

# Olga Banyai

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(nee Mermelstein)

Budapest

Hungary

Interviewer: Anna Legman

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Mrs. Olga Banyai lives in an apartment overlooking the street on one of the floors of an old, VI.District apartment building. A couple years ago she had a serious brain hemorrhage, so she couldn't remember certain events, years and dates, and her memories were sometimes confused. Despite this, she recalled many stories and memories from her childhood and her ancestors. Because of the state of her health, today she can rarely get out of her apartment, but her family, her son and daughter, and grandchildren are at her side, mutually supporting each other.

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## Family background

My great-great-grandfather on the maternal side was Mozes Herskovits. He was a Romanian. My father and mother were distant cousins, my maternal and paternal grandmothers were siblings. My great-great-grandmother was Lotti Reich, she was born in 1827, probably in Orgovany. But aside from this, the entire family lived in Romania, in Transylvania, spread all over: in Sziget [Maramarossziget], Palotamezo [Palotamezo was no longer included in the 1910 Hungarian census], Kolozsvar, Csenger. [Of this list, Csenger, a large town near the Romanian border was never a part of Romania.] My great-great-grandfather was a merchant, landowner and became poor because he vouched for somebody - signed some bill in someone's stead - and lost all his land. Then the children started popping up, he had four children. They lived in Bikszad. Bikszad was the nest. [Bikszad - a small town with a 160 room spa; became Romanian after Trianon.] One of my great-great-grandfather's grandchildren was my grandmother Julia, and another was my other grandmother, Netti.

My grandmother's father was a famous rabbi, they lived well-off in Csenger. They had - I believe - six children: four girls and two boys. But more of my ancestors were born in Bikszad, and were Hungarians. They were very cultured. My grandmothers were raised like that, I don't know exactly what school they finished, but they always said how cultured the boys were and the girls, too. But that was the [family] branch where the girls were schooled also. That's why my grandmothers were cultured.

My grandmothers' brother was Samuel Stern, who lived here in Damjanich street [Budapest]. He was my mother's Uncle, then there was Mozes in Erdely [Transylvania - in Hungarian]. There was

also a rich landlord in Ersekujvar [Ersekujvar - city of 16,300 inhabitants in 1910, was annexed by Czechoslovakia after Trianon, now in Slovakia]. There were a few landlords among the relatives, I had a landlord great-grandfather, and there was a landlord great uncle, my mother's uncle. I believe, he didn't have a family, or children, but he was a very rich gentleman. They called him the landlord. We wrote about possibly getting some kind of compensation, and they wrote back that we can't, because he wasn't directly related, but was my mother's uncle.

Samuel Stern avoided the war, he was a teacher, his wife was a teacher, he had one son. He was a lawyer-attorney. They were very sweet folk. Their son was called, dr. Pal Somjen. He was a very nice, enchanting person, well- loved. It was always very good to go here with the children to Damjanich street. It was truly one of those places where they greet you with open arms. We met them quite often, we had a close relationship. Today the family has all died off. The daughter died, she was my age, but died of cancer at the age of forty-six. The last to die was Samuel's wife, Annus [from Anna]. Annus was a girl from Devecser, her parents were also killed. She was an only daughter. Her father was a doctor. She lived with her son- in-law, because her daughter died earlier than she did. One of the hands of the son-in-law's new wife was paralysed. She cooked with one arm, shopped and dressed, as well. The family was well-off, teachers and instructors were well-paid at that time. And there was Pali [diminutive of Pal - (Paul)] the lawyer, but he's no longer living. Eight, nine years ago, he died of cancer.

Mozes Stern, I don't know what he did. I only know that he had a very pretty daughter named Olga. There's an Olga in all branches of my family. I don't know what the daughter did, I never met her, I just heard about her from one of my cousins, and he showed me pictures of her. I know she lived in Erdely, probably in Kolozsvar. The family was spread all around Erdely.

As for my maternal grandfather, the Herskovitses weren't rich, nor poor, but even if they were poor, they wouldn't show it. If clothes were stained, they were cleaned and ironed, and everybody saw what orderly people they were. You never saw them dirty, or in rags! If someone is poor, it doesn't mean they have to let themselves go.

My maternal grandfather was Jakab Herskovits. He died about the same time his youngest daughter (my aunt) was born, in 1895. Since he was born in Csenger in 1860, he was about thirty-five years old. His heart gave out on him. For the sake of something different, he was a tavern owner. But in the family they always just talked about how, 'Imagine Grandma, blind with all those children!' All I know of Grandpa, was that once a year, when the new year came [Yahrzeit], he lit candles. I don't know more about him.

My maternal grandmother was a very clever lady. They were rich. In those days, the wealthy people didn't make their women work. They never talked about what happened, when Grandpa died. Obviously, they split the property up among the children. People then weren't so unsatisfied as they are today. They weren't so demanding. Then my maternal grandmother, poor woman, was taken to Auschwitz at the age of eighty-three.

My mother is Eszter Herskovits, born in Bikszad in 1894. My mother didn't have an education. Grandma was left alone with a lot of children, and went blind with the last one. I don't know how she raised the children, only that they all turned out to be people. Two became cantor teachers. Samuel Herskovits was from Vecses. Dezso Herskovits was from Dombovar, he had ten children.

Samuel was the oldest sibling. He lived in Vecses, had a family, five children. He had a son named Laci Halmos - he magyarized his name - who was a bank director at the Ertekforgalmi [Securities Trade] Bank. He was called up for work service [Forced labor]<sup>1</sup> and died.

My mother's next sibling, Dezso, was a soldier in the First World War [Military in the Austro-Hungarian Empire]<sup>2</sup>. He had ten children. When his wife died, he was left with the ten children. He split the children up among relatives. He couldn't have worked [and raised the children] anyway. The ten children got used to independence. Many came up to Pest, and here in Pest they survived. Those who didn't come to Pest, all died in forced labor. Two of his children went into hiding, Klari in Pesterzsébet, Olga in Budapest. Both of Olga's children died in the war, they starved. After the war, she had two more children, who emigrated to Israel. Her son was killed in Israel on his twenty-first birthday, it was deemed a hero's death. Klari had a clothing shop downtown, but she always felt like an outsider in the family.

Dezso's son Jenó also hid out somewhere. After the war, things went well for him, he still had his business in Pest [Budapest], a women's clothing shop, they lived from that. He had two children. He had a car. He was going somewhere with his twelve-year old son and they hit a truck, and his son's carotid artery was cut. He died instantly. The little daughter survived. Jenó couldn't stand the pain of it, he died soon after.

Then there was my mother's next sibling, Pali. He didn't have children. And somehow, in the forced labor, he survived the war. Then he emigrated to New York. He had heart problems, they amputated his leg, he died from that.

There was Miksa, he had a son. A very pretty only child. He came over, so I could write to my siblings - because they were already in America - to help him get out [flee Hungary], because he didn't have anyone in America [to officially invite or sponsor him for a visa]. His father was in the hospital with cancer, and at that time he always asked when is his son going, already. I got a letter from my younger brother, that he'd arrange it, and he could go soon. But he wrote something, like he couldn't arrange it overnight. We should arrange everything here, he'll figure a way to get the son out sooner. I went in to see Miksa in the hospital, it was after an operation, and I knew it was metastatic, they couldn't save him. I read to him that his son could go to America, that they arranged everything, it's all fine. I lied to him, it was a complete lie. The poor guy, I really loved my cousin. [sic - It seems, that Miksa wasn't her mother's brother, but another relative.]

I don't know too much about my mother's other siblings, there was Aunt Hanna, Sara and Fani, all three died in Auschwitz.

My father's family was more 'pulled apart' than 'held together'. He wasn't in contact with his immediate family. As close as the Herskovits family was, the Mermelstein's were that distant.

My paternal grandfather was called Mano Mermelstein. I visited them once, they lived in Szolnok. They had two small houses, his daughter Zseni lived in one, my grandfather lived in the other. Zseni had a family already, three little girls, Mancsi [from Maria], Etus [from Etel - (Ethel)] and Ella. Her husband was a travelling salesman. Zseni died young from consumption, her oldest child was probably eight years old at the time. I knew their father, he travelled to Subcarpathia. He was left alone with the children. He was a traveller, a lot of Jews went house to house all over, with all kinds of things, with saccharine, I don't know, some little things. He was that kind of salesman on a small

scale, not big. They weren't big businesses. Mancis is still living. That's all I know about my father's side, whatever Mancis told me.

My grandfather was a comb-maker. He made the combs, and sold them, too. He was able to support the family with his comb profession. They went from city to city. They sold things in the bigger cities: Munkacs, Ungvar, Beregszasz, Nagyszolcs [Subcarpathia]<sup>3</sup>. They took my grandmother with them. They had a lot of children there, too. There was Marton - that was my father. There was Zseni, Olga, Tamara, Dora and Libi. I already told you about Zseni. Libi perished in the war, in Auschwitz. She had an eight-year old daughter. Olga left for Palestine already before the war, she's got a daughter and a grandson who live in America. I don't know anything about Tamara. Dora, who lived here in Pest, was deported but survived. Her husband and five-year old daughter were taken into the ghetto, in Wesselenyi street, into the temple ghetto [Budapest ghetto]. Her husband starved to death there, the little girl survived. A cousin of hers brought her out of the ghetto, when we were liberated. They took her away, soaked the clothes off of her because she had lice, she had sores and everything. They shaved her head, you know they could hardly get all the lice off of her. She stayed with them for a couple months, until her mother came back. Her mother survived. She was a very clever little girl. When her father was already weak, and they rationed out the bread slices, the little girl gave her own bread to her father.

Grandpa died, I believe, a couple years before the war, not in the war. My maternal grandma, Netty Stern died young, she was exhausted from all the travel. Her sister, Julia Stern, my maternal grandmother was taken to Auschwitz at age 83. It was probably better for those who died earlier.

My father, Marton Mermelstein was born in Tiszaujlak in 1897.

