

Louiza Vecsler

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Brasov

Romania

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Louiza Vecsler is a 94-year-old woman, who lives with her daughter, Nadia, in a two-bedroom apartment. She is a tiny woman, with thin hair. She has problems with her legs now: she cannot stand for long. She usually lies down on a couch, with a magnifying glass at hand, which she uses to take a closer look at photos, documents and newspapers. Although the apartment is small, it shows that the family was well-situated: the furniture is rather antique and expensive. On the door one can still read her husband's name, Solomon Vecsler. There is a tiny light bulb lit on the wall: it's the 13th anniversary of her husband's death.

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My family history

My paternal grandfather, Cassian Blumenfeld, lived in Botosani at the time I knew him, along with my paternal grandmother, Brucha Blumenfeld. I don't remember her maiden name. I don't know whether they were born there or not, or whether they had lived somewhere else before. They both spoke Yiddish, but they knew Romanian as well. My grandparents didn't dress traditionally: my grandfather didn't wear a kaftan, and my grandmother didn't wear a wig. They wore ordinary clothes, like everybody else. They were open-minded people and very kind. They were both religious: I think my grandfather went to the synagogue every day, because there was one close to them, but my grandmother didn't. They followed the kashrut, observed Sabbath and all the high holidays.

They lived in a house with two or three rooms, and a kitchen. They didn't have a garden, but they had electricity. Their house had no running water, and they heated it with wood. They were rather well-off. They had nice furniture and they could afford a woman to come and clean and broom the house, although my grandmother was a housewife. I don't know what my grandfather used to do for a living when he was young. I don't remember him ever going to work, and I never heard my mother or my father talk about his job. They got along well with their neighbors, both Jewish and Christian. I remember the Bibescus, who lived across the street. They had children. I don't know if my grandparents had close friends; if they did, I never met them.

My father had one younger brother, Adolf Blumenfeld, who lived in Botosani as well. He worked as a bailiff on an estate. He was married and had two children, Teodor and Rasela Blumenfeld. My father also had two younger sisters: Clara and Rasela, but I don't know when they were born. Both of them lived in Botosani and were housewives. Clara Blumenfeld married Itic Blumenfeld. Itic wasn't a relative, the same family name was just a coincidence. I don't know what Itic did for a living.

My maternal grandfather, Iancu Iosif Rosenblum, was born in 1862, but I don't know where. When I knew him, he lived in Botosani with my grandmother, Enta Rosenblum. I don't know her maiden name. My grandfather worked as a clerk in a mill, which burnt down one day. My grandmother was a housewife. They lived in a rented house with five rooms, had a small garden, and bred poultry. The owner, Mrs. Mimia, lived in the same house with them. She was Romanian, and a very kind person. I remember she had a sister, Cherez, who lived somewhere else. Sometimes, when I visited my grandparents, I accompanied Mrs. Mimia when she went to visit her sister: we picked hyacinths from her [Cherez's] garden. She was a good friend of my grandparents. They shared the courtyard with an Italian, who also owned the orchard. I don't remember his name, but I remember he had a daughter, Clara, and a boy, Luigi. Luigi was about my age, and we played together in the garden; we used to pick fruit in the orchard. There was another Jewish family that lived in the courtyard; the father was a coach driver, but I don't remember his name. When Mrs. Mimia died, someone else bought the house and my grandparents moved

to the mill's courtyard, which had burnt down, into a house with three rooms and a kitchen. They moved from there as well because their daughter, Eva - my mother's younger sister - bought a house and brought them all to live with her. Fani, her other sister, also lived in the same house.

My grandparents were kind. My grandmother was extremely gentle; I used to be around her a lot. A woman came every morning and brought her sour milk, and my grandmother immediately made corn mush and we ate it with sour milk. She had a housekeeper, but she also did her chores around the house, and after that she called me to lunch. Whenever I slept over, I slept in the same bed as her, and she used to teach me prayers in Hebrew.

They didn't go to the synagogue every day and they didn't dress traditionally, but they were both religious people. They observed all the high holidays and Sabbath, and they followed the kashrut: all the food was cooked a day before, on Friday, and Luigi came to light the fire on Saturdays if it was too cold. Neither my maternal grandparents nor my paternal grandparents were politically involved.

My mother had one brother, Herman, and four sisters, all younger than her: Adela, Fani, Eva and Amalia. Herman lived in Bacau and then in Israel. He married Beti Grad when he was still in Bacau and had three children: Raul, Coca and Edit. Raul lives in Israel and has two children with Miriam: Hermi and Levi. Coca married Nicki Muck. I don't know the name of Edit's husband, but they have children.

Adela married Isidor Cohn and died in Suceava. She had a daughter, Magda Cohn, who married a man named Blumenfeld; now she lives in Israel and has three children: Misa and Felicia Blumenfeld, who live in Israel, and Bruno Blumenfeld, who lives in the US. Fani married Morit Herscovici and left for Israel, where she died in 1953. Eva married a lawyer, Carol Saler, who died in 1959. Eva worked as a secretary for a factory, and she was in charge of the relations with the bank and other administrative matters. She died in Botosani in 1963. Amalia was born in 1899 and married Rubin Sigler; they lived in Bacau and then in Botosani, where he died in 1965 and she in 1968.

My father, Moses Blumenfeld, was born in Botosani in 1878. He spoke Yiddish and Romanian. He worked as a bookkeeper for a mill - but not the one where my grandfather had worked. We had a good financial situation back then. After the anti-Jewish laws in Romania [1] had been passed, he worked as a salesman and then as a high school secretary. My father was a kind man, who tried to spend as much time at home as he could. I don't remember him ever slapping me, and, as a matter of fact, he rarely intervened in the fights we, the kids, had.

