them I recognize as his cousin.

In Uioara grandfather's business as a flour miller proved very successful. As his four boys grew up, they joined their father in the business. Unlike my grandmother who was fun but quite venal grandfather remained modest, almost austere in his way of life. He is the only real live, old-fashioned patriarch I ever knew.

To escape the August heat our whole family would make the trek to one of the picturesque villages, high up in the Carpathian mountains. These were tribal occasions in which several generations, from the oldest to the youngest, took part. The custom was for the men of the family to take turns to join their families for short periods. Once settled in, the women and children would remain there for about a month. The last such holiday I remember well was in a place called 'Ratosnya' (Hung.), in the Northern Carpathians. Situated on the richly wooded slopes of the high mountains, surrounded by towering cliffs, criss-crossed by rushing streams, in which, incredibly, real silver trout leapt amongst the rocks, these villages were to me a very paradise. Recently I came across pictures of Ratosnya on the Internet. To my delight and surprise, the towering cliffs and the gorge with the waterfall at Ratosnya still look just as magnificent as I remembered them.

The organisation of our trek to the mountains required all of my grandmother's logistic skills. First, two household servants were sent up to prepare the place we had rented for the summer. With them went a great deal of the paraphernalia needed for our everyday living. Then, a temporary kitchen and place for dining were built, out of freshly-cut pinewood. The roof, made of plaited willow, was covered with aromatic pine branches, which were regularly changed to stay fresh. Last, came the family. Some years ago I wrote a story entitled 'Kingrock' which takes place in such a mountain village.

In September 1929, I became a pupil in our local primary school and stayed there for nearly three years. I have few affectionate memories of the place. To me school was something to be endured, something that went with growing up. There were no Jewish children in my class. Although I did make some friends, these friendships held an underlying note of discomfort, due mostly to the barrier my religion raised between us. I never questioned the constraints which my Jewishness imposed on me. My father's gift of infusing with joy our Friday nights, and all the rest of our festivals, made us feel that to be Jewish was a unique privilege. The discovery that there were others, who did not share this view, was

about to happen. It was to be my first encounter with Christian ritual.

On the very first day at my new school, before the class began, a girl stood up and recited something I recognised as a prayer, because she addressed it to God. When she finished, all the children made the sign of the cross, except for me. My initial confusion turned to fear when the girl standing next to me asked me the reason why I didn't make the sign of the cross. I said: 'I am Jewish, we don't do that.' The girl, whose name was Constanza, was astonished: 'But everyone knows the Lord's Prayer.' We were totally at cross-purposes. When my father came to pick me up from school I told him that I would have to learn 'The Lord's Prayer' because everyone in the class took turns to recite it. My father remained unperturbed: 'No one will ask you to recite it. Mr.Molnar, your teacher knows we are Jewish.'

But, as it turned out, he was wrong. One morning, a week or two later, when the time came for morning prayers, Mr. Molnar pointed at me, a sign that it was my turn to recite 'Our Father'. Icy with shock, but too frightened to protest I began my halting recital repeating the words I had heard others recite the previous mornings. I managed as far as: 'Thy will be done', when my memory, of which I was proud, let me down. After what seemed to be an interminable silence Mr. Molnar, finished the prayer and crossed himself, never once glancing in my direction. Then, as if nothing had happened, the class began. But for me things were no longer the same. In the first break some classmates, bolder than Constanza (who became my friend), questioned me: 'Why don't you know the "Lord's Prayer." ' 'We pray in Hebrew. Because that's the language of the Bible,' I replied, repeating my father's reply whenever I objected to learning my letters in Hebrew. My listeners, who 'knew for a fact' that the Bible was written in Hungarian, remained unconvinced. As for me, I never doubted my father's words. All the same, his attempts to teach me met with dumb resistance because I didn't see why I had to pray to God in a language which God understood but I didn't. Eventually my fellow pupils accepted me and my oddities. And on the occasions when I was their guest, the subject of my religion was avoided, nor did their mothers tempt me with the bacon patties, a delicacy popular with the children.

The rest of that year at school passed uneventfully. The most important memory I have of that period concerns the first spiritual discovery I made for myself. Being a religious child, I faithfully recited my morning and evening prayers hoping that God would understand them. But the fact that I didn't, continued to bother me.

Then, one Saturday afternoon, my usual time for leisure reading, I came across a Hebrew prayer in the Jewish literary monthly called Mult es Jovo ('Past and Present' in Hung.), to which my parents were regular subscribers. It was apparently the prayer which Joseph Pataki, the editor of the magazine, was in the habit of reciting every night before he went to sleep. It named the four archangels Michael, Gabriel, Ariel and Raphael as Guardians, and invoked the spirit of the Lord, the Shehinah, from above. In a moment of instant revelation, I knew that these words were a powerful formula for warding off the threat of werewolves, ghouls and other unnamed horrors, which, I imagined, lurked outside, beyond the closed shutters of the nursery. And from that moment, I decided to adopt it as my own mantra, every bit as powerful as the signs of the cross my Christian schoolmates resorted to in their moment of stress.

