

# Bernat Sauber

Bernat Sauber

Marosvasarhely

Romania

Interviewer: Ildiko Molnar

Date of interview: November 2003



Bernat Sauber, the more than 80 years old president of the Jewish community from Marosvasarhely, is called Beri by his colleagues. He is a stocky man with a severe-adust look. But when you get to know him better, it turns out he has a heart of gold. He is seriously and responsibly preoccupied with his small Jewish community. To the extent his state of health allows him, he comes to the office to solve the problems, but anyway, he cannot stand to stay at home and do nothing, it's not in his nature. One of the two rooms of the office is his empire, which he shares with the secretary, Sandor Ausch. He manages quite well the document piles on his enormous desk, and he often surrounds himself with books, including religious ones to help him conduct the services.

[Family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[Religious life](#)

[Magyarlapos](#)

[Going to school](#)

[During the War](#)

[Russian captivity after the War](#)

[After the War](#)

[Glossary](#)

## Family background

My paternal grandfather was Menyhert Sauber. He was born in 1860 approximately. He was from Szilagysag originally, from a village called Nagysomkut. He had two sons, Ignac and my father Heinrich. Grandfather died in 1944 during the Holocaust. I don't know what my grandfather's occupation was, because when I was born, he has already divorced my grandmother, so I didn't know him. They probably divorced sometime before 1920. First they divorced legally, then a rabbi separated them. I don't remember him, he never visited us, and I didn't visit him, neither, and my grandmother and him cut any connection with each other. Only the boys kept in touch with their mother. I don't know what caused this drastic separation, this has never been brought up in any discussion. My grandmother, Bella Goldstein, was a descendant of a rich family from Magyarlapos. It was a small landowner family which later went broke. She had a sister in Szaszregen called Ida Frenkel. Grandmother stayed with us in Magyarlapos. My uncle Ignac Sauber lived separately.

I don't know much about my father's brother, Ignac. He was younger than my father. His wife, auntie Gizi, originally from Kolozsvar, was a piano teacher, an eccentric lady. The relation between

my uncle and us was a distant one. I remember that my auntie was so house-proud that we had to take off our shoes before going in, and this wasn't accustomed in our family, at that time this habit didn't exist. We, and people generally, only had rag rugs, I don't know whether there was anyone who had a Persian carpet. They weren't too religious, and they rarely went to the synagogue. My uncle bought a truck and transported wood and board from the hills neighboring Magyarlapos to the nearest railway station, Galgo, 30 kms from Magyarlapos. This is a village between Magyarlapos and Des. After the Holocaust his son Pal Sauber emigrated to America. Their parents died during the Holocaust.

My father was Heinrich Sauber. He probably finished eight grades and he surely went to cheder. He was an observant Jew. He grew up in Budapest, he went there from Magyarlapos at the age of 14. We had some relative there; my father went to him to learn a profession. He worked as apprentice in the grocery store owned by that relative of ours. Later he obtained the assistant qualification, which allowed him to work as sales clerk. I think he worked there as sales clerk for eight years, until he joined the army in World War I. He was a sergeant and fought at Piave, where the Serbs destroyed a dam and flooded the Austro-Hungarian troops. [Editor's note: The interviewee refers to the Italian front [1](#) in Word War I, when the Austro-Hungarian army fought the Italians at Piave.] Quite a lot of people died there, my father almost drowned, as well. But he lived. He was liberated from the army early, and he didn't want to stay in Pest. He came home and got married. He married my mother in 1919. In Magyarlapos Jews married in and in. My parent didn't get acquainted through a matchmaker. Usually, only if there were quite many girls in a family and there was nobody to propose to them, or they didn't meet the expectations, they turned to a matchmaker. When my father got married, he got his marriage portion. At that time the custom was that the wife should come with the dowry, and it wasn't at all a small sum of money. I don't know how much was the dowry my father received, but it stared him off, as he opened a grocery store.