He married my mother, Pesa Rosenblum, in 1903. She was born in Botosani as well, in 1884. My mother knew Yiddish and Romanian. I'm not sure what kind of education she had, but she could read. I don't know if it was a shadkhan who brought them together, but I know that my parents had been neighbors before they got married. They married in the synagogue. My mother was a housewife, and she was pretty busy running the house, doing the shopping and taking care of my younger siblings. Although she had help in the house, there was still a lot to do. She was rather strict; she had to be because we, kids, often had squabbles. She intervened and sometimes took us by the ear and gave us a good talking-to.

Growing up

I had one elder sister, Ernestina, born in 1904, and two elder brothers: David, born in 1905, and Jenica, born in 1906. I was born in 1909, and after me followed: Sandu in 1911, Tobias in 1912, Sidonia in 1913, and Henrieta in 1918. The elder siblings usually looked after the younger ones, although I had a Christian nanny from Botosani when I was little, and at one point, one of my younger siblings, I don't remember who, had one as well. My mother and my maternal grandparents were around us a lot and watched over us, so we never went to kindergarten.

We lived in a house with four rooms, a kitchen in the basement and a hall that stretched throughout the house; the house also had a long wooden porch. We had nice furniture in the house. My parents slept in one room, and we, the children, in the other three. I remember I first shared a room with Reta [Henrieta], then with Tina [Ernestina]. We could afford a cook and a cleaning woman, who also slept in the house: the kitchen in the basement was big, and two beds fit there nicely. They weren't Jewish, but we all got along well.

There was also a summer-kitchen, a somewhat narrower room, with two beds and a table, where one could sleep in the summers, when it was warm outside. That's where we ate on rainy summer days; otherwise we ate outside. I remember there was some renovation at some point, and a new room was added and turned into a kind of drawing room: there was no bed, just hall furniture.

We had electricity because we lived across the street from the power station, but no running water. There was no sewerage, and every time the power station needed more water, it would close down the water in the whole street. We had a water tap in the garden, but we depended on the power station. We only raised poultry: my father had built a two-storied chicken-coop with a small ladder in the courtyard. We, the children, occasionally played with the hens, fed them grain, but the woman who helped around the house took care of them.

We had a garden and grew a lot of vegetables there, but in springtime my mother usually also went to the market to buy vegetables, when it was too early for the ones in our garden. Sometimes I accompanied her to the market. We had a few apple trees in the courtyard, and the apples were regularly stolen. I remember, one summer I only found a single green apple, which had remained there just because it was hidden under some leaves. My mother always bought apples from the market because she could never count on the ones in the garden. One time they stole an entire onion bed. When we wanted to pick the onions, it was too late: there wasn't a single onion left in the morning.

My mother also planted cucumbers for pickles. And one season, after a strong rain, there were so many cucumbers, that we filled two huge baskets. My mother didn't know what to do, she didn't have jars for all of them. There was a Jewish merchant living next door, Mr. Iossl, and my mother went to him and asked him, 'Do you want to buy cucumbers? I have fresh cucumbers'. 'Yes, bring them', he said. This merchant also lived across the street from the power station and close to the railway station, and all the workers came to him and bought merchandise on credit, and they paid for it when they got their salaries. Mr. Iossl had a big, five kilo empty khalva box, and everyone who bought something on credit wrote his name down on a piece of paper, what he bought and how much he would pay for it, and put the paper in that box. Mr. Iossl knew how to make his business work. And so, all our cucumbers were gone in an hour. I remember he had a lot of cereals, too.

Our family bought things from him as well, because his house was exactly next to ours. If we needed a liter of oil or a kilo of sugar, we would go to Mr. Iossl. We, the kids, loved to eat salad in summer, and it sometimes happened that the oil bottle was empty; then we would go to Mr. Iossl and ask him for some oil: he measured the oil, put down a note, and my mother paid for it when she got home. I used to knit and also did some chores around the house. One time I started starching everything that could be starched, including my father's handkerchiefs. I starched them, ironed them, and when my father came home, he said, 'What is this?!' They were stiff. I didn't know where my mother kept the starch in the house, so I had taken the one from Mr. Iossl.

We had a sour cherry tree in the garden and David, the eldest brother, climbed on a ladder onto the roof, and picked sour cherries. The rest of us, the small ones, couldn't go up, and we always asked him, 'David, give us some sour cherries!' And he did.

We also had a Christian gardener, Colibaba, who took care of the garden and planted flowers. He used to say, 'These flowers will last until the first snow!' We had mauve and white flowers - I don't know what they were - and also a bed of tulips. My father had put a table and two benches in the garden, so that we could eat outside if the weather was nice.

We had a bookcase in the house with all sorts of books; religious books and novels alike. My parents also read newspapers. We, kids, didn't go to the library because we had books at home, but our parents, who read novels themselves, never advised us what to read.

My elder brother, David, was a good mathematician, and he was also very fond of books. He used to read a lot of novels from the collection Biblioteca Pentru Toti - it was the first edition. [Editor's note: Biblioteca Pentru Toti - Everybody's Library was a Romanian publishing house, which published mainly classics.] He bought books and he was very careful about their condition. If he lent a book to you, God forbid you should return it torn or dog-eared! And because that happened, he worked out something. Each one of us had some money, so when he gave us a book, he said, 'See how much it costs? 1 lei. Give me 1 lei'. 'What for?', I used to ask. 'If you return the book to me as it is now, you will have the money back, if not, I will keep it.' He had so many books, my mother had to give him both wardrobe drawers to store his books because there was no more room for them. Then, when I and my brother Tobi were older, there was a magazine, Lectura, which was out once or twice a month. [Lectura - Passage was a literary magazine, which published literary works by different authors.] We bought it both, until my mother or father - I don't remember who exactly - caught us reading the same issue of the same magazine, and they got upset: 'Why are you reading the same magazine?' I knew Tobi bought the same magazine, and he also knew I did; but we wanted to be able to read from it whenever we wanted; we didn't want to share it. My parents threatened they would cut off our allowance.