Grandpa, Mano wasn't religious. But my father was religious, he was the only religious person in the family. There were five siblings, but only he was religious. He studied [the Talmud and the Torah]. He always studied. His siblings didn't like him, because he always studied. His siblings had to work, my father had to study. He was the only son. That's how he later became a travelling salesman.

The Mermelstein's didn't suffer, they weren't killed in heaps, like the Herskovitses. Always the good ones - there's a saying: 'Always the good ones go away.' In my family, the good ones went away. The Herskovitses were all kind people. Generous, they gave to the poor. The whole family was so charitable. They even shared what little they had. They were all killed.

## Growing up

I'm eighty-one years old, and I had a brain hemorrhage. My brain - I've got a paper about it - is officially faulty. I've got a Jewish name. My name is Braha, blessing. I'm the blessing. Mrs. Janos Banyai, Olga Mermelstein. I was born May 10, 1923 in Bikszad in Szatmar County. When I was an infant, they took me to Subcarpathia, to Huszt. [At her birth, Huszt (now Khust) was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1910, the nearly 10,000 residents were 51 percent Ruthenian, 34 percent Hungarian and 15 percent German. Of those, 23 percent were part of the Jewish community. After Trianon it went to Czechoslovakia. In 1938, it was reannexed by Hungary, and in 1945 it became part of the Soviet Union. Now it belongs to the Ukraine.]

It was a very pretty small town, with quite a lot of Jews living there, but few returned after the war. People there somehow mingled together, it didn't count then who was Jewish, who was Christian. We got along well with the Christians, we were friends. They came over, we went over [to their houses]. We played dolls together. There wasn't any problem under the sun with the fact that we were Jews. There were Ruthenians, very decent people. We got along better with them, but my mother missed the Hungarian language. Huszt was a Jewish city - we learned Yiddish in school, all of us. We were somehow separate from the big family. From almost everyone. My parents were distant cousins. Our grandmothers were sisters. My mother went to visit at my father's house, and they fell in love with each other. My grandmother was very much against it, but then a wedding came out of it anyway. It wasn't a bad marriage, just the problem was that my father was religious, there were religious problems. My father was more religious than my mother. My mother was already a more modern thinker at that time. That was the problem, but there weren't any arguments. Once in a while, they'd quarrel. My father said, that's because my mother wasn't religious enough.

My father wasn't a soldier in the First World War. They dripped something in his ear [to avoid conscription], and he carried that with him his whole life, he had a bad ear. They ruined his ear so he wouldn't be a soldier. A Hungarian soldier. There he wouldn't have gotten kosher food, and he insisted upon it [eating kosher].

My parents were tent marketeers. Once a week there was a big market - Huszt was a small town, at that time about 25,000 residents. They put out a table, full of all kinds of things, and they came and bought candies, and whatever else they sold. I don't know, ...they sold fruits, whatever there was at the time. Then my father gave that up, and became a salesman. Then they called them travellers, he became a traveller. He went to the Czech cities with this type of window blinds, that's what he sold. And we could live from that. He sent fifty-five crowns [Czech currency] every week. My father wasn't home too much, he was always travelling. I saw him four times, when I was little, when I was six years old, when I ten years old, that was a harder period at home. When I was fourteen years old, I saw him for the last time. He was always on the road.

The last fifteen years he lived in one place, in Prague, he worked for a famous rabbi. I don't know what exactly he did. I only know that he lived there, that was his permanent address. We never went to see him. We weren't that well-off that we could travel. I did travel, and that's how I met my Transylvanian relatives during the war, because I had to get my citizenship [KEOKH - National Central Alien Control Office].

Relatives of mine lived in Szinervaralja, Remetemezo, Bikszad, Somkutpataka, Szatmarnemeti and Kolozsvar. It was a large family. [All of these cities named belonged to Romania after Trianon. Kolozsvar alone was in Romania before the treaty.] They were scattered all over, and then my mother said to go visit them. Aside from this, we also travelled when we were sick. There wasn't a hospital in our town, if I was sick, for example when they took out my appendix, then I travelled to Beregszasz [Berehove] and back.

My mother always wore an apron at home, and always had small change in the apron. If a beggar came, she always gave. We had our own beggars. I'm sure they had more money than we did. She gave anyway, she helped, and taught us by doing that. I was like that, too. I helped, and helped, and I don't regret it. I had lots of friends. They really loved me, I loved them, too. There was no

difference, if they were Jewish or Christian. Or Gypsy either. The Gypsies [Roma] have really difficult, very disadvantaged lives.

We were Hungarian citizens until 1918, we always felt we were Hungarians. The villages, cities which I just listed, that was Hungary. I really loved Erdely, too. My mother told me so much about it, it was good to listen to her. The family was big, and everybody had some story.

Jakab Mermelstien is my older brother. And now for sixty years, he's 'Jack'. He was born in 1921 in Somkut, in Szatmar county. My parents were living there at the time. They wandered around quite a lot.

My younger brother, Ignac Mermelstein was born in Huszt in 1926. The mother tongues of all three of us are Hungarian and Yiddish, and naturally we also knew Ruthenian. We spoke Hungarian in Romania. Not many spoke Hungarian in Huszt, so we had to learn the Ruthenian language, too. All three of us went to a Ruthenian school. [Ruthenians: the name for an East Slavic people living in what was once Galicia and Subcarpathia, as well as Bukovina and who speak a Ukrainian dialect.]

I knew Hungarian, also, I learned a little German, Yiddish and German are very similar. I was happy with that for a couple years, and I developed further with English. I had to learn a little English, because if I went to [visit] my little brother's family in America, so I would have had to speak only English. They said that I spoke quite well, but now I don't know any English anymore.

My brothers went to a Jewish school. Jewish school lasted for half a day, either morning or afternoon. It was obligatory in our family, my father insisted on it. [probably a cheder]. Among my ancestors, there were cantors, teachers. The Jewish school was there in Huszt, the two boys went there. My father learned it, and he wanted the boys to learn Hebrew, too. They learned how to pray. I even know how to pray, I just don't understand a word of it.

My older brother finished grammar school, that was popular then. He didn't learn anything else. He was very talented, but since he was Jewish, they were careful not to support Jews. As a Jewish child, his drawings were out in the hall [on display], he was so talented. And he was very clever, he knew a lot about everything. At the age of fifteen, he took over the work from mother - he'd never studied how to sew - he sewed trousers beautifully, men's trousers. And then, at the age of fifteen, he became the family provider. We respected him and loved him, because he was so diligent. He saw that my mother was struggling with the three children, and we lived really far from the city, six kilometers away. You had to go by foot, and clothes had to be carried there, and the tailored work had to be brought back, and then my older brother took it over. My mother struggled a lot, but she didn't complain ever.

My older brother became a tailor. But a life artist, too. He could do something with anything. He made candy brittle in his childhood. He was still in grammar school, and he made candy brittle from sugar. He roasted it, then wrapped it and sold it. He had pocket money, and even my mother got some of it. When he was already older, then he made bead strings, and colored watch chains. It was the fashion then, the peasants wore them. He always figured something out. He was very talented.

The family was religious. Mainly, my father. He was somewhere between the Neolog [4](#) and the Orthodox [5](#). He went to the bath [mikveh] and to temple everyday, and only after that would he

unpack his wares. He was very sensitive to cleanliness. He never went into the street without a hat. He had a regular coat, normal shirt [not characteristically Hassidic clothing] and he had a little beard like this.

The rest of us weren't really temple-goers. My mother went once or twice a year, for the high holidays. The boys also went. Girls didn't have to go to temple. We did have to study religion. And Hebrew, too. All through grammar school we studied religion. I learned to read it, I just don't know what it means anymore.

I remember childhood celebrations. We were poor, but on Fridays we always held a regular holiday dinner. On Friday, you had to properly cook. We made brioche, fresh bread, meat soup. That was the usual thing, we always did this. My mom had a feeling for it, she didn't work on Saturday, didn't warm anything on Saturday, she cooked the kinds of things that you didn't have to warm up. In my childhood, we cooked dried plums and dried apples, and every week there had to be brioche. We had to wake up early Saturday morning. We could hardly wait to get to eat the brioche. Here in my household, it wasn't possible [to keep kosher]. My husband, Janos Banyai was Dunantul [from the 'beyond-the-Danube' region], from Nagykanizsa. His parents kept the Sabbath, the kids didn't much anymore.

On Saturday the boys went to temple, my mother went to the neighbors to talk a bit. She'd take me, too. Later, I went to one of my girlfriends, and when the boys came home, then it was lunch. At the Jewish homes, chulent was the main lunch at noon on Saturday. But we didn't like chulent. My mother rarely made it. She made plenty of salads, tarhonya [a pasta] with beef or chicken, meat soup. She made apple compote, lit candles, and if my father was home, then there were very serious lunches and dinners, my father always prayed at them. It was so cosy and peaceful. It's completely different when the head of the family is home.

At Passover, we ate and there's a tradition in the seder that you're not allowed to eat bread. So before that you had to clean out everything, and everything in the world had to be moved. Clean beautifully, and change the dishes. We did this, and it was a good piece of work, a little different than the everyday [cleaning]. Once on seder night, my father gave me a piece of matzot to put away, as a reward. You get a gift for it. I hid it, but the rest... I don't know anymore what I got. But I was very proud, that I got to hide the piece of matzot. You had to keep it for a while.

Then there were the high holidays, when my mother also went to temple. The women wore white dresses. There was Purim, then there was the Day of Atonement [Yom Kippur], there was Sukkot, the tent holiday, these we all kept, and my mother always went to temple then. Then came the mourning day for the dead, we lit candles or a little lamp, my mother kept it for me so I wouldn't accidentally forget to remember her loved ones.

I was sick a lot. Not seriously sick, a little cold, a little fever, this, that, it was enough that I just didn't feel good. Since I was the only girl, I had to clean and watch my little brother. When I was sick, then my brothers did the cleaning. We lived in a dirt-floor house in Huszt. Every week I had to do a big cleaning. My mother took the work, the finished work, and brought things to cook. I stayed at home to clean. Every year we had to white-wash it inside and out. Every week we had to putty up [the cracks]. My mother was maniacally clean. I had to wash, too, I had to do a weekly washing. For the big washing, Mariska came, my mother's friend, and she did it.

