

Zoltan Deutsch



This is my eldest brother, Zoltan. My father, Mor Deutsch, was born in 1882 in Bakonytamasi. His first wife died in childbirth, but the child, Zoltan, survived. When Zoltan was less than a year old, my father married my mother, Iren Sauer. She was born in Tet in 1887. She was an excellent businesswoman. Our parents owned the best store in Celldomolk. It had haberdashery, shoes, carpets, fabrics, silk. During World War I, my father served on the Italian front from 1917 to 1918. At home he was a Jew and a Hungarian at the same time. And as a member of the Alliance of Front Warriors, decorated with an award for war merit, he was convinced he would never suffer any harm from the Hungarians. I was born in 1918 in Celldomolk. I had three brothers and two sisters. We were a religious family, but we had a more-modern way of life and thinking. We spoke Yiddish and Hungarian. We were raised without being compelled to cover our heads. I went to the Jewish elementary school, which was run by the Orthodox community. Then I wanted to go to middle school. At first, my mother strongly objected. She said I did not need it; why should I go to a totally

secular school? Eventually I went to the middle school in Celldomolk. My mother consented, on condition that I would not write on Saturdays. Of course, all Jewish tradition was strictly observed in the family. One Saturday morning, one of our regular customers and her sobbing daughter knocked on our door. The daughter was to have her wedding the next day and the shoes they had bought in our store were too small. So the mother said: 'Please, Mr. Dezso, I know that this is a holiday for you, but please, do me a favor and let me exchange these shoes. I am not even going in; you just hand it out.' Well, I did not have the heart to refuse her. I went to the store and brought a pair that was one size bigger, which meant I did not have to touch money. Just as I was handing over the shoes, my father came. He saw me coming out of the store with a parcel in my hand, on a Saturday. My father did not say a word; he simply went into the house. When the customers were gone, he started to shout at the top of his lungs. He declared that as long as he lived and the store belonged to him, nobody in that house would ever be allowed to work on Saturdays. In Celldomolk, the majority of the Jews settled in the core of the town, but not in isolation. There was no ghetto. The Jews lived close to each other, not in one single street, but within one neighborhood. Our next-door neighbors on the right and the left were Christians, but we had a good relationship. The Jews mostly made friends with Jews, but we maintained good connections with the others as well, partly on account of the business. In Celldomolk, there was an Orthodox and a Neolog community. The two communities were not on good terms with each other at all. In the middle of 1940, I received my call-up letter from the army. I registered as a regular soldier and did not know that could be the beginning of something. We were taken to Koszeg. After two sessions of training, we were rounded up and told that we weren't trustworthy enough to defend the country, so we would serve as laborers. This was the first forced labor division, and we became the first Jewish forced laborers. We worked in Koszeg for a while, then on road construction, digging trenches and unloading train carriages. There was also some agricultural work. It was all quite hard, but we were young and strong. Then in summer 1942, the two years of compulsory military service had almost passed, when they packed us into a train. A very typical scene occurred: The trains that carried the Hungarian army soldiers to the front were finely decorated with flowers. When we arrived at the railway station, a beautifully prepared train was waiting. When our commander caught sight of it, he ordered that all flowers be removed because we were only Jews - not Hungarians defending their country. We traveled almost one week on that train. When we stopped, we were in Ukraine. After a while, I was hurt and treated in the basement of a hospital. One morning we woke up and realized the hospital was empty. When the Russians attacked, the Hungarians fled, and we were just left behind. For a few days we did not know what had happened, then the Russians came and said we were prisoners of war. We went by train as far as the eastern borders of Russia, and arrived at our destination in the summer of 1943. In 1947 those who were not fit for work because of their health were sent home - regardless of whether they were Jewish or German or Italian or Hungarian. In the barracks, people were separated according to their nationalities. The Jews, however, were not segregated; we lived where the Hungarians lived. I'll never forgive the Russians for treating us the same as the non-Jewish Hungarians, and for not sending us home earlier. In 1947 we were given a postcard so we could write home that we were alive. It was the first time in five years that I was allowed to write home. And I did not know who to write to; we had heard many things about what happened to the Jews. I sent the postcard to the mayor's office in Celldomolk. Then in the spring of 1948, we were released. I went to Celldomolk straight away. My brother Nandor was the only survivor of our family. I helped my brother in the store but at that time, the stores were being nationalized, so I was given a job in a textile emporium. I joined the Party, but in those days that was kind of natural, although I never became a very active Party member. Of

course one had to work on Saturdays, but I always remembered it was a holiday. And I went to the synagogue on the High Holidays. I took a day off so that I could attend the service. It was maybe the day before Yom Kippur when the secretary of the Party came up to me and asked whether I was taking a day off to go to the synagogue, and he said, 'You'd better not go; it is not really appreciated.' I said that at Yom Kippur there is a ceremony when we remember our dead. During the war, my grandparents, brothers, sisters, parents and cousins got killed. He stopped bothering me. I attended the synagogue - not much for prayers; I was seeking connection with my fellow Jews. It was in Szekesfehervar during a business trip that I met Klari, my wife. Her mother had been killed in Auschwitz, but her father had come home. Klari would not leave her father, and nowhere else could we have such a nice and spacious home as in Szekesfehervar. So I got transferred to a local textile center as a distributor and purchaser. We had a civil wedding, but afterward, the rabbi also married us. In the mid-1950s this was not a common thing to do, but to us it meant a lot. In 1956 nothing extraordinary happened in Szekesfehervar. A few people demonstrated, but nothing could be felt of what was going on in Budapest. I was not in the position to think about emigrating to Israel. But when there were the wars in Israel, I was deeply concerned. I was not in the position to help, but I kept my fingers crossed for Israel. It was very comforting to know that Jews were able to protect themselves, that they had arms, and they were able to fight and win.