My father was open to us, kids, I don't remember him ever slapping me. Once I had a fight with David, my father slapped him, and David ran out of the house crying. My younger sister, Sidonia, asked me, 'Why are you crying?', and I said, 'David hit me, and I fell on the piano and hurt myself!' Then Sidonia started crying because David was crying and because she thought he would get cataract in his eyes, like old Costache. He was a neighbor who had cataract. So, there was a whole row because of a slap David gave me and my father gave him back. My mother was kind, but sometimes she had to be harsh: she had eight kids to raise.

My parents observed all the high holidays, they followed the kashrut, but they didn't dress traditionally and they didn't go to the synagogue every day. On Friday evenings the cook baked challah, my mother lit the candles and my father said the blessings. I learnt from my parents to observe all high holidays and Sabbath. But I didn't often go to the synagogue, only on the high holidays. On Purim we always went for dinner to my maternal grandparents, and when Aunt Eva bought a house and brought the grandparents there, we went to hers.

My mother - who spent a lot of time in the kitchen - always heard us coming home because the kitchen was in the basement and one could hear every footstep from there. She had put a white carpet in the house, so she called out to us, that we leave our muddy shoes at the entrance where there was a mat. And on Purim - I especially liked Purim when masked people came over - we always had a lot of people coming over. Then, my mother used to put rugs and papers all over the white carpet, so that it wouldn't get dirty. The cook baked hamantashen, and sweets, shelakhmones, were handed out. Sandu was the one who usually dressed up: he took a coat and wore it inside out. He did the same on New Year's Eve: my father had a fur-lined coat made for him, white lamb fur it was, and he used to wear it inside out, cover his face with something and go awassailing.

On Sukkot everybody from my mother's and my father's family came over to us. We cooked a lot, and I still remember we had honey cake. We had a sukkah, but I don't remember if it was in our garden or in my maternal grandparents'. Somebody, I don't know who, came and built it, and we, kids, played in it. On the last day of Sukkot [on Simchat Torah] there was some sort of party with nuts, wine, syrup and apples in the synagogue; people took out the Torah, sang and danced, and had little pennons. We, kids, didn't go to the same synagogue where our father went to: my father went to the synagogue my mother's parents went to, and we, kids, went to the one closer to our home - it was the one my father's parents went to. But I did go with my father to the synagogue a few times, to the one he usually went to.

My family fasted on Yom Kippur. I remember Ernestina, my elder sister: when she fasted, we were still very young and she took care that we ate: there was food specially left for us, the small ones. I started fasting when I was 13-14 years old, too.

On Pesach all cutlery was taken out and cleaned, and the matzah wasn't brought into the house until all the cleaning had been done. If Pesach was on a Friday, matzah was brought in on Friday morning. We spent the seder night at home, and my father led it. Usually it was Ernestina who hid the afikoman, because she sat right next to my mother, and my father had to find it. If he didn't, he had to pay a reward. One of the younger boys asked the mah nishtanah.

On Chanukkah we went to the synagogue, and we lit the chanukkiyah at home. Every year, on Chanukkah, my father went to the bank and withdrew some money, which was the 'Chanukkah gelt' for us, the children. He always gave us new banknotes, not dirty or torn ones. I remember I was in high school, and a friend of mine, Ostfeld, had forgotten her rubbers somewhere and she couldn't find them anymore. She wanted to buy a new pair, but she didn't want her parents or her elder sister, who was a harsh person, to know about it: 'leti [the elder sister] will scold me and I'll never see money from my parents again!' And she asked me to lend her some money to buy a new pair of rubbers. And I said, 'No, I can't! I only have Chanukkah gelt and it is all new notes!' But I gave her the money in the end, she bought a new pair of rubbers and she gave me the money back some time after that.

In our parents' house, on Christmas, we, the children, used to gather in the summer kitchen: there was a stove, and we took a small fir-tree or just a branch, and trimmed it with colored paper and tinfoil. One night we played until the tree caught fire from the stove, and we put it out and ran into the house. On Easter, the neighbors came and brought us red Easter eggs, but my mother and grandmother also made eggs, boiled in onion leaves.

Our family got along well with the neighbors; they were both Romanians and Jews. There was a sergeant, Cojocar, who rented a house and had two children, Jean and Tita, who were always out at play with us. Then there was a Christian barber, who also had a daughter, but she was rather spoiled and her mother didn't let her

come out and play with the rest of the kids. Up the street lived the Ionescus. My mother was close to Mrs. Ionescu; they were good friends. They had a house and a garden, but a tiny kitchen, so on Easter and Christmas Mrs. Ionescu came to us and baked the sponge cakes in our kitchen. They had two children, Alexandru and Corina, who always played with us, either hide-and-seek, or with the ball.

The town I grew up in, Botosani, was a modern, cultural town, with paved roads and beautiful buildings. I still remember the Eminescu theater, which was later bombed. The town's population was about 30,000, and there was a big Jewish community: about 15,000 Jews. It was a well-organized community, with a lot of synagogues. I remember two of them: one was near our house, one near my grandparents' house. We had cheders, mikves, shochetim and all functionaries. I remember Rabbi Bernstein: one of his children was run over by a German truck. The driver came to him and apologized, saying it had just been an accident.

In the town there was no separate Jewish neighborhood or ghetto; Jews lived everywhere. In our street there were Jews and Christians and we got along very well; all the kids were playing together. I remember one Jew, who was a watchmaker, but a lot of them were merchants: many of the shops in the town center were Jewish. There was electricity and running water in Botosani, only on the outskirts there might have been some problems with that.

I went to a state elementary school, but then the war broke out and the school building was requisitioned. So the teacher, Vasiliu, who was a priest, held the classes in his house, and I went there. He had three daughters, who were also teachers. There were two Jewish schools in town, but I didn't go there, I don't know why. I got along well with everybody in elementary school, but I don't remember any classmates; it was a long time ago.