I always had to take care of my little brother. Because my mother worked, and when she left home, went into the city, I had to look after my little brother. It was a very big burden on me. My older brother was in school, I was together with my little brother. The area around our house was a very dangerous place, there was a canal in front of the house. And that went to the Tisza River [the second largest river in Hungary]. We really had to be careful that children didn't fall in. My whole childhood was spent looking after my little brother. I hated my little brother because I was tied down and I really liked to play. And now we're best friends.

Once when I was little, my father laughed at me. When my little brother was born, I was three years old. My mother nursed the child, and I wanted to be nursed, too. Until then there had been two of us, and then the third child came. I was jealous of my brother. My mother nursed him, and I wanted to be nursed, too. I sat down on the ground and cried. My father was home, and he laughed at me. I grabbed a shoe and threw it at my father. He laughed at me. He was rarely at home, and he only beat me once, when I was six years old. I was his favorite. He didn't see me much, but I was his only daughter. So much love flowed toward me. He didn't like the boys, he was very strict with them, because he wanted them to study [religion], too. But the boys weren't very interested in religion, though they went to the Jewish school.

My father always sent some kind of gewgaw, something to wear, beads, jewelry, sometimes he sent oranges. So he always sent packages. Plus he sent home the fifty-five crowns and fifty filler. The postman brought that to me, I went to the post office every week.

I really loved to play. I had girlfriends. I really loved to play dolls, and to build houses out of mud, and furniture and everything. My mother, as a seamstress, had these little pieces of cloth, I took them, and had a good time playing with the peasant kids. At that time, they sewed dolls for children themselves. If you were clever, you sewed a doll for your girlfriend. Plus we made furniture and a dollhouse. It was great to be little then, despite the fact that you had to sweep, too. Everything was good then. It's the same now, if people would be a little more modest, they'd live a lot more happily.

I did very nice needlework. Once I didn't dare go home, because I got a five [the worst grade then] in needlework. At that time, a one was the best grade. I was crying when I told how I got a five in needlework. My mother bathed me, and tucked me in, nothing happened. I didn't know that it wasn't my fault, that I failed because she didn't give me money for needlework. But after that, I always had needlework.

I fell down a lot in my childhood. We had to go on stone streets, and tights were popular then. My tights always ripped, when I went to school. I went home, fell down again, my mother came home late, she'd done the shopping during the day, that night she washed them and patched them.[probably darned them, that is, 'patched' the hole in the cotton 'florete stockings' with a multi-string thread in a singular pattern.] The next day, I put them on again. Later I patched them, too. When I patched them, my mother, who wasn't big on praise, complimented me. 'That's my little girl', and I was very proud of that. It can be good to be poor too, if that's how it turns out. I didn't want anything else, we had everything. Our parents did all they could to dress us decently and send us to school.

I remember from those times that once my mother went to visit relatives in Erdely, and she took a sack of pastries. Her mother was alive then, and my aunt, too. My mother told us how happy they



were. A sack of pastries were even cheaper then, in the 1930s. There in Subcarpathia, we didn't have anybody, we were wanderers.

We didn't really get to see my paternal grandparents, because we didn't have money for travel. Once we went, all three of us kids, to a wedding, and it was really good, because there was a big garden. And there was an oven, and since I was the guest, I got to sleep on the top of the oven. It was very interesting. I got clothes then, that was a rare thing, to get clothes for a wedding. And I was very happy. It was my aunt Libi's wedding. She ended up in Auschwitz, too. They lived in Munkacs [Mukaceve], they took them away from there. It was a proper wedding, she had on a pretty white dress. When I went out the gate of the temple, then they threw confetti. I loved it so much, I was about five or six. There was good food then, so we partied well. But my mother always said: you have to behave! Well we had to, you couldn't horse around there.

I always loved to work, and I always had work. I took on everything. My first job was at age fourteen, when I finished grammar school. When I finished, I went to a family and had to watch two twins. Their mother had lung problems. They were about eleven years old, I was fourteen. I had to watch them, it was just like when an older sister watches the younger ones. They gave me something to eat, they gave me clean clothes, they had no problems with me. I didn't have to clean, because I was a child myself. Though I was already cleaning at home, I started early, I didn't play much, I had to work a lot at home.

Then when I was already bigger, I started working on Fo street in a hat shop, in a first-class place. They were very satisfied with me. I was so happy. That was a good place. And I set aside my fillers [pennies], and went to study in the trade school. I learned millinery [hat making]. My mother asked me, what do you want to be? A seamstress or something else? I said, something else, and it sounded so good then. Women's milliner. And I became something else, though I surely would have been a good seamstress. Because I already had the background. I saw it at home.

I knew the Hungarian language, because my mother was a native speaker, but I couldn't write it, I just learned to speak it from my mother. Then they enrolled me in the Ruthenian school, and I finished eight classes in Ruthenian. Later in the trade school, we learned Hungarian. You had to study in Hungarian, you had to learn Hungarian, and that's when I learned Hungarian. Things went well, I didn't have a problem. At that time, if there was work, then there wasn't a problem.

Thank god, we didn't have conflicts in Huszt. Because for us it didn't matter who was Jewish and who wasn't. We were so lucky, my mother got along with everybody. They came, 'please sew these trousers. My child's pants have holes in the knees, please fix them.' Friday night, there was always brioche at our house. That's when the children got crescent brioche. My mother fixed the pants for the children, and well, they didn't even pay. And that's how it went.

I didn't feel that some stranger would hurt us, nobody, never. Nobody ever said, 'smelly Jew' to me. My poor mother, but she helped in those little ways a lot. For the peasants, and the poor.

What was hard, was that we were Hungarians. There were ladies, proper ladies, Christians, who would have liked to talk to my mother, but they couldn't speak Hungarian, just Ruthenian. The majority were Ruthenian. My mother didn't know Ruthenian. Or rather, she spoke Ruthenian very badly. That was difficult. Nothing else.

There were a lot of Jews in Huszt. The Jews in general were merchants, they did business. The ladies almost never worked. My mother worked, because my father was sick for a while, and she had to learn to sew, so we could live from something. The wealthier Jews acted so strangely with the poor. They felt different than them. And that's somehow why they didn't like them. I didn't like, for example, the 'Lipotvaros' ones, either. [A stereotype of wealthy Jews; Gyula Zeke wrote, Lipotvaros in the 1870's 'attracted the modern, big city functionaries, and this district (of Budapest) was home to the big capital institutions and Jewish upper middle classes'.]

There were three Mermelstein families in Huszt. I heard there were some in Munkacs and in Beregszasz, too. In one of the kibbutzes, there's a roll of names of those killed in the time of loss, and my father's name is on it. And there are a lot of Mermelsteins on the list. That's how I know they were in Munkacs, too. These were generally rich people. Lumber merchants, all kinds of merchants. Then you bought land, it was their business, spice shops, delicatessens. One of my classmates was even called Mermelstein, I was poor, she was rich. When I was studying at the trade school, she came in with a blue fox on her neck ['blue fox' - a high-quality gray arctic fox stole with bluish highlights, a truly expensive piece in Europe at the time] - because as I said, the hat shop was in a elegant quarter - and she said, 'Good Day' to me! [the most formal greeting for strangers] I didn't return her greeting. Why should she greet me with 'Good Day' when we went to school together for eight years? But I saw her, when she was very unfortunate.

### During the war

When the Hungarians came in to Huszt [First Vienna Decision]<sup>6</sup>, the Jewish laws [anti-Jewish Laws]<sup>7</sup> came. My mother was a big Hungarian. It was a Thursday. The Hungarians are coming, the Hungarians are coming! - said my mother. She was so happy that the Hungarians were coming, she'll have someone to talk to. There were a lot of Hungarians in Erdely. Much fewer in Huszt. She made the pickle on Thursday afternoon, then went down to city hall to welcome them. Well, she couldn't have been happy for long.

Then came the crying, when almost all three of the children had to leave at once! And it's good that we left, because we survived. If we'd stayed, then we surely wouldn't have survived. We had no work, nor anything to eat. The Hungarians came, they wanted to see the papers, that we were Hungarians. I left to visit the relatives, so we'd have the papers. I got the papers together. But meanwhile, I was there for a couple weeks with the relatives. They all jumped on me, that here's Olgica, Eszti's little girl, they'd never seen me before. Although I was born in Bicszad. I was Transylvanian, too.

I got the citizenship together, and it was quiet for a while. [But] When the time came, 1944, they killed the whole family together with their citizenship. They killed my father in 1941, they took him away in Prague, and we didn't know anything about him. Later, we found out he'd been taken to Theresienstadt <sup>8</sup>. I just saw the museum, I was in Israel. They made a museum on a kibbutz, for just those who'd been taken to Theresienstadt, and there's a memorial plaque there for my father. My little brother found it.

And so my mother stayed there with three children. True, we were already pretty grown up [The three siblings were born in 1921, 1923 and 1926]. My little brother, Ignac was in grammar school when the Jewish laws came. They kicked him out of school, and he wasn't allowed to study. I wasn't allowed to work. My older brother, Jakab (he later became Jack) they called him up for 'work

service' [forced labor] in Koszeg. They took away my mother's work, too. She worked in a dress shop as a home-worker seamstress. Those she worked for, they were also Jewish small businessmen, they had a business, but that also closed.

There were some who hung themselves. There was a very sweet spice merchant neighbor, who was already elderly, and when they said they were taking people in, without a word, he hung himself. He was a very smart man. Mister Zoli Szabo, he was called, I greatly respect him that he hung himself. It's better than the gas. He took the pleasure away from the Germans [sic - Nazis]. He was a very good neighbor. There were a lot of poor people living around there, and he gave them goods without getting paid, he wrote it up in a little notebook. And he'd say to the person, they can pay him next week or the week after, and he trusted them. That's how he stayed in business. Poor people always paid their debts. That was the old man whom I bought candy from when I was little, and he wrapped it in newspaper. He was a really decent man.