My maternal grandfather was Mendel Berkovits. He was from Maramarossziget originally. He was a well-situated man, he had a going kosher butchery. But he didn't work, because he had two Christian assistants. It's an interesting fact that in every larger Jewish store the owners couldn't manage by themselves, they hired help or apprentices who usually were Hungarians. In Lapos, next to each kosher slaughter house there was a treyf one, as well. In the ritual butcherries one could only buy kosher meat, respectively the upper part, the forepart of the cattle. We ate the brisket, the ribs, called leiterl in Yiddish. Jews were not allowed to eat the back end, so it was sold in the other butcherries, where the Christians used to buy. Thus Christians got to eat the better part. My grandfather used to buy cattle, took it to the slaughter house, where it was slaughtered by the shochet. The Jews bought from him the forepart, while the Christians the back end. In order to be allowed to sell it, the shochet had to cut out the veins from the forepart. The back part had so many veins it was impossible to release all the blood from them, that's why Jews were not allowed to eat it. There was a special Jewish man, the controller, the so-called meshgiah in Hebrew. If one sent the Christian servant to buy meat, this was packed in a sheet of paper, roped, sealed with sealing-wax and signed in Hebrew by the meshgiah, to prevent the Christian servant to touch it with a piece of pork or bacon.

I only remember my maternal grandmother, Miriam, as an 85 years old woman. I can still see her sitting in her armchair. She could hardly speak, but she dictated to the whole family. The old lady

was originally from Hungary, I think from Transdanubia, she even had that specific accent. [Editor's note: The interviewee refers to the accent as being the difference in speech between regions speaking the same language.]

It was a quite big house my maternal grandparents lived in, I slept there many times before World War II. Last time I've been there it was after the war. It was still standing. It was demolished since then. The house had 3 or 4 rooms. I can clearly remember there was a part in the house where a tent-like construction with shake roof was built in. Its structure included a cylinder with a wooden wheel on it. On the wheel there was a rope tied to two beams which pushed out the two sides the roof. When Sukkot came, we pulled the rope and the roof opened up. If it rained, we closed it back. It was a rarity to have such a house. During the holiday of Sukkot my grandfather used to eat and sleep in that tent because the prescriptions required it.

My mother's brother, Mihaly Berkovits did not live in Magyarlapos, but in Disznajo. He was a fairly rich man. He had a nice, big store. Later my brother Dezso ended up working there as assistant, until he joined the army. Mihaly's wife was Jewish, and they had a daughter, Dalma. They were religious, but not their daughter. Mihaly got old and couldn't observe it anymore. He died in Disznajo in the 1930s. Mihaly's wife, his daughter and her two children have been deported. None of them returned. Dalma's husband was taken to forced labor, but I don't know anything about him. He didn't come back neither, that's for sure.

One of my aunts, Sara Indig, lived in quite poor conditions. Aunt Indig had 6 children, they were about my age or younger. Her husband Jozsef was a tinsmith, but his workshop wasn't going that well. One of his sons separated from the workshop and became a steeple tinsmith. He was doing well, but it was a dangerous job. He was the only one in the county who climbed up any steeple, and people used to watch him. I asked him all the time: 'Aren't you afraid, don't you get dizzy?' 'No way - he said - I'm used to it, it's like walking on the ground.' One of Sara's son's son is a rabbi in Israel. Jozsef Indig, Sara's husband died suddenly in 1937-1938, and later his family was deported. All of them came home except one of the daughters.