My elder sister Ernestina played the piano; I took some piano lessons as well, but I gave it up soon; I wasn't patient enough to sit in front of the piano and practice.

In high school I liked languages a lot. I had a very good French teacher, who didn't allow us to answer in Romanian, we had to speak French. When she entered the classroom, we had to stand up and say, 'Bonjour, madame!' When she called us to the blackboard, we had to answer, 'Je viens!' [I'm coming]. When she told us to write, we had to say: 'J'écris' [I write]. My mother sometimes helped me with my French homework. I never studied Hebrew and never had religious classes with a rabbi in school. Also, in high school, I had a physics teacher who mostly slept during classes, so one time I thought of cribbing when we had a term paper. I went to the back of the classroom, and randomly opened a textbook. But the teacher woke up, and when she saw that I had changed my place, came to me, found the textbook - which was opened at a totally different page than the one the paper was about - and took it. But when she corrected the papers she realized I hadn't cheated. So I got the mark I deserved; but she never gave marks higher than 6 or 7.

Personally, I never had problems in school because of being Jewish, and I got along well with all my teachers. I had Jewish and Christian colleagues alike, but I got along with everybody. However, I was first confronted indirectly with anti-Semitism in high school. There was a problem with a landowner's daughter, Ciolak was her name. She called somebody, not me, 'jidauca'. [Editor's note: jidauca in Romanian means 'Jewish woman' but it has a derogatory meaning.] I remember the headmistress, Mrs. Adam, reprimanded the girl, and when her father came to school, he reprimanded her as well.

I had a good Jewish friend, Ostfeld, whom I mentioned before. We went to the same school, and we took long walks, or we just sat in the garden if the weather was nice. We also went to the cinema or to the theater. We were a large group of friends in high school, boys and girls, and we knew the man who sold tickets to the cinema, and he always gave us the first row on the balcony. I didn't go to Jewish theaters because I couldn't understand the language.

When my brother David was in high school in Botosani, he only came home during Easter and summer holidays. When he was in the last year in high school, the school-leaving examination was introduced for the first time, and he had to go take it in Iasi. All boys from the high school went to Iasi, and everybody was worried. One day, when we, kids, were out in the street playing at the tree - there was a tree in front of the house - we saw Doctor Tauber, whose son was David's colleague, coming in a coach. We called out, 'Doctor Tauber is coming!'. He stopped in front of our house. He had a telegram saying: 'All boys from Botosani entered the oral examination.' So David had also passed. He had to go to university, but fights had already broken out in universities - the Cuzists [2] attacked Jewish students - and it was too dangerous in Iasi or in Bucharest. So he went to study in France with a larger group of boys.

Jenica was three years older than me, but I had outrun him in school. He had to repeat the 3rd grade and I caught up with him, I think. On one Saturday evening, we, children, were playing in the street. On the sidewalk there were lime trees in bloom, and Jenica climbed into a lime tree to pick lime flowers. And one kid said, 'Look, there is a really nice branch, but it's out of reach!', and Jenica said, 'I can reach it!'. But he fell on the sidewalk. By that time, our parents were getting ready to leave for the engagement of an aunt of Stefan Cazimir, when they heard screams. The children ran into the house shouting, 'Jenica fell down and hit his head!' Of course, my parents didn't go anywhere that evening.

The next day they took Jenica to the hospital: he didn't die immediately. My elder sister, Ernestina, watched over him in the hospital, and he was calling for me: 'I want the flapper who outran me in school!' He called me that because I had long hair, and I wore it in two plaits, and when we played horses, he used to pull my hair. Soon after the incident, one day, when I was at home, on my knees while Ernestina was combing my hair, my [maternal] grandfather came in, said nothing, but his eyes were red and tears ran down his cheeks. We understood: Jenica had died.

My other brothers and sisters each had their own interests, but I was closer to David, Tobias and Jenica, probably because of the age.

We lived across the street from the power station, and not far from us, there was a regiment. Whenever there was a military parade, on Heroes' Day, 10th May [3] or Epiphany, the regiment marched in front of our house. In school the teachers always took us to see the parade on 10th May. I remember one of those parades in particular: I fainted because of the heat and I woke up in a garden with my mother's sister, Amalia, by my side. She was in high school by then, she was ten years older than me; I was in elementary school. I remember, I asked her what had happened because I didn't remember a thing. She told me I had fainted.

My parents used to go on holiday on their own. When I was little, my father suffered from asthma, however he took care of himself: every year he went with my mother to a spa in Czechoslovakia, Karlsbad [4], I think. They always went during the summer, but I don't know if they went alone or not. We, the children, stayed at home and looked after each other, even if we had our little quarrels. Our grandparents also stopped by when our parents were away, so we weren't alone. But I never had a vacation with my parents.

I remember the flight of the Poles, who passed through Botosani as well. I don't remember being afraid back then. This happened around 1938, after I had finished my first year at the University of Medicine and Pharmaceutics in Iasi, and I had to have a period of practical training in a chemist's shop in Botosani. When I came home for the summer holidays, whomever I asked, they didn't have any openings; they said they would hire me if the people they already had left, but they couldn't promise anything. There was a Jewish pharmacist, Lerner, at the Military Hospital. My father knew him and the hospital's director, Colonel Apostoleanu. One day my father was walking down the street and he met this pharmacist. He told him that he had a daughter who had to have a period of practical training somewhere. The pharmacist told him, 'Send her to us, talk to Apostoleanu!'. So I talked with the colonel and he agreed, and I started working in the hospital. I learnt from him the first basic notions about pharmaceutics, notions I still remember today and I have always put to practice.