I was nineteen years old, when I had to get away from Huszt. Until the age of nineteen, I worked for a Jewish man who was a milliner. They shut down the business, sent three assistants away, and kept me. He took me to his apartment, hid me away in a dark room, and there, in that haze we worked for him. I don't know exactly... I recall it was about a year, but it could have been less. The point is that I was happy to be able to work.

Then times got really hard. Uncle Dezso came for the summer to my mother's, and my mother was there, too. Uncle Dezso sent a message, 'My Olgica, go up to Pest [Budapest], my daughter is there, she's very smart and very diligent, she'll help you find a position.' I came up to Pest. I brought my little brother with me, who was sixteen. We took a monthly room on Dob street, and stayed there for a month. Then we found a better one on Kossuth Lajos street, next to the old Uttoro Department Store. I couldn't stand my little brother. He always jumped up on moving trams. I sent him to Uncle Dezso, who was a cantor teacher in Dombovar. He accepted my brother right alongside his own ten children. There you could still study, nobody asked if you were Jewish or Christian. My uncle signed my brother up to be an electrician [trade school] And then for work they went to a Schwabian [ethnic German Hungarians]. They pretty soon... it came up what religion are you. My brother said, he didn't speak Hungarian so well, because they spoke Yiddish at home, that he's Jewish. Then the assistant kicked him, why did he say he was Jewish. They didn't kick him out because, in fact he was a hard-working kid, they let him work. My little brother learned to be an electrician there. At that time, they didn't give my mother work anymore, and my older brother was in work service.

On Uncle Dezso's advice, I looked up Olga, and told her, 'Hello, I'm Aunt Eszti's daughter.' Aunt Eszti was her aunt. 'I already heard about you, come on, my Olgica', she always called me that. 'I'll run a hot bath for you, but you are a big girl!' But she wasn't like that with just me, but with everybody. And when the war broke out, they took her husband away to forced labor with my later husband. Her husband and my husband were brothers, and they married two cousins, because Olga and I were cousins.

When I looked Olga up, my future husband was living there - Olga's brother- in-law. That's how we met. He was so happy when he first saw me. He could love you excessively. He loved me so much that he always wanted to be with me, and wanted to hear my voice. Now also, until his death, everything was very nice and very good.

In 1942 in Pest, I was already a milliner. Like everyone, I was looking for work. I had a pair of rags, that I tried to keep decent. I didn't do a lot of shopping. I had an oil-burner, that I made myself morning tea on, and there was a telephone. I didn't really use it. I wasn't a little girl anymore, I was already nineteen. They paid badly, I could barely pay rent. I wasn't in that first hat shop for long, just a short time. Then I found a position somewhere else, on the Vamhaz ringroad. There I had good work. I had to work a lot, but I made good money. The owners were husband and wife, the man was Jewish and the woman was German. I worked there until they called me in [to forced labor].

My younger brother lived with Uncle Dezso, but supported himself. Slowly, they too became poor. Those couple of years were very difficult. All at once they just shut every door in front of you. You couldn't work, you couldn't buy bread, buy milk, anything.

My mother wrote: If you can, go out to Teleki and buy some trousers for your older brother, and find something for his feet, too. I went out to Teleki - it was a kind of flea market - and bought him trousers. She also wrote: 'Don't let there be trouble with your brother, because in the work service you're only allowed to get one letter, and the others they don't hand over, so if you have something to tell him, or you can send him something, then write to me at home, and I'll pass it on to your brother. I had gotten a little money together in Pest. I was very lucky, I always had work. I earned twenty-eight pengo [Hungarian currency before the Forint] a week. I arranged it, and sent it.

Don't send me anything, mother wrote, because I've got everything. From what does she have everything? They kicked her out of her job, because she was Jewish. I couldn't imagine where she could have had everything from. And plus in the summer - this was in 1942 - my little brother, Ignac went home, and it turned out where from she has everything. She was at the neighbors', with her skirts rolled up, on her knees scrubbing. She became a maid.

My little brother saw that, he was a sensitive child anyway, and he cried so much because she was scrubbing floors. I said, what do you have to cry about? Be happy she's got work, and something to eat. Then he got himself past it, but it really broke his heart. Then mother disappeared. They took her to Auschwitz. She ended up in the crematorium, I know that, because I was in Auschwitz, and I met a classmate of mine, and she said she saw her with her own mother, and knew that where they were lining up to go was to the crematorium. That was the end.

Uncle Dezso's children, Miksa, Miksa Herskovits, then Jenő Herskovits, Lali and Jolan came up to Pest. They came when they guessed something: Those who don't come up, will die.

Olga, to whom I came, was left alone with her children, her husband ended up in the work service. She was ten years older than me, I was the little Olgi. She was a seamstress, a very good seamstress. She studied under Klara Rotschild [fashion designer, opened a salon in 1934, worked as a state employee after 1945, and was the artistic director of the Clara Salon]. She was an excellent seamstress, if she sewed herself a dress, she sewed one for me. We got along so well, and wore the same dresses. She had two little daughters, one was four years old in 1944, the other was two. Both of them perished. They hid in Pest. A bomb hit the house next door to the one in which they were hiding, and then they went into the house. They were there for a couple hours, then started out into the street. A Christian woman called out to Olga, said there's an alarm on, why is she walking in the street. She took them in. The woman's husband was very angry that she

adopted them. We haven't got anything to eat, why did you bring this woman and her two kids here? She can't feed her kids! And she couldn't, and the girl starved to death. Gabi. The other girl, Zsuzsa died in the hospital, she had some sickness.

After the war, she and her husband moved to Mezohegyes, the man was a head accountant there, but in 1956 [9](#) they kicked him out of his job. They picked themselves up, and left for Israel. After the war, they had two children, they were successful, clever, educated. One was six years old, the other eleven years old when they left for Israel. The boy died a hero's death on his twenty-first birthday. Olga was the big woman of the kibbutz, they always had lots of guests, because they really liked her, and she worked to the end of her life. She couldn't stay at home. Olgi sewed there in Israel, too. Sanyi worked poor guy, outside in the orange plant.

Here in Pest, they took people away later by a couple weeks. Altogether, they gathered up the Jews and took them away probably within a month.[Plight of Budapest Jews][10](#) It went very quickly. They had just kicked me out of my job. An Arrow Cross[soldier][11](#) came, and said I had a quarter of an hour to gather my most important belongings, and come with him. What for, where to? You'll see. I packed up, and he took me to Csepel [island in the Danube]. I worked in the Csepel brick factory for a while. There I met a girl, who became my best girlfriend, to the end of her life she was a very good friend of mine. We went through everything together. She was dr. Stefania Mandy, art historian [Stefania Mandy: poet, art historian, translator]. Stefka was already twenty-five years old, she was an art historian, she had already taught. Before they conscripted her for work service, she was already a real person. And a good friend can give you life, too. Not just me, a couple of us stayed alive only because we succeeded in gathering a couple people around us, with whom we didn't talk about, 'My, how hungry I am, a little poppyseed pastry would be great.' Stefania Mandy held lectures for us, she knew a lot, that we didn't. We were twenty years old, or still eighteen, youngsters. And that was what saved our lives.

They took us from Csepel to Budakalasz by boat. We were there for five days under the open sky. It rained the whole time. Earlier they'd taken our rings, watches. I was engaged already, the ring, the chain, they took it all. I was left with only the clothes I had on. Then they took us into a room. They said, if somebody has to go to the toilet, go then. We went in line to the toilet, and one of the girls hid fifty pengo in the toilet. Then they got us together and took us into another room. Constables[12](#), 'feathered' constables ['kakastollas csendorok', named for the rooster feather on their helmet] came, and started to beat us. We were all girls. And they only beat us, because nobody talked, because the girl who hid the money wasn't among us.

Then they put us on a certain Auschwitz-bound boxcar. We were on a train for five days. There was no toilet, not to mention a place to sleep. We were locked up for days, no food, no water, nothing. In the morning, they gave us some kind of slop. There were some who went crazy there in the boxcar with the child in their arms, some who died, young. Then we arrived. There, the selection began. One right, one left. Whomever they found able-bodied, they took away to work. They cut our hair off, shaved us bald, took off our one article of clothing and gave us some rag. They gave me a black lace dress, and when it got really hot, the lace stuck to my neck, my body. I could laugh that I was 'all in lace' [the impression of the lace marked her skin].

We were very thirsty. We'd gotten off the boxcars, they'd bathed us, cut off our hair, gave us a lace dress, and we were still thirsty. Once they brought a bucket of water, everyone climbed into that

bucket. I got a swallow of water too. I'll never forget it as long as I live, how delicious that water was, never! I never ate and drank things that tasted so good, that probably saved my life. I almost died of thirst, not just me, others too. We considered it a separate punishment.

We starved a lot, they beat us. They once hit me in the head so hard from behind with a big club, that my girlfriends just stared to see I was still alive. We were very hungry, I had bent over for a potato skin and that's why they beat my head in. I was okay, that was a personal bit of luck. Then I just watched from in line: they took pregnant mothers away, they never brought them back. They experimented with children. I went before Mengele four times. And all four times I stayed alive. There was a truck. Whomever didn't please him, whomever he thought wasn't able to work, they immediately put on the truck. And by the third selection, I was really thin.

I always collected them - didn't matter if they beat my head in - the potato peels. It was muddy, but I ate it. I had a little package set aside, I was really scared before every selection, I ate them quick. Poor Stefka, she spoke up for all of us, when they dished out the food. Once there was cabbage soup or potato soup, but there were no potatoes in it. Stefka, she said: 'There aren't any potatoes!' She got slapped so hard! We were really sorry for her. Next day, we stood in line again with our little mess-tins. The food server asks: are there enough potatoes? Steffi said, 'Enough'. She would have given her another slap.