Unfortunately for me, the moment when I really needed some magic words, to 'ward off evil', took place in the daytime. It happened during my third school year, on the last day before the Easter holidays began. I was on my way home, having just parted from Constanza who lived in a house on the edge of town. I hurried to get home, excited, looking forward to the coming Seder. I looked forward to the familiar ritual, to the story of the Exodus, to the feeling that we were special. Suddenly I found myself trapped by two thick arms, one across my chest, another across my eyes. Blind and half suffocated I heard a voice hissing from above: 'Jew, you crucified Christ.' 'I have a knife in my pouch to cut your throat with.' 'The voice, I recognized, was that of the postman's daughter, who sometimes distributed the mail instead of her father. I struggled and somehow, I don't remember how, I managed to tear myself free. Frightened and confused, I ran the rest of the way home. After my parents managed to calm me down, father explained about the crucifixion. It was, he said, a lie, invented against us by our enemies. I remained troubled. 'If it is a lie, why do our enemies keep repeating it?' But to that he had no explanation. This experience shattered, for good, the cocoon of security in which our parents had enveloped us.

My fourth and last school year in Diciu turned out to be a year of trials and tribulations for the whole family. Late that autumn, the mill burnt down. The events I described in a story called 'The Fire' quoted here, is a fairly realistic account of events as I remember them.

> 'At first it was just voices. Reluctantly, I opened my eyes to darkness. Then, impatient hands yanked me out of bed. Ignoring my protestations, Erzsi, our maid, ordered me to get dressed immediately. She was busy dressing Ferko, who, half-asleep, stood unresisting. My mother was holding Ernoke. Somebody said, 'The mill's on fire, we have to leave.' Wide awake by now. I became conscious of voices shouting and the howl of sirens. Outside, the carriage, harnessed to two horses, is waiting for us. Our coachman hurriedly bundles us into the barouche. My father appears out of the dark. He kisses us, but I notice, anxiously, that he stays behind. 'Don't worry,' he says, 'We'll soon put it out.' As the coach begins to move. I strain to look back. The sound of the fire is like thunder and it pursues us a long way. Then, the sound of explosions, one following another, louder and louder. 'It's the sacks of flour exploding,' says the coachman, 'flour burns something fierce.' My mother, silent, clutches the three of us, as if we too were in danger. Gradually, the sound grows less, but when I look back, I see tongues of fire lashing the darkness, reaching high up, lighting up the darkness.'

The mill burnt for three days. It took six weeks before we returned from town, to our home. During our absence, winter had set in. From a sky grey like an upturned porridge bowl, a steady sheet of snow fell, blotting out the landscape. Charred remains in the snow, outlining a huge yawning gap, marked the place w0here the mill had been. The sweet animal smell of milk and dung, which clung to the area around the cowshed was gone. Instead, the air was full of a raw, bitter smell, which clawed at the throat and brought tears to the eyes. But worst of all was the silence; or rather the absence of the friendly, booming sound which had filled the air when the mill was still there.

Then my father fell ill and was taken for treatment to the Jewish Hospital in Kolozsvar. Mother went with him, taking Ernoke, who was only five-and-a-half at the time. This was at the beginning of the second term at school. Ferko was sent to finish the rest of the school term in Ujvar. I was left in Diciu in the care of some friends. Then, my father recovered, and we moved to Blaj, a town not far away, where he bought another mill. But during those weeks of illness and separation, I lost for good the certainty I had before, that life would always turn out to be alright.

V

Cluj (1932-1940)

When I began this retrospective chronicle, I had every intention of leaving the town of Blaj (Hung. Balazsfalva) out of my account. But, on further reflection, I feel that the eighteen months spent in that dusty little town, to which we removed when we left Diciu, was more than just an insignificant interlude between two other places.

There was another reason for my reluctance to conjure up memories of our stay in Blaj. Our time there had been overshadowed by constant worries about the new mill. From my parents' whispered conversations I understood that there was 'something wrong' with the 'axle' of the engine, which drove the mill. Each time it broke down, an 'expert' would be called in to fix it, but then, after a few days' relief, it would give up the ghost again. And so the mood of my parents at that time, likewise, fluctuated with the fortunes of the mill. I was old enough to understand their worries, yet, still a child, knew that I was unable to help them. I felt very frustrated. The question of whether the mill-engine would work or not, haunted our days. Each morning, as soon as Father left for work, I would station myself in our front garden, within earshot of the machinery, and strain my ears, willing it to work. The throbbing of the engine, which told me that all was well, brought instant relief. But on the days when the lengthening silence signalled more trouble I would be prey to the most terrible dejection.