During the War

I was directly confronted with anti-Semitism when I finished university, I think I was in my last year, during the last period of practical training in 1941. We had a neighbor, a Jewish widow, who sold her house to a Romanian sergeant. This sergeant, who lived near us, was some kind of surgeon's assistant, and he sometimes came to the hospital to pick up some drugs. He used to say to me, 'Good morning, Miss! How are you? I saw your mother this morning and I told her I'm on my way to the hospital.' This lasted until just before the beginning of World War II. One day, I was on my way home - at that time I was already wearing the yellow star [5] - and a soldier stopped me in the street. A couple was also coming down the street, and they stopped to show their IDs as well. The man who had stopped me told them, 'Go ahead!', and they said, 'Ah, you're only checking the ones with the yellow star?' And he said, 'Yes, only them'. I was in my early twenties and wearing the star was compulsory. After he checked my ID, he let me go. It had rained heavily, there was mud everywhere. Then, when I was almost home and wanted to step on a dry rock, I heard a voice behind me: 'Step aside, you Jew [in Romanian: 'jidauca'], I will not step in mud with my new shoes because of you!' It was the sergeant who was our neighbor and who a month or two ago had said to me, 'Good morning, Miss!' After that I was forbidden to work.

Before World War II, I had worked as a pharmacist. The owners of the shop where I worked were Jews, and they lived upstairs. Their name was Rosenberg, and I got along very well with them. In 1942 all the merchandise in the shop was handed over to a Christian pharmacist, Mrs. Constantinescu. She wanted to keep me because she was from the countryside and she didn't know anybody in Botosani, except for her sister, who lived there. And it was something else, when the customers saw somebody familiar at the counter. People in Botosani knew me, and whoever came into the shop said: 'Thank God you are still here, you know what to give us!'. There was a peasant from Cotusca [a small village near Botosani], whose wife was sick, and he always bought a 100 gram bottle of valerian tincture. He used to say, 'I wouldn't buy it from somewhere else, even if they gave me a kilo for free! This one is clean, carefully prepared and it cures!'

On one winter day, when it was already dark and there was a blizzard outside, the ex-owners upstairs asked me to sleep over because I lived far from the chemist's shop. I accepted, I had also joined them for dinner on several occasions. And in the morning, when I came down, a man from Social Insurance came into the shop, saw me and said, 'What is a Jew doing in a Romanian drug shop? You just got your shop, Mrs. Constantinescu; if you keep her, we will revoke your license!' I went upstairs, took my coat and left. [This happened around 1942.]

Then I worked for another Romanian pharmacist, Miss Popovici, for ten days. She had an anti-Semitic sister, who lived in Botosani, and who always told her, 'All you do is listen to Radio Free Europe [6], Radio London and fear that the Russians will get to Botosani! Don't worry, they won't get here!' [Editor's note: actually Radio Free Europe only began broadcasting in 1949.] And this sister always called me a Jew, but Miss Popovici didn't listen to her. After ten days, she received an official letter from the Pharmacists' Council stating that she had to let me go or they would revoke her license. And Miss Popovici went to them and told them, 'How come Gheorghiu can keep Jews, and I can't?' But she had to let me go.

There was another Romanian man, Gheorghiu, who was an accursed legionary [7] pharmacist. However, he also kept a Jew in his shop, but in the back, where no one could see him. His daughter was also a pharmacist, but she had just finished her studies and she didn't know a lot about running a chemist's shop. And he talked to Miss Popovici, although by that time I had already left her shop because he wanted me to go work in his daughter's shop. I didn't want to go, and I said so. Miss Popovici had paid me 1,000 lei per day, in ten days I made 10,000 lei and that was a lot. When I had worked for the Jewish pharmacist, I got 3,000 lei per month. Miss Popovici paid a lot because there was nobody to help her. So I told Gheorghiu that if he wanted me to work for his daughter, he should pay me 1,000 lei per day, like Miss Popovici. Of course he didn't want to; that was a lot of money. But he knew my father, and he came over to talk to him. My father told him, 'Mr. Gheorghiu, she is a grown-up woman, she does what she wants. If she won't do it, I cannot force her to!' And I didn't work for him. I preferred to knit a jacket - whoever needed something like that came to us - and get paid for that. I would have rather got 1,500 lei for a waistcoat, which took a long time to make, than work for Mr. Gheorghiu.

During the war a German officer stayed in our house. He lived in our living room; he wasn't very talkative, but he was polite. Over at Aunt Clara's, my father's sister, there was another German, and my father used to go over there because my aunt didn't know German very well. And my father told him that the Germans are getting on well, and he said, 'Yes, yes, the Germans are getting on well, but remember Russia is large and deep!'

After the first anti-Jewish laws were passed, my father couldn't work as a bookkeeper any more. He worked as a salesman. He had representations from different factories and he sold their products to wholesale dealers. This happened shortly after the war began; meanwhile Jews were also forbidden to travel by train and he had to give up his job and work in a high school. He was a secretary; that was where he retired from. All this time, my mother continued being a housewife. We lived on whatever work I could do at home.

David, my brother, also helped us. He was a technical manager at the textile plant in Prejmer and was living there. [Prejmer is a place in Brasov county which had a well-known textile factory.] There were only two managers: him and an administrative manager, so they needed him there. Once on New Year's Eve I went to Prejmer, it was soon after the rise of the Goga- Cuza government [8]. The train was late, and it was dark when I arrived at the station in Prejmer. I knew that someone had to wait for me there. When I got off, I called out, 'Is there anyone here from the plant?' And a man answered, 'Yes, Miss, the engineer is waiting for you!' And then I heard another voice: 'No, you will take us to the village!' The voice belonged to a legionary who was at the train station with many others. They were some people from a village, but not workers. And the driver said, 'No, I'm just taking this young lady to the plant!' And they took revenge for that. They came to the plant and asked for light bulbs, and later I heard that they had a fight. My brother was also beaten by these legionaries.