Sometimes, at dawn they dragged us out in our one thin dress. They yelled and beat us. We drank puddles, I scratched the frozen garbage pile with a stick to make it easier to pick things up with my hands. He [the guard] gave me such a sudden beating. He said, 'Throw the stick away, do it with your hands!' I threw it away. A lot of people went crazy, and afterwards everybody stayed a little crazy. Me, too.

We got together to listen to Stefania Mandy. I liked her a lot, and I was very proud that I was close to her. She was very smart, a mature person. Klari Hoffman taught us French. So we had a little culture, and that helped a lot. French was so alien to me. I already knew Yiddish, Hungarian and German. But French was somehow very difficult. I never got anywhere with the French language. I wasn't really interested afterwards.

Many times I excused those who sat alone. People went crazy there, too. There were two sisters, one went insane. She looked at her sister helplessly, she couldn't do a thing. They were two girls from Mako. There were young parents who buried their children. I didn't consider myself unfortunate. We made a lot of plans. Who would eat what, who would cook what... One would like to eat this, the other would eat that. It was horrible when we talked about food.

Twelve of us slept in one bunk. If one wanted to turn over, all twelve had to turn over, like herrings, that's the way they put us. The toilet was far, and separate. We went to the toilet quite a lot, because we were very cold at night. The nights were very cold. I saw the crematorium, the smoke, and I always kept looking for my mother. We were very much mama's girls, truth be told. I always searched for my mother, after the war, even on the street, I always looked for a lady in a scarf.

Then they took us from Auschwitz to work in Liebau [This was a sub-camp of the Gross-Rosen concentration camp in the south Silesian town of Liebau (today Lubowka, Poland).] I was in Auschwitz for a couple months. We signed up for work and we got into a really good place, a factory. We were happy that we could work. The first time they gave us food, we got a real

goulash. It was such great happiness - that after months we could finally eat something - it's impossible to explain. We said to each other, 'My God, how lucky we are, how great it will be here for us'. There was warm water, a bit rusty, but it was something. We got through about a half year there. How louse-infested we were, and hungry, and ragged! The more there were of us, the easier it was to bear the hunger, and beatings, and that driving pace - we had to work really hard. We bore it all. A lot of them fell out, a lot died. But among us [friends], hardly any died.

We worked in a weapons crate factory. We had to drill those... clips or whatever, with heavy drills. It was so heavy, that it caused an abscess on my neck. There was a sickroom, they put me there. Good God what happens, Mengele came there after us. I said, 'Well, he found me.' I was sure he was going to take me away. He didn't take me away. And that was some kind of holy miracle. I'm sure that was sent by God, because that just doesn't happen. That somebody is lying there sick, and he leaves them there. True it was close to the liberation, but that something like that happened? There aren't many of those kind of miracles.

The liberation was really good. I noticed it. I said, 'Quick, quick come here!' How many were there in the room then? About thirty of us. And everybody wanted to get in front of the other. They saw the French soldiers throw up their hats. There were French prisoners of war there, too. They came in. By that time, the Germans had all run away, not one was left. We greeted them so joyfully! You just can't describe it. I dreamed the liberation. I dreamed that it was spring, and the lilacs were flowering. And Jean, one of the soldiers, and more of them, are running around with lilacs, happily passing them out to everyone. And that's the way it was. The lilacs bloom in May. My dream came true. I think about that very many times. We were there for three more weeks. We had to clean ourselves up, find clothes, there weren't any anywhere. We searched for food. We almost died doing that. I stuffed myself with molasses - a kind of yellow sugar, half-done sugar. You eat more because you feel like, 'More, more!', and you stuff yourself. I ate it and I was so sick. Oh, not just me, the others, too.

Then soon I got better. Then we ate with discretion, a little less of it. I couldn't tell you what we ate. We didn't really pay so much attention to eating then - rather that we organize a way to get back home - that we sleep in humane conditions at all. We looked for an empty apartment. We found an empty German apartment. It was a nice, middle-class apartment, and they had canvas curtains on the windows. We took down a curtain, Kati could sew, and I could somewhat also. And we sewed dresses out of the curtain. We threw away those rags, which we had on. A woman came and asked what we're doing. We said we're sewing dresses. How could we take down the curtains, what will the owner say if they come home? We said, we only took one of the pair, if they're hurt about their curtain, we're a lot more hurt about our loss and sorrow. She grabbed a vase and threw it to the ground. We said, 'For you the [loss of the] curtain hurts, for us our loved ones and our youth hurts. Look at us, how we look. We don't have clothes, nothing.' Then the woman got scared and left. Then a Russian car came. The Russians arrived and gave us food. We trudged along. They escorted us. That's how we came home.

They escorted Stefka away. First her, she was the one who directed the group, and she was the one who got the big beatings many times instead of us, in Auschwitz. We were so sorry for her, she stood up so often for others. They'd killed her father, there was a lot of lamentation, her mother stayed alive. There was one other in our group, Kati Winkler, they also escorted her home, she lived on Suto street. And both of her parents stayed alive. They were at home in the ghetto. The

other Kati's father and step-mother were killed, her mother had died before the war. They'd killed one of her brothers, and the poor thing lost her other brother too, he died of an illness. And everyone else's loved ones were also all killed, the other's were orphans just like me.

## Post-war

We met occasionally after the war, and that was really good. Annually, and as the years went by, they passed away. One after the other, they died. They died young, quite young. Us three, Kati, Stefka and I lived a long time. Stefka was eighty-three years old when she died. Kati was younger, than me, by two years, I'm already eighty-one years old. I never would have believed that after all that suffering I would live to be eighty-one years old.

After the war, we were here in Pest with my friends in a rented apartment. Three friends took one apartment. My fiance hadn't come home, yet. I had a fiance during the war, who was in the work service, and they didn't take my picture away from him. 'I always think about you, my dear love, and even the greatest suffering will be easy. Budapest, 1944. June 28.' There were other love letters, I just can't find those. They took my mother's last picture away from me, I cried so. Well, we lived from one day to the next. I was lucky that I could adjust to people, and I could say what they wanted to hear.

And the Joint [13](#) gave us food and something to wear. I got a coat, a dress and food. My name was written on the list, I looked, maybe I might find somebody. I looked for my brothers. My older brother and younger one. Once I saw, 'Ignac Mermelstein, Prague'. I was so happy! I had no idea how he got there. Then he quickly arrived in Pest, and we met here in Bethlen square. Then we started looking for my older brother. We expected him to just come home. One after the other, quite a lot of young people came home, those who could take it.

One day my fiance and I, who was already home, went past the Dohany street Jewish temple and somebody starts yelling from across the street, 'Olga! Jack (then still Jakab) is in the Arena Street [Dozsa Gyorgy Street, today] school.' I didn't know from my joy, if I shouldn't start running there to see him sooner. I went there. 'Oh god, look at you,' and I started crying. He pushed me away. 'What are you crying for?', he said. 'Be happy that I'm alive. I been through Typhus. You know how they dropped dead from that? Like flies', he said. 'Be happy, that you can see me like this, that I could wake up and could come home. Because the others, they burned down the lager and burned them.

My younger brother was in Theresienstadt. My older brother in Koszeg, in forced labor. Then he was in Bergen-Belsen. The family was scattered, and you had to live with that. The greatest suffering wasn't even that we weren't together, it was when I found out that they'd cremated my mother in Auschwitz. I saw the crematorium, but I didn't want to believe that they were burning up women and children. For many years, they didn't talk about the children. They burned up a million and half children, innocent children! And old people, and nobody talked about that. The memory of a million and a half children. Under the open sky, completely free, as if the sky was free, and the stars, all the stars changed into children. And for long decades, everyday they have been constantly reading the names. I was there in Yad Vashem. Terrible, terrible.

I have a list. When they celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the death of our martyrs, then I made a note for my children and my grandchildren. 'On the 50th anniversary of the death of our martyrs,



so that you don't for the old victims, ever!' And then here I started listing them - Eszter Herskovits, 49 years old, lived in Huszt, killed in Auschwitz. She was my mother. My father, Marton Mermelstein, 44 years old, he was taken away in Prague, they killed him in Theresienstadt in 1941. My grandmother, Julia Stern, was 83 years old, lived in Remetemezo, in Erdely, was killed in Auschwitz. My mother's siblings: there were seven of them, six of them were killed. Samuel Herskozits, was 65 years old, and his wife, she was 63 years old, they took them to Auschwitz, one of their sons, Laszlo, was 43 when he was taken to forced labor. I don't know where he died. And there was another son, Erno, he lived in Satoraljaujhely, he was likewise in forced labor, his wife, Elza was taken to Auschwitz at the age of 32. Their child was three when it went to Auschwitz. Dezso Herskovits, 62 years old, and his wife 58 years old, were taken away from Dombovar to Auschwitz. They had ten children, they were in Pest, of the ten, thank God only one was killed, Karoly, age 26. He was called up for the work service in Dombovar. Two among them went into hiding, two families. The others were conscripted into work service and stayed alive. Hanna, 58 years old, who lived in Kolozsvar went to Auschwitz with her two children, Frida, 32 years old, and Marton, 28 years old. Sara, 56 years old, was taken away in Szinervaralja. Aunt Fani, 52 years old, her husband, Lajos Samuel, 52 years old, and their two children, Eva and Jozsef were taken away in Remetemezo. So all my mother's siblings died except the youngest.

A couple things are missing from my father's side: my great aunt Libi, 49 years old, my father's sister, Auschwitz. Her daughter, Judit, eight years old, Auschwitz. Her husband, 57 years old, Auschwitz. Plus one little girl, Olga, nine years old, Auschwitz. Herman Stern, my father's uncle, died in Theresienstadt, they took him away in Ersekujvar.

On my husband's side, Janos Banyai's father, Adolf Brand, 62 years old, Auschwitz. His mother, Judit Kalman, 53 years old, Auschwitz. His grandmother, Mrs. Zsigmond Kalman, 83 years old, Auschwitz. His uncle, Zsigmond Brand, 64 years old, Auschwitz. Bela Brand, my husband's cousin was in forced labor, I don't know where. Bela Kalman, his mother's brother and his wife, 50 years old, Auschwitz. Their little daughter, Marika, ten years old, Auschwitz. Gabriella Banyai, my husband's sister's first daughter was six years old, she died here in hiding, and their smaller daughter died, too. I wrote here that the aforementioned were recorded by the Auschwitz survivor, seventy year old lady, stamped with the number 11506. That's what was left to me. Horrible. I knew them all.