The episode of the axle lasted no more than the first months of our summer there. Once it was over, I lapsed again into a state of mind better suited to my age. For a while I was preoccupied with the business of finding friends amongst the Jewish girls I got to know in the local synagogue. Being socially inexperienced I had no idea how to approach them. But this time luck was on my side. One day, I happened to mention to one of the girls that we had a mulberry tree in our yard. This information turned me, from a social outcast, into an instant success. Mulberry trees were apparently rare in the vicinity, but the breeding of silkworms, which was a very popular pastime just then amongst the boys and girls, demanded a readily available supply of fresh leaves. An added attraction was the abundant, juicy black fruit which ripened in August. To reach either only required a safe and easy climb amongst the old branches. Nevertheless, girls were debarred from this activity on the grounds of propriety. According to my mother, because girls wore skirts, they were in constant danger of exposing their knickers to the gaze of any passer-by, who happened to look up. There were no passers-by in our yard, and my friends and I completely disregarded this rule. If she caught me in the act, my mother would sternly call up: 'Come down at once, your knickers are showing.'

But my social standing grew even more with the discovery we made one long

Shabbath afternoon. Desperate for some distraction, a group of us loitered in the front garden from where there was an unimpeded view of the railway embankment opposite. Not that we expected much. Once or twice a day a local train, driven by a small steam locomotive, would stop for the odd passenger travelling to some nearby village. On this particular Shabbath afternoon, things turned out differently. The train that hove into sight was not the 'coffeegrinder' we knew but something much more majestic. Mesmerised, we watched as the glossy, black giant locomotive, towing a long train of green and gold carriages, slowed to a halt before our very eyes, exhaling a long a long breath of steam from its funnels. (This apparition, had we but known it, was a regular event. Every Saturday evening, the famous Orient Express, on its regular route from Europe to Istanbul, took a few minutes off at our shabby station to fill its water tank from the station pump.) Then, in the gathering gloom, the longest of the coaches was suddenly lit up from within, revealing, of all things, an elegant dining room. The light came from the several crystal chandeliers which hung from the ceiling. Through the open curtains, we had a perfect view of tables covered in white damask, laden with silver dishes filled with who knows what delicacies, and next to them, sparkling crystal goblets. At every table, men and women elegant in party clothes sat facing each other. Every now and then, a waiter would refill a tall glass with a foaming liquid, which, someone said, was champagne! Many smoked Russian cigarettes (I recognised these because, they were like the ones kept in a silver box in our dining room in Diciu). These must be, I told myself, the real sophisticated people, whose photographs I had admired in Theatre Life, my aunts' magazine. According to the articles in it, the lives these people led were a never-ending round of travelling and staying in hotels at places like St Moritz, or Cannes. In that ineffable moment, I promised myself that when I grew up I would be like them; I can't remember what Ferko, who was also there, thought of it. (In the fullness of time, my wish was granted, but only in the ironic way that wishes are granted in real life. I became an advertising executive, and in this capacity travelled a great deal, frequently staying in hotels, and, for a while, I even used a long cigarette holder. But instead of the perfumed interior of the Orient Express I had to make do with noisy, smelly jet planes, and the hotels where I stayed had little in common with the luxury hotels of pre-war Biarritz or Cannes.)

During our short stay in Blaj, Ferko, Ernoke and I became much closer. The backyard of our house, which, to my father's disgust, also contained a disused pigsty, had many interesting nooks and crannies including a woodshed, where logs were stored for the kitchen fire and the pot-bellied iron stove, which heated the rest of our small house. These, together with the rusty tools which the previous owner left behind, served for

many of our games. The wood and the tools were particularly handy for building a 'Robinson Crusoe' type hut - a game which we began after I read the book. Ferko, eight and a half to my ten years, was taller than me, a great deal stronger, and, more daring. Ernoke, a small and serious little boy, treated by both of us with protective affection, was, by then, also allowed to take part in our games. The two of them also spent a great deal of time in the company of two boisterous Hungarian boys who lived next door. The fence which separated our two houses, had some slats missing which offered a convenient shortcut. Through this gap, the two of them would disappear, for long periods, in pursuit of, I knew not what games, and from which I was excluded.