Sandu was in Bessarabia [9], in the Romanian army, near Nistru, somewhere around Edineti, and he lived in somebody's house. That man had a little kid, who slept on the oven. Whenever the kid saw Sandu eating, he cried out, 'Give me! Give me! Give me!' And Sandu used to give him food. When Sandu came home, he always took more food, and said, 'I have to feed give- me-give-me-give-me!' After they let him go [from the army], he came to Botosani, where he had to work for the public service: change plates with street names and so on. After that he worked in the city hall, but they fired him from there as well by saying, 'What is a Jew doing in the city hall?' I don't remember what kind of work he did after that.

Before 1945, when the Russians came, Miss Popovici asked me to work for her again and I accepted. Then, the wife of a Jewish doctor - who had been deported to Transnistria [10] - came and asked for some drugs, and I gave her what she needed. And Miss Popovici's sister asked me who that was, and I told her. She said, 'I've never heard of her, I wouldn't have given her anything, accursed Jew!' And after that everything was packed because they were leaving for Bucharest the very next day. She showed off as a Jew- baiter, even though the merchandise she sold was a profit for them. Next day somebody was supposed to come and take all the merchandise to Bucharest, but the Russians came to Botosani, and everything was left behind. Soon after Miss Popovici moved to Bucharest. She came back some time later; she had a farm near Botosani where she retired because she was ill. After that, I worked for the pharmacist Mrs. Constantinescu, whom I had worked for before the war, with an officer: whatever I gained, I had to give him half. He was a relative of Mrs. Constantinescu's, who had taken refuge, and I was selling her merchandise, so I had to give him money.

After the War

I met my husband, Solomon Vecsler, after I had finished my studies. He worked as a pharmacist as well. He worked for an expropriated chemist's shop, but nobody said anything to its owners [at the time of the anti- Jewish-laws]. We met by chance: one of his colleagues set up a deposit with pharmaceutical supplies, and we met there. We married in 1945. I think it mattered to me that my husband was a Jew; I don't think I would have married a Romanian.

My husband's mother, Enta Vecsler, was a housewife. His father, Raphael Vecsler, worked in a bank, I think, but I never met him; he had died long before. My husband was a gentle man, and very obliging. He helped everybody in the chemist's shop. I remember there was a young pharmacist from Cluj [Napoca], who had been assigned to Botosani. My husband looked after her a lot, taught her how to prepare different things. Back then drugs were prepared in the chemist's shop, they weren't ready-made as they are now. And she had to take an exam in Bucharest I think, and her subject was on something she had worked on together with my husband. And she sent us a postcard to thank us: 'I was lucky to be in your shop, I passed the exam!'

After World War II, our house was nationalized [see Nationalization in Romania] [11], but we weren't forced to leave it. But we moved out because we were too close to the railway station, to the power station, to the military units; the neighborhood was too noisy and crowded, and we wanted to be closer to the rest of the family. The house where we formerly lived was inhabited by several people until my sister, Henrieta, who worked at the People's Council, managed to take the house out from the nationalization list; I don't know how she managed to do so. We registered the house in Sidonia's name, my other sister, because the rest of us had better jobs, compared to her: she worked half a shift as a secretary and half a shift as a librarian. We all thought it was fair to do so.

Sidonia, who lived in the same house we had rented, with the rest of us, rented out the house, but the rent was very small and the tenants always came to her to ask for money for restorations, and they cost a lot. Two rooms at the back of the house were rented to an elementary school: one was the library where Sidonia worked and the other was the pioneers' room. And when she saw how much the restorations cost, she said to the school principal: 'Keep the whole house and leave me alone, these restorations are confusing me!' She donated the house to the school and that was it. My elder sister, Tina, worked as a clerk in a men's underwear factory, whose owners were from Vienna. When everything was nationalized, she lost her job.

I had my first child, Raphael, in 1946. In the same year I started working in the same chemist's shop with my husband. A year before, the pharmacist I had worked for before World War II, Rosenberg, moved to Bucharest and we rented his shop. We lived upstairs, and had the shop downstairs. My husband woke up earlier and went into the shop, and I would look after Raphael a bit and then join him. We had our own chemist's shop until 1949, when all chemist's shops were nationalized. But there were too many pharmacists in Botosani and I had a husband who was a pharmacist, just like me, and a small child at home. They only hired one spouse. That was

my husband, and I couldn't find a job anywhere. I only got a job in 1953 when someone came to me and told me, that there was an opening in Botosani, at Sanepid, in the chemistry department. [The Sanepid institution was established in 1950 and its main objective was the prophylaxis of infectious diseases, then extending to other fields of prophylactic interests, especially concerning the hygiene of public institutions or locations.] So I applied for it at the county, because back then Botosani belonged to Suceava county, and after a few months I was accepted and started working at Sanepid as a food chemist.

My daughter Nadia was born in 1949. We raised our children in the Jewish tradition: we observed Sabbath, said blessings on Friday evenings, observed Purim and Chanukkah and all the other high holidays. Of course, on Sabbath we, that is me and my husband, had to work, but we celebrated it at home. We followed the kashrut as much as we could, with separate pots for dairy and meat products. We only went to the synagogue on high holidays. There was no rabbi in Brasov when we moved here. The service was led by some of the elderly Jews, who had no functions in the community. We could go to the synagogue during communism, we had no problem, but if there was some kind of special event, like a high holiday, or an anniversary, when other important non-Jewish people were invited as well, like the mayor, we had to thank comrade Nicolae Ceausescu [12] for allowing us to have that gathering. [Editor's note: it is very unlikely that an important non-Jewish person would have gone to the synagogue during the communist era, especially because generally they were party members and religious practice was not well received. Also, Ceausescu was not mentioned by name, but there is a prayer after reading the Torah each Sabbath about the country and its rulers.]

I've never been a party member, and I've never been involved in politics, in any way. But it was compulsory to take part in social activities, like marches on 23rd August [13] or 1st May.