My husband, Janos Banyai was from Nagykanizsa, born in 1916, died at the age of 87 last year. One year ago. Originally, he was a watchmaker, then he graduated from the Economics University, then he finished a steel-industry technical [school], he liked to study, he studied a lot. In the end, he was always a watchmaker. He was a technical manager too, but he loved watch making so much, that he gave up the manager position. He retired as a watchmaker, poor man. He was sick a lot, in the end he went blind, struggled a lot.

They were originally the Brands. In 1929, they wanted to emigrate to America because they already had relatives there. Big families were popular then. They were a big family, and a part of it emigrated. I think, two or three of them were in America, and they also got ready to immigrate. But for some reason, it didn't work out, I don't know why. Then they magyarized their name to Banyai. And since 1929, they were Banyais.

His parents had a little shop, it went really well. His great grandmother was called Lina Markovics. Mrs. Zsigmond Kalman nee Lina Markovics. My mother in law was called Judit Kalman. My father in law was Adolf Brand. My husband had an older brother who was called Sandor Banyai, his wife, Mrs. Sandor Banyai, was my cousin, Olga. My father-in-law and mother-in-law and her mother were killed in the war.

At my wedding in 1945, all of them laughed cheerfully. Though we should have cried at the wedding. We didn't cry because somebody always did something on purpose so there wouldn't be crying. I couldn't do anything to stop it, anyway. I was in a borrowed dress at my own wedding, I got it from my cousin's girlfriend. It wasn't ugly. She got a dark blue dress - there was an assistance program, and they loaned it to her. It was a Jewish wedding, we were married in the Dohany Street temple [synagogue]. There wasn't a white dress, nor a veil, just a dark-blue borrowed dress, and that was fine. I could buy new shoes, the shoes were my own. And beyond that, the two friends with me were my own. There was nothing to laugh at then, but we were cheerful, that we made it this far, that somebody among us was getting married. Who would have thought that we would somehow get home. Everyone just thought of death there, mainly when I saw the crematorium smoking.

So I was the first to rush to get a husband. My husband quickly moved in, as soon as he got back from the work service. Anyway, I was already engaged before [the war]. Then everything was fine, because we were free. And we expected an easier life. We thought that if we get free of Auschwitz, then everything will be okay. Three or four months went by, since we got home, and I suddenly gained so much weight for my wedding. There were no relatives at my wedding. But that circle of friends was there, who were in Auschwitz with me. So this is how we looked three months after the war. We could eat already and we could smile. We had something to be glad about. That at last, something good is starting, a new life.

Such loyal friendship can only be formed there [in Auschwitz]. I found a picture, where there weren't any relatives, just deportees, friends, who I made in Auschwitz. I keep in contact with the girls, who I was together with in Auschwitz. There were eight of us, and we loved each other so. We helped each other stay alive. That was good. We didn't withdraw in Auschwitz, a person found someone they could tell things to. All the bad things, difficult things... Aside from hauling bricks, it was good that we were there for each other, because we could talk a little to each other.

One of the girls' uncle was a hospital director here in Pest. My girlfriend said, if you are going to give birth, go to my uncle. You don't have to pay, he'll arrange to have the birth done for free. A year after the war, it was still a really difficult world. I don't know whether I could have paid or not, and it felt good that she said it. As if I was part of a family.

My children never had a grandmother, grandfather nor aunt. If there was one, they were far away, because they tried to get as far away from home as they could. Though everyone in the family were big Hungarians. My husband and I were equally unfortunate, that they exterminated our whole family, and because of that I was nervous, and he was also nervous. How can one live eighty years? And that's the miracle, if anything He was nervous, he was sick too, and still we raised two children. That is such a holy miracle. We suffered a lot.

Soon after my wedding, my siblings scattered across the planet, and we never saw each other. It didn't matter that we had stayed alive, I never saw them, the same as if they had been killed. It

hurt many times. I saw them three times in sixty years. That was very painful, and the way we look at around eighty, we won't see each other again. But it's good that they call sometimes. It was my birthday not long ago, and they called me, both of them. It was really good to hear them speak, I was glad that I have somebody. I was happy to at least hear their voices. That's how I lived out my life, because my husband didn't want to emigrate. My older and younger brothers left with an empty sack in 1945. I got married then. They yelled, 'You coming?' I said, I couldn't go. They said, 'Then god bless you!' They would have taken me, too, but my husband didn't want to go. His only sibling was here. And he felt this was his home. We stayed.

My brothers felt that they had nothing to gain here. If a country was capable of exterminating its' own residents, I don't know how many hundreds of thousands of innocent people and children, then they had nothing to gain by staying. They had to find a new home, which would accept them! It was painful for them also, that they had to go away, leave their friends here and like I said, we were very close. Of course, they had no property, it wasn't difficult leaving that. What they had, they carried it off, it was nothing to cry about. In Auschwitz, there was something to cry about.

They went to Czechoslovakia, they were there for a while. Then they went to France, my older brother stayed for five or six years. He learned French. Then he went to Canada, that's where he met his wife. They lived there for three years, while they got together enough money to travel. Then they went to California, to Los Angeles, and got themselves together very nicely. Sometimes my older brother worked twenty hours a day. In the beginning, they struggled a lot, because they weren't really accepted in America either.

My little brother went to Israel. Poor guy, they didn't accept him either, because they didn't know him. There was an aunt there, Olga, who'd never seen him, and didn't want to accept him. She only allowed him to put his belongings in her attic. That could only happen in the Mermelstein family. The Herskovitses welcomed me with so much love. Though they weren't close relatives.

My younger brother was very industrious. First he worked as an electrician, and once he even had an accident. I wrote him then to pack up and come here if he wants to live! He let me convince him. He came home, but just for a visit. Later, he retrained himself to be a tailor. Then he went to Los Angeles, too. In Los Angeles he had a business in the most elegant quarter. He had a salesman, too. One has three sons, the other has two sons.

This apartment, too. An old lady had to die so that I could get an apartment, because an old lady lived here. One of my husband's comrades from the work service said that unfortunately his mother never came back. The apartment is empty, I'll sell it to you. Then, in the end, it was only one room, because there were people already living in the other.

My husband's father and mother were killed. My husband's family was well- off, his parents had a spice business in Nagykanizsa. They pillaged that along with their small warehouse. The house and the business were left there, empty. They took everything. From the dulcimer to the expensive pictures, the goods and the shelves, too. Then they sold it after the war for 13,000 forints, a four-bedroom apartment and the business. A constable showed up, the neighbor. My husband was left with a double-cover gold watch, an earring, a gold ring and a chain which he gave to me. I really cherished it, because my previous necklace was taken by the constables, they ripped it off my neck.

From the 135 grams of gold my husband had left, we bought this room. Just this room, there was a share renter [share-renting]<sup>14</sup> living in the other room. He was a country postman. He lived in the kitchen with his family, and kept rabbits in the prettiest of the rooms. They got along nicely. Then we came, and he had to put the rabbits out. We lived for thirteen years in a share-rent.

After the war, I finished a shorthand and stenography course. When I worked in a nursery, I finished an different course, and I became a social worker. Wherever you could find work, I worked there. In the nursery, I became the nursery director, because I was really hard-working. I tried terribly hard. Then I worked for thirty years in the Zrinyi Printing house as a stockpiler. So I was a paper stockpiler and I retired from there.

My husband was very often sick in the work service also, and when he got back home, he was always in the hospital, he'd been so destroyed. He couldn't face the loss of his parents, he really loved his parents. He couldn't face the fact that all his loved ones in Nagykanizsa had perished. Then he began studying. He worked and he studied, which really wore him down. Then somehow, we couldn't get along because of religion. He wanted to be an atheist, I wanted to stay Jewish, we argued quite a lot about that. He objected, for example, that we spoke Yiddish. It wasn't allowed. Although, he was Jewish, too. He was in a labor battalion, he suffered a lot. We didn't argue, we just debated. Because I was concerned about the child. Zsuzsi was seven years older than my son.

After the birth of my daughter, I fell into bad condition again. After the war, I gained weight, then I constantly lost it. And I was very weak. I worked, the family and job, it was hard getting to where I am today. I was here at home with my daughter until she was seven months old, then I had to go [to work]. I put her in a nursery, and she got blood poisoning there. I took her to a doctor, and said this child is sick, vomiting, doesn't want to eat, is crying. The doctor said to my colleague - the doctor was a close acquaintance of mine - that, this woman is crazy. She says this child is sick. I look at her, how beautiful. I told him, maybe she's beautiful, but this child is sick, I'd like to have her examined. He gave me a referral to the hospital. I took her in, and the child got worse day by day, so bad that she threw up everything they gave her. There were a lot of children there, and at that time a lot of them died. My daughter just didn't get better. They said I have to feed her one spoon of mother's milk every hour. They cut her leg here, her hand here, both of them, and on her thigh where there's a hole, a depression. So they were trying to feed her with blood, because she always vomited the mother's milk. She was in the hospital for three months before she finally got better. And how did she get better? That day she'd nearly died. Her eyes had rolled up. The doctor said, 'Sweet girl, you can see yourself'. I wanted to give her blood. The doctor said, 'You? You look like a consumptive.' I was in with her for twenty hours. I didn't want her to get stranger's blood. In the end, she got stranger's blood, and she's still bearing the consequences. She has liver problems, which she got from the stranger's blood. It was really hard for me to save her. I took her home, and I started crying, my husband consoled me. Don't cry, we'll have another child. Then seven years later, Gyurka [from Gyorgy - George] was born.

Zsuzsi only has her high school diploma, and two years in the conservatory. Plus she finished a librarian course.