The exact circumstances of our move from Blaj to Cluj (Hung. Kolozsvar) in 1934 are lost to me now. Our first home in Cluj was a flat in a crowded block. This was my first experience of living 'cheek by jowl' with a lot of strangers, and I didn't like it a bit. The name of our street was similarly offensive. It was called Meszaros Utca, Butcher's Street, a name I considered vulgar. Fortunately, soon after, my parents found a large airy flat, in a street called Ferenc Jozsef utca (Emperor Franz Josef street), whose name and prestigious location both satisfied my childish snobbery.

I started my high school education at the French Lycée in Vasarhely, a town not far from Ludus, where Aunt Esther, my father's sister, lived. But when I returned for the christmas holidays I made up my mind to stay at home. My parents, overcoming their earlier reluctance to a convent school education, enrolled me at the local Christian Girls' High School, run by the Greek-Orthodox Church. The following year, in Cluj, I was enrolled at the Liceul Principesa Ileana (Princess Helen Lycée). Though less prestigious than its rival, the Liceul Regina Maria, it exempted Jewish pupils from having to write on the Shabbath morning, when attendance was compulsory. This privilege was short-lived, and, sometime during the following year, it was abolished without explanation. The seven girls, out of thirty-five, who were Jewish, complied without a murmur, because, we all knew that there was no higher to which we could appeal. I made up my mind to write but not tell my father, fearing that, if he knew, he would feel obliged to look for a more permissive school for me, elsewhere. To save us both embarrassment, I made sure that before I returned home at midday on Shabbath, I got rid of any tell-tale ink spots on my fingers. To myself, I argued that if God existed he would surely see that I was only breaking the Shabbath because of antisemitism.

By 1936, the Jews in Rumania were increasingly aware of antisemitism in public life. Economic crisis and political unrest, in Germany and elsewhere, provided fertile political soil for antisemitism to flourish. On 30th of January, 1933, Hitler assumed full power as Chancellor of the German Reich. In Rumania, the liberal premier Ion Duca was murdered by Rumanian fascists. In 1934, the Uj Kelet, our Hungarian Jewish daily, cited the demand of the English politician, Oswald Mosley, to establish a 'modern dictatorship' in England, similar to the new regime

Mussolini, his idol, had established in Italy. Though we staunchly refused to believe that England could succumb to fascism, this item of news only increased our foreboding about the future. Headlines, in Hungarian and Rumanian papers, carried daily news of mounting anti-Jewish legislation in Germany. At the same time, murmurs of approval of these measures could be heard in other countries in Europe. Though I grew up to regard antisemitism as a historical 'given', I seethed with anger that we Jews were nothing more than helpless playthings in the grip of some brutish capricious force. The stoical attitude of my larger family exasperated me. At the next Pessach meal, with all the family present, I confronted them: 'We can't just sit here like frightened sheep, doing nothing.' My grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, around our festive table, showed remarkable forbearance. 'You are right, the situation is not good for us, but there is nothing we can do just now.' Desperate to convince them that the time for action was right then and there, I persisted: 'Why can't we sell the mills and go to Palestine — now?' 'No one is interested in buying them, ' my grandfather explained, 'because the Government is going to nationalise Jewish property.' Soon after this conversation, 'The Government' did indeed appear, in the shape of two shady-looking officials, who installed themselves in the best office. However, as they had no idea how to run the mill they were obliged to leave the family to run it. During our talk, my grandfather also reminded me that the year before, in 1934, both he and my uncle Gyula (Julius) took a trip to Palestine, in order to see if it was possible to start a flour mill there. But what they learnt about the situation in the Yishuv convinced them that the economic conditions were not favourable for starting such a business. Their arguments silenced me. The truth was that even I, who had recently become a member of the labour Zionist youth organisation Habonim, could not imagine my family turning to chalutziut at their time of life. I, at the age of fourteen, was completely set on doing just that, but for the time being I thought it wiser, not to talk about it.

The subject of my connection with Habonim was a bone of contention between us. Not long before, my parents had found out that I had enrolled in Habonim. The fact that I did so without getting their permission first, or even telling them, sparked a terrible row. The circumstances in which my transgression was discovered, somehow, made the whole matter worse. One afternoon, while working in his office, my father's attention was drawn to the sound of persistent whistling coming from the street. Looking out of the window, he saw some boys, whom he described as 'louts'. When he asked what they were doing, they said they were members of Habonim, and that the whistle was our signal for calling each other. My father was generally sweet tempered man, though he did have the occasional fit of temper. This was one of those occasions. The chaverim left without speaking to me. For the rest of that afternoon, I was subjected to a prolonged questioning concerning the nature, political leanings and ethics of the movement. The news that I wanted to belong to a Zionist youth movement with socialist ideals, did not please him. In principle, he explained, he had no objection to my joining a such a movement — he was a Zionist himself. But he refused to

contemplate the idea of my joining a group of 'anti-religious revolutionaries, who plan to live in a commune'. 'What's wrong with joining the Misrahi?' he argued. Misrahi was religious, respectable and dull. Besides, I wanted action not prayer. Nor could I admit to him that what first attracted me to this particular group was precisely their air of subversiveness, the very thing he objected to.