I never had problems at work because of being Jewish; I got along well with my colleagues. I remember the lab's director, the first of them, Mardare. He lived in a rented apartment, his neighbors were Jewish and they got along very well. That's how he met my son, who was playing with his neighbors' kid. And Mardare used to say openly: 'On [Jewish] holidays I don't want to see you in the lab!' The doctor who followed him, Naciu, was the same: I had time off on high holidays. But I had to work on Saturdays, of course, like everybody else. I worked at Sanepid until I retired. But I went on working after that as well, I got a full salary and half a pension. I needed the money because by then both my children were studying at university in Bucharest and it was hard to get by.

My father died in Botosani in 1954. My mother continued living in the same rented house until 1960, when she also died. They were both buried in the Jewish cemetery and the Kaddish was recited, of course, but I don't remember who did so; probably somebody from the community in Botosani.

When Nadia was about two years old, in 1951, we started proceedings to leave for Israel, me, my husband, my mother-in-law and our children. But only my mother-in-law got the permission to leave for Israel. She didn't leave, she was too old to take care of herself alone, with no family. That was the policy: many families were separated, parents left without their children or the other way around. I remember about one family, I don't know the name anymore: the parents left with one daughter, and the other had to stay here because she was over 18 when they filed for aliyah and she didn't get the approval. She had to stay here for many years, I don't know exactly how many.

And because we had filed for aliyah, and the proceedings lasted for many years, Nadia didn't win any prizes in elementary school, although her grades were very good. I remember I told her she wouldn't get a prize because of our situation on the way to the festivity because I knew that if I had told her at home she wouldn't have wanted to go anymore. And she didn't get any prizes until we gave up on emigration and withdrew the file when she was in the 8th grade and had to take the capacity examination.

We gave up because my husband received a note from Centrofarm, which was in Suceava by then, which said that if he didn't give up on emigration, he would be transferred to work in a village. [Centrofarm was a state pharmaceutical company, which operated all over the country.] They had probably been asked to do so. So we gave it up, and Nadia entered the high school examination on her first try. Our boy, Raphael, didn't make it on the first try just because our file was still valid. [He was older, so he took the exam earlier than Nadia.] After we gave it up, they both won prizes in high school.

I was glad to hear about the birth of Israel, but I was upset because of the wars since I had acquaintances who had already left. They weren't close friends, but a lot of pharmacists from Botosani left for Israel. Ieti, the sister of my friend Ostfeld, was married, had a son, and they both left for Israel. Ostfeld died young because of typhoid

fever. She was almost cured when she had another fit and died.

My sister Ernestina emigrated to Australia in 1964; she married a Jew call Rufenstein who left from Botosani as well. I think he was an accountant and she was a translator, we kept in touch, wrote letters to each other, but I don't know many details about their lives there. Sandu left for Israel, Jerusalem, in 1984. His son, Sergiu, had already emigrated to the US, but he came home for a while. Sandu's wife, Fiameta, was ill, she had to have dialysis, and Sergiu convinced them that dialysis was easier done in Israel. So they left, and she died during a dialysis in Jerusalem in 1985. Sandu had been an accountant at a spinning mill here, in Bucharest, but I don't think he had a permanent job in Israel. Now and then maybe, but he was already retired. I was sad when he left, he was the only one of us siblings whom I had left. But we kept in touch through letters, and I never had problems with that, or suspected that someone opened our letters. But there was only family talk in them, nothing interesting for someone else. Sandu died in Canada, after he went to the US for Sergiu's marriage. After the marriage, they went on a trip, and Sandu died in Toronto.

My children always knew what they wanted to do, I couldn't influence them. When Raphael finished the 5th or 6th grade, he had to choose between mathematics and humanities, and he chose the latter. Then, he studied journalism in Bucharest. Nadia was just as determined, and went to study mathematics in Bucharest. They had no problems at university because of being Jewish, as far as I know. In 1975 my husband and I moved to Brasov because of the children. In 1974 Raphael married Felicia Reinisch, who is also Jewish, in the synagogue in Bucharest, in the presence of Rabbi Moses. They moved to Brasov. They have two daughters: Manuela and Karina. Raphael works as a journalist at several newspapers in Brasov. Tradition is still very important to them. Manuela also married a Jew, Andrei Czizler, in 2002. They had a religious ceremony in the synagogue here, in Brasov. Nadia didn't want to be separated from her brother Raphael, so she came to Brasov as well. We lived with Nadia here, in an apartment with two rooms and a kitchen. Nadia didn't marry and she still lives with me. She works as a programmer.

My husband died in 1990 and was buried in a Jewish cemetery. There was a rabbi and a chazzan at the funeral, and someone from the community, not from the family, recited the Kaddish. None of my siblings are alive now; the only family I have are my children, my nieces and Magda Blumenfeld - the daughter of my mother's sister Adela - who sometimes calls or writes.

Things became better after the collapse of communism in 1989 [see Romanian Revolution of 1989] [14]. I remember I was in the kitchen, and I heard something on the radio but I didn't understand. And then Nadia phoned, and said, 'Turn on the TV!' There were people who came into the headquarters of the national television station, announcing that the communist era was over, and broadcasting scenes showing fights in Timisoara. After that we had better heat, the electricity wasn't stopped from time to time [as it used to be during the communist era due to reasons of economy], I was no longer afraid to go out into the street, I didn't have to stand in queues for food. Beforehand, people got angry and sometimes started to talk against the regime, and you never knew who was listening. You could be arrested with them, taken as a witness, or accused for not intervening.

Things have changed in the community as well; I feel there are more activities. But I no longer go to the synagogue because I have problems with my legs. When I could, I did go, not every Saturday, but on the high holidays, like Purim and Chanukkah. Now I observe them at home with my daughter, who still goes to the synagogue on the high holidays. We lit the candles every Friday evening and say the blessings, but we don't follow the kashrut anymore, it's too difficult, and we don't do anything special on Sabbath. But we still cook hamantashen and send out shelakhmones. The community helps me with medication.