In fall of 1956, Pali, my husband's cousin and I took our daughters to ballet [classes]. The girls were about ten or eleven, they were really good friends. The children danced, and we sat there and waited. All at once, we hear there's a big commotion. Across the street, there was a Stalin statue, it

disappeared. [The Stalin statue on Dozsa Gyorgy street was pushed off its pedestal on October 23, 1956, then it was dragged to Blaha Lujza square, and cut to pieces.] Pali says, oh-oh, let's go home, there's something really strange starting here. We grabbed the kids, they stopped the dance, and people scattered, everybody rushed home with their children. By the time we got home, there were a bunch of rascals in the tavern on the ground floor of our building. There was a rabble-rouser. He went into the tavern, and said, 'Whoever is Hungarian, is with us!' Oh-oh, I said, that's not a joke. Then later, when we were standing in line for bread, I heard them yelling, 'We're not afraid, just the Jews are afraid!' When they start selecting, 'us Hungarians aren't afraid, just the Jews are afraid', that's trouble.

I decided to submit our passports [submit the application for them], and we're going to America. My brothers were already living in America then. I wrote to my brothers, and they were very decent, they were helpful. They wrote that they're arranging things and maybe they can do something. Of course, it couldn't happen so fast, because it wasn't just us and my relatives applying. Very many Jews emigrated then. Things went really slowly. Then I spoke to my brothers on the telephone, I went over to Pali's house, and we talked from there. My little brother asked: Do you want to come? I said I really did.

He arranged it, sent the money, but we couldn't defect, because they caught us on the border. My son was three years old, I carried him on my back, he slept the whole way. He woke up on the border, and started screaming. My husband's brother came too, with two kids who were born after the war, they also came back. They were let out in 1957, because my brother-in-law wasn't obligated for military duty. My husband was, he was a soldier. Everybody [in the family] got out, who wanted to go. At least four or five from the family left, we couldn't leave. And my husband didn't really want to. But if his brother left, he would have gone, but it was already too late. So we were left behind. Yet, we were in the best position, the money was in our hands.

Then we became really lonely. We didn't want to leave illegally, and we applied for passports. They didn't give us passports, because my husband was obligated to military service. They let his brother out because he was never a soldier, he had weak eyes. So he left with his family easily. Though he wouldn't have gone, because his son would have stayed alive. His oldest boy was twenty-one when he died a hero's death in Israel. Then his father went after him, his heart couldn't stand it. He went to work, then died.

We were lonely, but we had very good neighbors and very good friends. Not just the Auschwitz ones, I made friends. I was very clever about making friends. I can tell from first sight if you can talk to this person. And then, if I hear a good word, that's enough for me. But if people look at you with disgust, or make comments, that's what I can't stand.

I had a lot, also. I had a lot in Pilisszentlászlo for thirty years. That was the main vacation. I got a larger sum because of my parents' deportation, and my brothers also sent their parts, and in 1969 I bought a lot for 12,000 forints. There was a piece of forest, it was a marvelously pretty place. Then the lots were cheaper, I bought it through OTP [National Savings Bank]. Then I bought a little wooden cottage for it. Likewise, for 12,000 forints, and ran in electricity, that already cost a lot more, but not right away, we got electricity ten or fifteen years later. It was something like 40,000 forints altogether, but I saved a lot, because I wanted it to be habitable. It was one space. Then I cleverly furnished it. We had furniture made from the left over wood, and sometimes there were

four of us there. There were two beds, if Zsuzsa and her family came with, they slept on mattresses. We all fit inside. Once, my grandson and his father slept outside in a tent. They were nice summers. Modest, but it was great for me. The shower for example was out in the garden, because only a basin fit inside the room. We filled the basin from the shower, stuck it out in the garden, and the sun warmed it up. Later we ran water pipes in there, too.

I worked diligently, and if I got some extra money, then I didn't take it home, I put in savings, so that it would be good for something. That's how I got together the nice little Pilis [house].

My husband also went out to Pilis. We divorced, but not according to Jewish rites, just officially. We lived separately like this for forty years. But he ate at the same table as us. He lived his life here. He had a girlfriend, he went there at night. In our old age especially, we were fine, it didn't matter that we were living separately, because he was always at home. Then, last year, the poor man died at the age of eighty- eight. I was very sorry, and I miss him a lot. It makes no difference, we did live fifty-eight years together. Through good and bad. It would be good if he were still alive.

In 1973, Zsuzsi got married, they divorced a few years ago. She finished a gardening technical [school], but she really loves music. She sang in various choruses for a long time, and even went to the conservatory. My son is a journalist. He graduated from a printing school, worked as a printer, at the Zrinyi Publishers, no less, before he became a journalist - he finished Law School. He got married, then divorced. They're really good kids.

I've got osteoporosis, and I'm always scared I might break something somewhere and it won't heal up. And I see that I haven't got any strength. My grandson is very strong, he always takes my arm. He's a very generous, very decent child. He's my daughter's boy, Gabor. He was born in 1977, I retired in 1978 and I raised him. His mother was often sick, and never at home.

Gabor was twelve years old when I told him that he's Jewish. His father is Christian, his mother Jewish. You know, you're Jewish after your mother. 'I'm not Jewish', he said, 'I'm not anything!'. And he shrugged his shoulders. He was insulted that I told him that he was Jewish. It turned out why he denied it so. He was still little, going to elementary school, the kids Jew-bashed each other. He also Jew-bashed. 'You're a Jew!, You're a Jew!'. He told me this later, that that's why he was so upset. After that the child went away to vacation at Szarvas [summer Jewish youth camp], in that Jewish social group. He really liked it. They did sports, swam, were free, there was good food, so it was good. He came home, he said how great he felt there, they learned a lot, swam around, and they said, they should sign-up if they want to go to Israel, to get to know Israel. I asked him, do you want to go? I'd really like to go, but I haven't got any money. I said, then I'll give you money. Go on! He went, and fell in love with Israel. Letters came. It's a wonderful country, how pretty. Everything's beautiful, everybody's nice, everybody's good, he found his place. When he came home, he started telling me about it. He has to learn the language, he has to go again because everybody was so friendly. Okay, sonny, if you want to go, arrange it. It wasn't expensive, so he went. He was there for two and a half years. He learned to read and write Hebrew. When he was gone for a half year, already the letters were coming, how great it is, we should come, too. I always wanted to live in Israel. I thought, I'll go too, I get my pension, I'll be fine. My daughter and I both went, and we rented an apartment.

I was in Israel until 1998 with my grandson, a half year, but I was already ill. And the doctor was far away, I couldn't even speak to him, because he was Russian. I had to go to the doctor's everyday, I

didn't understand him, he didn't understand me. Then I thought, I'll come home to get myself healthy. I remained here nicely. I was in the hospital a lot in the last ten years. Nearly regularly, they took me into the hospital. I have a kind of sickness where I'm ill a lot since the stroke, and occasionally I get fits, and then they take me in. Then the kids also came home.

My daughter is in her fifty-eighth year. She retired, she gets a disability pension. My son is fifty years old. He always says I'm living until I'm a hundred and twenty. I asked, how many friends of yours have grandparents? Not a one. Now, see. I'm now already the last - plus Kati - of those I was in Auschwitz with. Kati is two years younger than me. But she's had it bad, because both her siblings died.

The good Lord [sic] let my brothers through the war, and they didn't believe in anything. An that's how they raised their children, and yet their children became religious. One of them is constantly praying in Israel. The other is equally religious, lives in New York, has very pretty children.

Up to now unfortunately or thank god, people have gotten all mixed together, so already the Jew is mixed with the Christian. My daughter also married a Christian boy. But they never talk about it, that you're Jewish or you're Christian. They get along well, so much so, that my grandson is practicing the Jewish religion. I'm very glad that he's saving something from Judaism. Because I'm just half Jewish. I keep the traditions, but I don't go much of anywhere. But I'm pleased that the temple is full, that they don't forget the religion. My daughter's generation was really left out of these things. The young people, it seems to me as if they're returning to God again and again. My children mostly concern themselves with Judaism for my sake. If there's some program then maybe they go, but they don't feel what's Judaism and what's religion.

On Friday night, I light the candle, I have a kind of candelabra, and then I remember at least those ancestors that are already gone. I can't do more. I wasn't properly religious either. I don't know what the religion is. I believe in God, but I'm not religious. I light the chandelier - not a candle, a chandelier - every week, for the memory of my parents. I keep the holidays, the customs, all those kinds of things which my mother kept.

To tell you the truth, the political changes [in 1989]<sup>15</sup> didn't shake me yet, nor delight me. I was already ill, I was old, and I hoped that it will be better than it was, better for the children than it was.

It doesn't make a difference which [political] system there is, just let people live, that's why they were born, so they can live. Well, let them live. And the poor people want to live, also. Let there be food for them everyday, and shoes on their feet. I know what poverty is. There were poor people in my time who had a lot of children and they had one pair of shoes. There were three or four kids, and they took turns going to school in them. They bought one big pair of shoes, that fit everybody, and then you go to school in them today, tomorrow you go in them, etc. That's the truth, because I lived with them. But that was after the war, the consequences of it. Things hadn't gotten back in place, yet. Nowadays they don't do things right. When everybody's got food, then people can start collecting, as much as they want, they won't take it with them to their graves anyway.

## Glossary

## **1 Forced Labor**

Under the 1939 II. Law 230, those deemed unfit for military service were required to complete 'public interest work service'. After the implementation of the second anti-Jewish law within the military, the military arranged 'special work battalions' for those Jews, who were not called up for armed service. With the entry into northern Transylvania (August 1940), those of Jewish origin who had begun, and were now finishing, their military service were directed to the work battalions. The 2870/1941 HM order unified the arrangement, saying that the Jews are to fulfill military obligations in the support units of the national guard. In the summer of 1942, thousands of Jews were recruited to labor battalions with the Hungarian troops going to the Soviet front. Some 50,000 in labor battalions went with the Second Hungarian Army to the Eastern Front - of these, only 6-7000 returned.