I first saw them, one day, on my way home from school. A group of boys and girls, dressed like me in school uniforms, walking just ahead of me. I instantly took to the careless manner in which they wore their uniforms, with coats unbuttoned, caps jauntily tilted, all in defiance of the 'buttoned-up' manner in which officialdom expected them to be worn. They walked side by side, deep in animated conversation, oblivious of everyone else, as if the whole street belonged to them. Following close at their heels, to catch what they were saying, I guessed, rightly, that they must be members of one of the Zionist youth groups I had lately read about in the local Uj Kelet. Soon after, one of the boys from the group approached me and invited me to come to a meeting; it seemed that they had noticed me too. My first meeting with the group confirmed my initial impression of them as revolutionaries. The ideals of the movement instantly captivated my imagination. Building a free and egalitarian society for Jews in Eretz Yisrael, promised a sort of hope for the future, and a moral vindication, for which, (had I but known) I had been thirsting. No more ambivalent status of being Hungarian-speaking Jews in a Rumanian state. We were Jews, and we were going to build our own Homeland. With this one step we would leave the millennial curse of antisemitism forever behind us.

My first direct experience of antisemitism, in its most brutish and irrational form, was at the age of eight, when the postman's daughter in Diciu threatened to kill me, because, she said, I 'crucified Christ'! As I grew up, I learnt to recognise in the behaviour of others the signs of hostility, and learnt not to react to it. By the middle of 1937, displays of antisemitic behaviour had multiplied, though it was not till 1938 that the Jews in the class were segregated in one corner of the classroom. But on one particular day, at the end of a particularly galling German lesson, during which our teacher, Mme Chinezu, kept extolling the virtues of the German Reich, my painfully maintained composure broke down. As Chinezu left the class, I walked up to the blackboard and began filling it up with large Hebrew letters. The effect on the rest of the class was electric. The Rumanian girls in the class, who were secret members of the fascist Iron Guard, began to buzz like angry bees. Someone hurried to denounce me to the Principal. I was summoned to her office, accused of being a troublemaker and threatened with expulsion. My father was summoned to the school and warned that my behaviour would not be tolerated.

Sad, rather than angry, Father questioned me: 'What point were you making?' I had no answer. I felt embarrassed at my folly. 'They have enough worries, just bringing us up,' I told myself, and for my remaining time at the Lycée, I restrained myself.

But the consequences of this rash act haunted me for a while. My Jewish schoolmates were angry because, I was causing them embarrassment, and, for the rest of that school year, with the exception of a couple of brave souls, they avoided my company during school time. But even before this incident occurred, I had been singled out for being 'subversive'. Several of the members of the fascist youth group in my class suspected that I was a member of some Jewish youth movement because they saw me after school in the company of some chaverim. On that occasion, both they and I were guilty of breaking school rules by not being in uniform. According to the draconian school rules, laid down during the regime of King Carol (who feared both communists and nazis), students were expected to wear armbands bearing prominent identity numbers, with their uniforms. I was number 380. To this day I don't know whether my activities were known to the school authorities, and, if so, whether they cared. Ironically, their desire to be rid of the Jews, and my wish to leave Rumania, happened to coincide. They probably knew about the clandestine activities of the nazi girls but avoided confrontation because of the possibility that the Iron Guard might one day come to power. Unlike my Jewish classmates, these girls made a point of seeking me out. But only in order to provoke me into admitting that I intended to emigrate to Palestine. This admission would have made me suspect of engaging in Zionist political activity, as well as being confirmation of disloyalty to the Rumanian state. Their malice was no more than a classroom reflection of what was going on in the outside world. The seemingly unstoppable advance of Hitler's power in Europe began casting a heavy shadow over our lives. In 1938, after Hitler annexed Austria, occupied the Sudetenland and then marched into Czechoslovakia, our own future in Rumania, next door, became anybody's guess.