I had another uncle, Mihaly Karl, Berta Karl's husband. Berta was my mother's sister. She had two sons. Mihaly owned two stores in Magyarlapos, he was a wholesale trader, but they sold per unit, as well. There was nothing they didn't have: from boot-soles, leather, cotton, sugar, rice, iron, kerosene or gas to horseshoe nails and bolts, one could find anything. They were very well situated, and my uncle was a quite avaricious man. They eventually went broke. I was around 15 then. My wealthy uncle wasn't managing the store by then because he paralyzed, I can still remember the poor man was rolled over in the bed. He wasn't old at all, he was some 50 years old when he paralyzed. His son, Lazar took over the store and he revived it again. 'Karl Mihaly es fia' [Mihaly Karl and Sons], this was the name of the company. In Magyarlapos only the state institutions had phones, no private persons or stores had, except for his store. On Thursdays it had a tremendous turnover. The Jews used to go here on Thursday afternoon to buy the flour, sugar, oil, some kind of a margarine made out of coconut and kerosene they needed for Saturday. A family usually bought 6-10 kgs of flour. They didn't sell it in packs of 1 kg, but there were these large paper bags with this special kind of opening. One used to measure it, this is how they sold the flour. It wasn't pre-packed flour just in bulk. The price of 1 kg of flour cost 4 lei, I will never forget it. They always bought approximately two such bags of flour. They bought some 4 kgs of whites to make challah, pasta and anything they needed. Macaroni was an unknown notion. We

heard of macaroni but to buy it, or biscuits in Magyarlapos was impossible. However, there was chocolate.

One of my cousins, Sandor Nemes, worked in Mihaly Karl's store as assistant. There were four assistants, he was one of them. I used to go myself there on Thursdays to help out and cousin Lazar paid me for that. My cousin said to me once: 'Hey you, listen to me! When uncle Jaszuf Indig comes for shopping - my uncle's name was Jozsef, Jaszuf in Hebrew -, do the following.' There were long boxes with compartments for flour and sugar. Only sugar was pre-packed like today. He said 'Listen, always put 2 kgs of sugar, into the bottom of the bag, then placed half a kg of candle, they needed it on Friday evening to light candles. If he needs a pair of boot-soles for one of his children, he used to cut out the soles in advance, wrap it in paper and placed it into the bottom of the bag, and on top of all place about 3 kgs of flour.' So I measured the package, it was 8-10 kgs and he paid 10 kgs of flour, 40 lei in all. One kg of sugar cost 32 lei, you can see how expensive it was. We only did it for this brother of ours, because he was the poorest. After World War II, when I came home from captivity in 1949, I met my family in Des, because in the meantime my whole family moved to Des: my brothers and sisters, my whole-trader cousin Karl's family. (Lazar was taken to forced labour somewhere in Ukraine his wife and 2 children were deported and they died there.) I met Lazar who managed the store, we talked and we looked back on our lives in Magyarlapos. I said to him 'Listen to me Lazar, I'm now 28 and you are over 40 I owe you, a confession. Do you remember when I worked for you? 'Of course'- said him. 'I'll tell you the truth, Sanyi, my other cousin told me that when uncle Jaszuf came in, to put in his bag sugar, pepper, cinnamon, everything he needed for a week', only the oil had to be left out. While I was telling him this, he just smiled. He said to me 'Do you think I was blind, I didn't see what was going on? I saw everything what you and Sanyi were doing there.' He saw it all, but he played blind. Lazar emigrated to Israel in 1953-54, and settled in Haifa. At first he was a night-watchman in a warehouse, but after two or three years he recovered himself and became a clerk in an important bank.

One of my uncles from the maternal side was Izsak Nemes, a butcher. He was the husband of one of my mother's sisters, Zsuzsa Nemes. They had five children: Geza, Lazar, Jasszi, Sanyi and Ocsi. Three of them worked in their father's butchery, another one was a trader, and the fifth one was a carpenter. In the hill-country the farmers' main occupation was sheep-breeding, and when spring came, they started to slaughter lambs. Izsak Nemes used to buy and sell lambs. I used to help him out with the slaughter. Cutting was fast, then they stuck a bicycle pump under the lamb's leg and armpit and pumped some air there. The butcher only had to make a cut and the entire skin of the animal could be taken off in one move. This skinning was my duty, and I received a fee for it from my uncle. They used to buy the lambs in March and slaughtered some 500-1000 of them each day. Then they put them on trucks at 6pm, on ice, and drove off. At 5am they arrived to Bucharest. The non-Jewish traders and butchers already awaited them there, and each of them bought some 20-30 at once.