## **2 Military in the Austro-Hungarian Empire**

From the Compromise of 1867, the armies of the Empire (Kaiser und Kundlich Armee - the Imperial And Royal Army), were subordinated to the common Ministry of War. The two parts of the country had separate armies: Austria had the Landwehr (Imperial Army) and Hungary had the National Guard (Hungarian Royal National Guard). Many political conflicts arose during this period of 'dualism', concerning mutual payment and control of these armies, even to the degree that officers were required to command in the language of the majority of his troops.

## **3 Subcarpathia (also known as Ruthenia, Zakarpacie)**

Region situated on the border of the Carpathian Mountains with the Middle Danube lowland. The regional capitals are Uzhhorod, Berehovo, Mukachevo, Khust. It belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy until World War I; and the Saint-Germain convention declared its annexation to Czechoslovakia in 1919. It is impossible to give exact historical statistics of the language and ethnic groups living in this geographical unit: the largest groups in the interwar period were Hungarians, Rusyns, Russians, Ukrainians, Czech and Slovaks. In addition there was also a considerable Jewish and Gypsy population. In accordance with the first Vienna Decision of 1938, the area of Subcarpathia mainly inhabited by Hungarians was ceded to Hungary. The rest of the region was proclaimed a new state called Carpathian Ukraine in 1939, with Khust as its capital, but it only existed for four and a half months, and was occupied by Hungary in March 1939. Subcarpathia was taken over by Soviet troops and local guerrillas in 1944. In 1945, Czechoslovakia ceded the area to the USSR and it gained the name Carpatho-Ukraine. The region became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1945. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, the region became an administrative region under the name of Transcarpathia.

## **4 Neolog Jewry**

Following a Congress in 1868/69 in Budapest, where the Jewish community was meant to discuss several issues on which the opinion of the traditionalists and the modernizers differed and which aimed at uniting Hungarian Jews, Hungarian Jewry was officially split into two (later three) communities, which all created their own national community network. The Neologs were the modernizers, and they opposed the Orthodox on various questions.



## **5 Orthodox Communities**

The traditionalist Jewish communities founded their own Orthodox organizations after the Universal Meeting in 1868-1869. They organized their life according to Judaist principles and opposed to assimilative aspirations. The community leaders were the rabbis. The statute of their communities was sanctioned by the king in 1871. In the western part of Hungary the communities of the German and Slovakian immigrants' descendants were formed according to the Western Orthodox principles. At the same time in the East, among the Jews of Galician origins the 'eastern' type of Orthodoxy was formed; there the Hassidism prevailed. In time the Western Orthodoxy also spread over to the eastern part of Hungary. 294 Orthodox mother-communities and 1,001 subsidiary communities were registered all over Hungary, mainly in Transylvania and in the north-eastern part of the country, in 1896. In 1930 30.4 % of Hungarian Jews belonged to 136 mother-communities and 300 subsidiary communities. This number increased to 535 Orthodox communities in 1944, including 242,059 believers (46 %).

## **6 First Vienna Decision**

On November 2, 1938 a German-Italian international committee in Vienna obliged Czechoslovakia to surrender much of the southern Slovakian territories that were inhabited mainly by Hungarians. The cities of Kassa (Kosice), Komarom (Komarno), Ersekujvar (Nove Zamky), Ungvar (Uzhorod) and Munkacs (Mukacevo), all in all 11,927 square kilometer of land, and a population of 1.6 million people became part of Hungary. According to the Hungarian census in 1941 84 percent of the people in the annexed lands were Hungarian-speaking.

## **7 Jewish laws in Hungary**

The first of these anti-Jewish laws was passed in 1938, restricting the number of Jews in liberal professions, administration, and in commercial and industrial enterprises to 20 percent. The second anti-Jewish law, passed in 1939, defined the term "Jew" on racial grounds, and came to include some 100,000 Christians (apostates or their children). It also reduced the number of Jews in economic activity, fixing it at 6 percent. Jews were not allowed to be editors, chief-editors, theater-directors, artistic leaders or stage directors. The Numerus Clausus was introduced again, prohibiting Jews from public jobs and restricting their political rights. As a result of these laws, 250,000 Hungarian Jews were locked out of their sources of livelihood. The third anti-Jewish law, passed in 1941, defined the term "Jew" on more radical racial principles. Based on the Nuremberg laws, it prohibited inter-racial marriage. In 1941, the Anti-Jewish Laws were extended to North-Transylvania. A year later, the Israelite religion was deleted from the official religions subsidized by the state. After the German occupation in 1944, a series of decrees was passed: all Jews were required to relinquish any telephone or radio in their possession to the authorities; all Jews were required to wear a yellow star; and non-Jews could not be employed in Jewish households. From April 1944 Jewish property was confiscated, Jews were barred from all intellectual jobs and employment by any financial institutions, and Jewish shops were closed down.

## **8 Theresienstadt**

A ghetto in the Czech Republic, run by the SS. Jews were transferred from there to various

extermination camps. The Nazis, who presented Theresienstadt as a 'model Jewish settlement', used it to camouflage the extermination of European Jews. Czech gendarmes served as ghetto guards, and with their help the Jews were able to maintain contact with the outside world. Although education was prohibited, regular classes were held, clandestinely. Thanks to the large number of artists, writers, and scholars in the ghetto, there was an intensive program of cultural activities. At the end of 1943, when word spread of what was happening in the Nazi camps, the Germans decided to allow an International Red Cross investigation committee to visit Theresienstadt. In preparation, more prisoners were deported to Auschwitz, in order to reduce congestion in the ghetto. Dummy stores, a café, a bank, kindergartens, a school, and flower gardens were put up to deceive the committee.

## **9 1956**

Refers to the Revolution, which started on October 23, 1956 against Soviet rule and the communists in Hungary. It was started by student and worker demonstrations in Budapest and began with the destruction of Stalin's gigantic statue. Moderate communist leader Imre Nagy was appointed as prime minister and he promised reform and democratization. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops which had been stationed in Hungary since the end of World War II, but they returned after Nagy's declaration that Hungary would pull out of the Warsaw Pact to pursue a policy of neutrality. The Soviet army put an end to the uprising on the November 4, and mass repression and arrests began. About 200,000 Hungarians fled from the country. Nagy and a number of his supporters were executed. Until 1989 and the fall of the communist regime, the Revolution of 1956 was officially considered a counter-revolution.

## **10 Plight of Budapest Jews**

The majority of Jews living in Budapest fled. By December 5, 1944, those remaining were required to move into the ghetto created then - some 75,000 people were gathered there, by its liberation on January 18, nearly 5000 people died in the ghetto, others had gone into hiding, or occasionally succeeded in getting into a 'protected' house, although that did not always prove to be a guarantee of escape. By the time Budapest was liberated, many thousands of people were dragged off to forced labor, driven in death marches to Austria, herded into concentration camps or were killed by the Arrow Cross. Despite this, there wasn't time for deportations of the scale and organization that rural Jews suffered from May of 1944 in smaller town ghettos.

## **11 Arrow Cross Party**

The most extreme of the Hungarian fascist movements in the mid-1930s. The party consisted of several groups, though the name is now commonly associated with the faction organized by Ferenc Szalasi and Kalman Hubay in 1938. Following the Nazi pattern, the party promised not only the establishment of a fascist-type system including social reforms, but also the 'solution of the Jewish question'. The party's uniform consisted of a green shirt and a badge with a set of crossed arrows, a Hungarian version of the swastika, on it. On 15th October 1944, when Governor Horthy announced Hungary's withdrawal from the war, the Arrow Cross seized power with military help from the Germans. The Arrow Cross government ordered general mobilization and enforced a regime of terror which, though directed chiefly against the Jews, also inflicted heavy suffering on the Hungarians. It was responsible for the deportation and death of tens of thousands of Jews. After

the Soviet army liberated the whole of Hungary by early April 1945, Szalasi and his Arrow Cross ministers were brought to trial and executed.

## **12 Constable**

A member of the Hungarian Royal Constabulary, responsible for keeping order in rural areas, this was a militarily organized national police, subordinated to both, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence. The body was created in 1881 to replace the previously eliminated county and estate gendarmarie (pandours), with the legal authority to insure the security of cities.

Constabularies were deployed at every county seat and mining area. The municipal cities generally had their own law enforcement bodies - the police. The constables had the right to cross into police jurisdiction during the course of special investigations. Preservatory governing structure didn't conform (the outmoded principles working in the strict hierarchy) to the social and economic changes happening in the country. Conflicts with working-class and agrarian movements, and national organisations turned more and more into outright bloody transgressions. Residents only saw the constabulary as an apparatus for consolidation of conservative power. After putting down the Hungarian Soviet Republic, the Christian establishment in the formidable and anti-Semitic forces came across a coercive force able to check the growing social movements caused by the unresolved land question. Aside from this, at the time of elections - since villages had public voting - they actively took steps against the opposition candidates and supporters. In 1944, the Constabulary directed the collection of rural Jews into ghettos and their deportation. After the suspension of deportations (June 6, 1944), the arrow cross sympathetic interior apparatus Constabulary forces were called to Budapest to attempt a coup. The body was disbanded in 1945, and the new democratic police took over.

## **13 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)**

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

## **14 Share-renting**

One of the ideosyncrasies of housing after the war (based on the Soviet model) where numbers of families were placed together in the larger apartments (of those owners killed, deported or interned abroad in the war). Each family was given one bedroom, while the kitchen and other rooms were used commonly. Sometimes, the original owner had families placed in their homes on the grounds that they weren't 'entitled' to such a large apartment. Other times, owners 'took in'

share renters of their choosing before the council sent strangers into their homes.

### **15 1989 Political changes**

A description, rather than name for the surprising events following the summer of 1989, when Hungarian border guards began allowing East German families vacationing in Hungary to cross into Austria, and escape to the West. After the symbolic reburial of Imre Nagy, the Hungarian parliament quietly announced its rejection of communism and transformation to a social democracy. The confused internal struggle among Soviet satellite nations which ensued, eventually led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the reorganization of Eastern Europe. The Soviets peacefully withdrew their military in 1990.