By 1937 my parents had relented, and, thereafter, I no longer needed to hide my activities in Habonim. Relieved of the need for secrecy, I became a lot happier. Family peace was restored, and with it our habit of animated mealtime conversations. The talk was usually about what we had done at school that day, or the time spent with our friends. This habit of recounting our doings began when I first started kindergarten. Throughout the years, our parents remained our most appreciative audience, never showing boredom no matter how meandering the story. As the boys grew bigger, they too joined in, but I fear that I was inclined to dominate the conversation. My brothers were both more reserved and more modest than I, who never doubted, in those days, that what I had to say was always of interest to my parents. Ferko and Ernoke were probably far less entranced, but they didn't show it. On the other hand, I know for a fact that the privileges I enjoyed as the eldest, and as a 'girl', did sometimes annoy them. I learnt this from a diary Ernoke kept when he was nine. His interest lasted only a

few days, and when he threw it away my mother and I thought we should keep it for posterity. To my regret it was lost, along with so much else. The injustice which particularly irked my little brother apparently concerned a family custom. My father objected to we children ringing the bell for the maid at mealtimes. Instead, taking it in turns, one of us would go and tell the maid in person that we were ready for the next course. The trouble was that I was excused this duty, because, he said: 'She is the biggest — and she is a girl.' But did I take my turn after that (after discovering Ernoke's complaint)? Alas, I can't remember.

Ernoke was nine years old when we moved to Cluj. Serious as well as dutiful, and enchantingly innocent, he was everyone's favourite. Even my Sternberg granny, who had no time for us, her two elder grandchildren, was very fond of him. His family nickname 'Tati' ('little father' in Hungarian) suited him to perfection. If I remember right, it was about this time that he began his great project of reading the whole of my parents' Hungarian Encyclopaedia, 'from A to Z'. I can still see him, as he lay sprawled on the carpet, spectacles on his nose, totally engrossed in learning 'everything'. Another memory of this period is linked to the wedding of our beloved aunt Lilli, to Andor Ullman, a wealthy paint manufacturer from Nagyvarad (Ruman. Oradea Mare). Ernoke was very upset. What made him sad was, he told us, that he hoped his beloved aunt Lilly would wait for him to grow up so that he could marry her himself! In fact Lilly's modest charm and gentleness drew everyone to her. Everyone felt a little sad. Her new home was to be in Nagyvarad (Oradea Mare) which, by Transylvanian standards, was a long way from where we lived. I too was going to miss her presence. My memories of holidays in Uioara, at my grandfather's house, were entirely bound up with her constant reassuring presence as my most trusted and beloved confidante and companion. Lilly's absence was alleviated for me by my newly resumed activities in Habonim — this time with activities in Habonim, this time with my parents' permission. The reason for their change of heart was no doubt connected with the atmosphere of growing atmosphere which was almost palpable. From then on until I made aliyah, the movement became the centre of my daily life. During the week we met after school, often at each others' houses. Our home also became a favourite meeting place. I can still conjure up before me the picture of chaverim in possession of our sitting room. A bunch of teenagers, boys and girls, carelessly sprawled over the sofa and the carpet, engaged in noisy disputation, busily consuming large quantities of my mother's store bread and jam. Our weekend gatherings were often spent in hot debate on some aspect of the movement's ideology. New members, like me, modestly silent, accepted all we heard with uncritical enthusiasm. The most active participants in these debates were the older, more experienced, eighteen to twenty-year-olds. Their talk, peppered with political and sociological terms went way above my head. Nevertheless I was dazzled by their sophistication. 'What was the meaning of dialectical materialism?' 'Would I ever understand Das Kapital?' Fired by ambition, as much as by intellectual curiosity I resolved to master the subject. I got hold of a list of recommended titles and set off on a feverish course of reading which I found, I remember, very hard going.

The other task I set myself, to learn to speak ivrit, was more enjoyable; learning languages had always come easily to me. The curriculum of the Lycée included language and literature in Latin, Rumanian, French and German, all of which I enjoyed. Besides, I had been reading ivrit, without understanding any of it, from the age of five. Now at last the prayers I had been taught over the years, and the enforced readings from the Pirkey Avot (against which I had rebelled at the age of nine), all began to make sense.

A topic which frequently came up was the relative moral worth of one youth movement versus another — never doubting that our ideology was the most sound. My own views, I remember, were utterly simplistic. The Noar ha Tzioni was not radical enough by our standards, Shomer Hatzair, on the other hand, was too radical, and Betar, the militaristic Zionist youth group, was dismissed as being altogether beyond the pale.

On a few memorable occasions a visiting shaliach, passing through Transylvania, would give us an account of the joys and problems of kibbutz life. What they said about hardships meant nothing to us; we never doubted for a moment our ability to cope with any difficulty that might come our way. But beyond our normal teenage bumptiousness, our confidence was also enhanced by the new sense of identity we had acquired through the ideals of the movement. The cultural and social ambiguities of our status, as 'Hungarian-speaking Jews in a Rumanian state', which had plagued us before, had now ceased to matter. We were neither Rumanians nor Hungarians but Jews, who were going to build our homeland in Eretz Yisrael.