Glossary

[1] Anti-Jewish laws in Romania

The first anti-Jewish laws were introduced in 1938 by the Goga-Cuza government. Further anti-Jewish laws followed in 1940 and 1941, and the situation was getting gradually worse between 1941- 1944 under the Antonescu regime. According to these laws all Jews aged 18- 40 living in villages were to be evacuated and concentrated in the capital town of each county. Jews from the region between the Siret and Prut Rivers were transported by wagons to the camps of Targu Jiu, Slobozia, Craiova etc. where they lived and died in misery. More than 40,000 Jews were moved. All rural Jewish property, as well as houses owned by Jews in the city, were confiscated by the state, as part of the 'Romanisation campaign'. Marriages between Jews and Romanians were

forbidden from August 1940, Jews were not allowed to have Romanian names, own rural properties, be public employees, lawyers, editors or janitors in public institutions, have a career in the army, own liquor stores, etc. Jewish employees of commercial and industrial enterprises were fired, Jewish doctors could no longer practice and Jews were not allowed to own chemist shops. Jewish students were forbidden to study in Romanian schools.

[2] Cuzist

Member of the Romanian fascist organization named after Alexandru C. Cuza, one of the most fervent fascist leaders in Romania, who was known for his ruthless chauvinism and anti-Semitism. Cuza founded the National Christian Defense League, the LANC (Liga Apararii National Crestine), in 1923. The paramilitary troops of the league, called lancierii, wore blue uniforms. The organization published a newspaper entitled Apararea Nationala. In 1935 the LANC merged with the National Agrarian Party, and turned into the National Christian Party, which had a pronounced anti-Semitic program.

[3] Heroes' Day, 10th of May

national holiday, commemorating Romania's independence against the Ottoman Empire in 1877; at the same time, 10th May was King Michael's birthday and was celebrated as such until his forced abdication.

[4] Karlsbad (Czech name

Karlovy Vary): The most famous Bohemian spa, named after Bohemian King Charles (Karel) IV, who allegedly found the springs during a hunting expedition in 1358. It was one of the most popular resorts among the royalty and aristocracy in Europe for centuries.

[5] Yellow star in Romania

On 8th July 1941, Hitler decided that all Jews from the age of 6 from the Eastern territories had to wear the Star of David, made of yellow cloth and sewed onto the left side of their clothes. The Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs introduced this 'law' on 10th September 1941. Strangely enough, Marshal Antonescu made a decision on that very day ordering Jews not to wear the yellow star. Because of these contradicting orders, this 'law' was only implemented in a few counties in Bukovina and Bessarabia, and Jews there were forced to wear the yellow star.

[6] Radio Free Europe

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

[7] Legionary

Member of the Legion of the Archangel Michael, also known as the Legionary Movement, founded in 1927 by C. Z. Codreanu. This extremist, nationalist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic movement aimed at excluding those whose views on political and racial matters were different from theirs. The Legion was organized in so-called nests, and it practiced mystical rituals, which were regarded as the way to a national spiritual regeneration by the members of the movement. These rituals were based on Romanian folklore and historical traditions. The Legionaries founded the Iron Guard as a terror organization, which carried out terrorist activities and political murders. The political twin of the Legionary Movement was the Totul pentru Tara (Everything for the Fatherland) that represented the movement in parliamentary elections. The followers of the Legionary Movement were recruited from young intellectuals, students, Orthodox clericals, peasants. The movement was banned by King Carol II in 1938.

[8] Goga-Cuza government

Anti-Jewish and chauvinist government established in 1937, led by Octavian Goga, poet and Romanian nationalist, and Alexandru C. Cuza, professor of the University of Iasi, and well known for its radical anti-Semitic view. Goga and Cuza were the leaders of the National Christian Party, an extremist right-wing organization founded in 1935. After the elections of 1937 the Romanian king, Carol II, appointed the National Christian Party to form a minority government. The Goga-Cuza government had radically limited the rights of the Jewish population during their short rule; they barred Jews from the civil service and army and forbade them to buy property and practice certain professions. In February 1938 King Carol established a royal dictatorship. He suspended the Constitution of 1923 and introduced a new constitution that concentrated all legislative and executive powers in his hands, gave him total control over the judicial system and the press, and introduced a one-party system.

[9] Bessarabia

Historical area between the Prut and Dniestr rivers, in the southern part of Odessa region. Bessarabia was part of Russia until the Revolution of 1917. In 1918 it declared itself an independent republic, and later it united with Romania. The Treaty of Paris (1920) recognized the union but the Soviet Union never accepted this. In 1940 Romania was forced to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina to the USSR. The two provinces had almost 4 million inhabitants, mostly Romanians. Although Romania reoccupied part of the territory during World War II the Romanian peace treaty of 1947 confirmed their belonging to the Soviet Union. Today it is part of Moldavia.

[10] Transnistria

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

[11] Nationalization in Romania

The nationalization of industry and natural resources in Romania was laid down by the law of 11th June 1948. It was correlated with the forced collectivization of agriculture and the introduction of planned economy.

[12] Ceausescu, Nicolae (1918-1989)

Communist head of Romania between 1965 and 1989. He followed a policy of nationalism and non-intervention into the internal affairs of other countries. The internal political, economic and social situation was marked by the cult of his personality, as well as by terror, institutionalized by the Securitate, the Romanian political police. The Ceausescu regime was marked by disastrous economic schemes and became increasingly repressive and corrupt. There were frequent food shortages, lack of electricity and heating, which made everyday life unbearable. In December 1989 a popular uprising, joined by the army, led to the arrest and execution of both Ceausescu and his wife, Elena, who had been deputy Prime Minister since 1980.

[13] 23 August 1944

On that day the Romanian Army switched sides and changed its World War II alliances, which resulted in the

state of war against the German Third Reich. The Royal head of the Romanian state, King Michael I, arrested the head of government, Marshal Ion Antonescu, who was unwilling to accept an unconditional surrender to the Allies.

[14] Romanian Revolution of 1989

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