Ilona Steinmetz, my mother's another sister, got divorced because her husband became deranged. The husband went back to Sziget because he was from there originally. She had two sons. In 1938 a widower called Doppeld, a Jew originally from Magyarlapos, but who was living in America, moved back and married her. He was older than my aunt. He was a fashion designer in America, and designed ties. He was making good money, and he received a monthly pension of 120 dollars, an

enormous sum in 1938. He wasn't able to spend even the fourth part of that. Instead of emigrating to America, which they could, they remained here. She had one daughter with this man. In 1944 the whole family was deported. Only her elder son from her first marriage, Mozes Steinmetz, survived, and from Auschwitz he went directly to America, and still lives there and works as real estate agent. I even met him in 1984, when I went to America. He is not a wealthy, but a well-situated man.

I don't know anything about Malcsi Dub's and Emma Dub's family. They moved away from here, and I don't remember where. They didn't live in Lapos. They married some Jews, they had some daughters, but I don't know in what region they lived. The husbands were cousins. Back then we didn't kept in touch like today, we didn't travel too much. Travelling by car was much too expensive, and roads were in bad shape. Everyone lived for themselves.

I didn't really know Nandor Berkovits, because he moved from Lapos to Des. He was the wealthiest from the siblings. He owned a large thread factory, and some other factory in Des. One of his children suffered a terrible accident. They were building something and in the yard there was a lime-pit where they put the lime and poured water on it. He fell into one of these pits and died, the poor thing. This was a tremendous tragedy for years, and not only for his family, but the entire kinsfolk talked only about this. I met uncle Nandor once in 1938. I remember he gave me 20 lei. 20 lei meant some 2 kgs of meat. He was taken to forced labor. His first wife has been deported, and I think they had a daughter who also got deported. The third child was Noe. Nandor came back from the deportation and after the war he emigrated to Austria. There he got married for the second time. His second wife wasn't Jewish, and they didn't have any children. When I arrived home from captivity, he was already gone, and lived in Vienna. Last time I met him was in 1967 in Haifa, he came to Israel especially to see me, He knew I was going to be there. He gave me 300 dollars. This was all the help he provided me. He died shortly after our encounter.

Our family, which lived in Magyarlapos, that is, the brothers and sisters who lived there, used to come together on Saturday afternoon, but for Sabbath dinner they went back home. The yard at my maternal grandmother's was full of children, there were at least 20 grandchildren. Everyone got some snacks there. Every Saturday we had minces. She used to say: 'Everyone can eat as much as they can, because there are two for each of you...' She was religious and kept a kosher household. All of my brothers and sisters, including myself, were born in Magyarlapos: I was born first in 1920, then Matild in 1923, then came Dezso in 1925, Judit in 1926, Emma in 1928 and Zelma in 1930.

## Growing up

My paternal grandmother lived with our family. She had a small pub she inherited from her parents, and she has always been a landlady. She managed the pub by herself. The place didn't had a name. It was quite large, with tables and backed wooden benches. She sold liquor, spirit, tobacco and cigarettes. She was doing quite well, she made more money than my father. Especially on Thursdays, at the weekly fair, there was quite a racket, everyone drank and ate. Later I helped her out, and on Thursdays I served the customers. There was no meal in my grandmother's pub. People used to bring the food and ate it there. On Saturdays she used to close the pub, but she opened the window at put there let's say five packs of tobacco and cigarettes. There were customers who took the pack and put the money onto a plate. This is how it worked on Saturdays. It never occurred that someone took away a pack of tobacco and didn't put the money



there, even though my grandmother wasn't there. If the packs ran out, she put there several more. There was a small hotel in Magyarlapos, with four rooms or so, and the owner had a restaurant, as well. In 1940, when Transylvania was annexed to Hungary [following the Second Vienna Dictate, when the Hungarian era (1940-1944) [2](#) began], the authorizations have been revoked for Jews [on basis of the 2nd anti-Jewish law] [anti-Jewish laws in Hungary] [3](#). My grandmother didn't want to give the pub away, so she joined with a Saxon gentleman called Strauss, and from then on the pub functioned under his name, and they split the profit. The man's wife was a photographer, but later they divorced.