By the end of 1937 Ferko, to my joy, also joined Habonim. The leader of his group of young chaverim, called Gyula (Yona Rosen in Israel), remained a lifelong friend. In contrast to his attitude in my case, Father approved Ferko's choice without reservation. However, they were less enthusiastic about his attitude to study. At the age of thirteen Ferko was becoming a tall, handsome, loveable boy. While undoubtedly bright, he was at this time showing a very marked reluctance to put his mind to subjects that bored him. At school he did very well in maths geography and drawing, but flatly refused to study history or literature, preferring instead to read comics about football. Remonstrations citing the example of his more industrious siblings failed to move him. At last, thoroughly baffled, my parents turned for advice to a child psychologist, who had recently

opened a practice in Cluj. After a lengthy interview with the reluctant student, the psychologist advised my parents to stop forcing my brother to study the subjects he hated, and to let him concentrate instead on the subjects he was good at. With commendable wisdom, they followed his advice and, after Ferko had finished his fourth year at the Lycée, he began a course in technical studies, which included an apprenticeship with 'a fine instrument maker'. He started the course in September 1939, a few months before my aliyah, and from the letters I later received from home, it was clear that the course had turned out to be ideally suited to his talents.

Looking back on my own activities before I left home I have a keen memory of the ideas and activities which preoccupied us in the movement but very little of what else happened. Despite our earnestness we also found time for more mundane pastimes. Opera going, on Saturday afternoons was one of them. While the authorities disapproved of students frequenting cinemas they considered going to the opera a worthy, intellectual pastime for which they subsidize cheap season tickets. In fact the segregated audience of boys spent as much time eyeing each other as enjoying the performance. But Jewish youth like us active in our mixed zionist groups of boys and girls did not need such subterfuges. Our relationship was that of equals and we treated each other as comrades. But neither our earnestness nor our ideology as socialists prevented us from being preoccupied with thoughts of love and sex in the manner of all normal teenagers. We fell in and out of love with each other. Some, it was whispered had 'real' relationships but most of us never went beyond 'canoodling'. I too had my share of romances. The first boyfriend who counted was Latzi Fisher a tall, handsome engaging youth. His block of flats was just across the road from mine which was very convenient because we could walk together to our meetings in Habonim to which we both belonged. Sadly be 'dropped out' after becoming a communist. He survived the Holocaust and returned to Cluj where he became a journalist writing for the Hungarian papers. He was the only one of us who remains there. But to return to the subject of our sexual education, the fact is But despite our enlightened debates on sexual equality in the ideal society we intended to build, the subject remained theoretical, at least for me.

My own first attempt to learn about sex took place at the age of twelve in Blaj, when I accidentally came across 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' in a Hungarian translation, which I found secreted away on top of the wardrobe in my parents' bedroom. Regrettably, my misdemeanour was discovered by my other before I managed to learnt anything. In the end I was told about the facts of life by a bunch of giggly little girls, one day, while we were tending to our silkworms.

In the 'thirties, before the Second World War, our society as a whole, conspired to keep the subject of sex 'under wrappers'. At home this topic was avoided, at school it was totally banned. Our anatomy lessons in the Lycée, for instance, were lavishly illustrated with giant coloured diagrams, leaf upon leaf, each revealing a

separate biological system in the human body, but the area of the genitals remained blank on all of them.

In Habonim theories on the subject of sexual freedom were part of the revolutionary agenda we debated, but they tended to remain just that, theories. In fact we shared a tacit assumption that before our aliyah, or at least before hachsharah, when we achieved independence from parental authority, sexual relations would remain on hold. In retrospect I recognise that this consensus, which we claimed to have reached on ideological grounds, coincided entirely with the inhibitions about sex which had been instilled in us from early childhood.

In the spring of 1938, my grandfather Isidor Sternberg died. He died of an acute asthma attack, brought on by a chronic condition that was aggravated by living so close to his beloved flour mill. Ignoring the warning of his doctors that the fine dust of flour which permeated the air around the mill was bad for his asthma, he stubbornly refused to move. His death left a big gap. His life had been a moral fairy story of hard work, material rewards, and unfailing generosity to those in need. The Jewish community of Uioara, over which he presided, relied a great deal on his charity. But while he carried out his 'tz'daka' modestly, I saw for myself, during my frequent stays there, his open generosity to the wandering Talmudists who called at the house regularly for a meal, and a handout.

To feed them, the kitchen, presided over by a rather cross Jewish cook, always had to have a hot meal ready. The visit of the oreach (guest in Hebrew), traditionally followed the same routine. It began with a courtesy call during which the oreach would receive the customary donation from my grandfather. A large meal would then follow, and when that had been consumed the visitor would spend a set period of time devoted to the 'study' of a particular pasuk from the Talmud, a custom which, according to tradition, counted as an act of mitzvah credited to the host who made the occasion possible.

To me, the death of my grandfather meant losing the only person close to me, who appeared to approve of all my aspirations, without demur. I use the word 'appeared' deliberately. While he refrained from taking part in the 'political' arguments I had with the rest of my family, I always had the feeling that he was 'on my side' — and, as events were to prove, that feeling was right.

In other ways too 1938 was a dark year. The advance of Nazi power seemed unstoppable. The memory of my family around the radio, listening anxiously to Hitler's ranting on the day he entered Austria, is still vivid before me. And yet our daily life continued as usual.

The only ray of sunshine in that dark year was our summer holiday. Instead of the usual exodus to some place in the mountains the three sisters, my mother and two aunts chose to spend it together in our home town in Cluj. It was a good choice. Cluj a picturesque historic town was surrounded by beautiful hilly countryside. A large house surrounded by a luscious fruit orchard was found just outside Cluj and the women and children accompanied by the domestic help set out to spend the summer there. The adult male members of the family came to visit when their duties allowed them. hardly remember what we did most of the time but I know we had a very happy summer there. Fortunately, some photographs, taken by Lilli have survived. Several of them show my two brothers and my mother, surrounded by various domestic help, engaged in the usual summer business of jam making. Everyone took part in the preparation. Hundreds of plums, apricot. peaches would be stoned before being cooked in the vast copper pot kept for this purpose.

Summer over, the family dispersed. My aunts with their children returned to their homes. I said goodbye to Lilli and little George, not suspecting for a moment that I would never see them again. In the picture she sent me of the two of them, in 1942, they look so happy.

In September the three of us returned to school. Not far away, Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia. The radio sounded menacing and life, still carried on as usual. Then, in the spring of 1939, something happened which abruptly propelled my life forward. One day, after returning from school, I received a telephone call from one of the senior chaverim. His voice, demanding that I join them immediately, sounded urgent. When I got to our usual meeting place I was told nd to my astonishment that I was about to be interviewed by Akiva a shaliach from Ben Shemen an agricultural boarding school in Eretz Yisrael. Apparently,he had in his possession twenty emigration certificates for suitable candidates from the various Zionist youth

movement in Rumania. I can't remember how many of them came our way, perhaps ten, but to my astonishment I turned out to be one of the chosen.

The news threw my poor parents into a quandary, and panic. Which was safer? To keep me by their side or, to let me go? Both alternatives seemed equally dangerous. But when I informed them that they were expected to pay a hefty school fee, Father sounded both relieved and regretful: 'Darling, I can't afford such a sum.' But then, after a moment's hesitation, he added, 'Of course, there is your inheritance from Grandfather.' His voice reluctant, he added: 'Grandfather would have probably approved.' I knew that Grandfather had left me some money but until that moment it meant nothing to me. I struggled to take it in: 'You mean I can use my inheritance to pay the school fees?'He reluctantly admitted that I could, provided that my eldest uncle, Jozsi, the executor of grandfather's will, agreed to it. I didn't hesitate. That very afternoon I took the train to Uioara where Uncle Jozsi was now running the mill. By the time I arrived he had discussed the matter on the phone with my father. He heard me out patiently and without further ado, agreed to release enough funds to cover the fees required by our school Ben Shemen. I returned home, my head spinning, but triumphant.

But the date of our departure dragged on, due to various obstacles, including the difficulty of finding a suitable ship to take us from the port of Constanza (on the Black Sea) to Haifa. On the 3rd of September 1939, England declared war on Germany and the Second World War began. For a while the whole thing looked hopeless. Then, quite suddenly, everything fell into place, and we were told we would sail in the last week of December. The intervening weeks remain a blur. I was seized in a whirlwind of preparations. A dressmaker came daily to sew the wardrobe required by the school. (When I got to Ben Shemen, the housemother unpacking my clothes decreed sourly, that my wardrobe of beautiful poplin shirts, elegant shorts — in fact everything that my mother had so lovingly prepared — was 'much too luxurious for 'our sort of life'. So most of it was packed away in the giant wicker packing case in which it came, and remained there until I left the school.) I said goodbye to my family in Ludus and Uioara, I parted from my Jewish schoolmates — most of whom were to perish in Auschwitz — and said l'hitraot to the chaverim who were to follow later. The parting from my father, and my little brothers — even now, after sixty-five years — is still too painful to think about. Then my mother and I travelled by train to the port of Constanza where our group was to assemble. At the moment of departure my friends and I lined up on the deck of our ship to wave farewell to our parents who stood on the quay. I went on waving until, at last, the figure of my mother grew dim and it finally came to me that I was leaving them all behind.

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