My family's situation wasn't too rosy, but we managed quite well. My father had a store at home. I used to help him out there, especially on Thursdays and Fridays, on the busier days. The store was furnished according to the style. There were 4 boxes, for each type of wheat flour: '0', '00', '000' and '0000' [Editor's note: the number of '0's represents the grinding quality of the flour], and another one for the corn-flour. There was coffee, candies, chocolate, toilet-ware you could buy then: soap, household soap, Nivea cream – this was the only cream, and everyone used it. Traders used to bring it from Brasso, since it was made there. There was a section for kerosene, and people used to put it in one-litre bottles or cans. Another section of the store held the two-meter iron grindings. These were the grindings, or as we called them, the 'raf's [from the German 'Raff'] for carriages. Villagers used to come there saying their carriage grinding got damaged, so they bought these raf's. There were blacksmiths – mainly Christians –, who put the wheel on a special mechanism. They measured accurately the raf, heated its two ends and hammered them together. Then they heated it again and burnt it on the wheel. The wheel then lasted for years. In the store one could also buy horseshoe iron, thin iron bars and horseshoe nails, because when one went to the blacksmith, they needed the nails to secure the horseshoes. Very few people bought coffee.

The store was inside our house, but my grandmother's pub also was there, in two separate rooms, and in addition we had four rooms and a kitchen. There was a room for my parents, one for the girls and one for the boys. Grandmother had her own room. For a while she was afraid to be alone, so I slept in her room on a couch. We weren't allowed to go to the movies, cinema was forbidden, our religion forbid it, even though there hardly was even a kiss in it. In the evening, grandmother used to let me out through the window, because the movies were running from 7pm or 8pm. So I got out through the window. The cinema was owned by a Jew. We got into the cinema, and I used to watch a movie three, four, even five times. There were these westerns, then Pat and Patason, similar to Laurel and Hardy, but an earlier one. And there was Zigotto, the main character of the movie was called this way. These movies ran in the cinemas in the 1930s.

Our neighbors were a very rich, well-situated Hungarian family, and we were on very good terms with them. They had 3 or 4 cows. We used to go there for 3 litres of milk. I was the oldest, so I had to go for it. They had some large cans and a pail. The woman who was milking the cow, or her servant, had to wash their hands first: they rubbed their hands with boiled potatoes, just like with soap and washed it off with water. It wasn't allowed to wash hands with soap because soap is made from fat, and milk shouldn't come in contact with fat. So I had to wait for them until they milked the cow. We had one-litre bottles and a pail, specifically for milk, we didn't use theirs because it wasn't kosher. The neighbor poured the milk from the pail in one-litre bottles, and I carried them home.

I was around four or five, that is in 1923-25, when there was a enormous wave of emigrations to America. My father was on the list, as well. But my mother didn't want to leave her family here, and didn't want to leave her brothers and sisters, so we remained here. My poor father, when he wasn't doing that well, always blamed my mother: 'You are to blame for the situation we came to, because remained here.' Everyone emigrated then because one could get on one's feet and get rich quite rapidly.

After the world-wide crisis [world economic crisis between 1929-1933] [4](#), it was very difficult for my father to make money, and he tried everything just to make some. Eventually he managed somehow, but I did feel the difficulties. This was a world-wide crisis that also affected Romania. It was a two-year long drought, I remember this long drought, and some hail-storm, as well. There were problems I cannot talk about for just a few minutes, it would take me long hours. 60-70% of those who had servants had to lay them off, because they had to provide him with a place to live, food and such things. For a while, when I was already a big boy, we had a servant, as well, but later, after 1932, we couldn't afford anymore to have employees. I noticed there were castes: the rich and the poor. There were people who lived on their salary, others lived in poorer conditions and needed assistance. Thank God we didn't need any.

My family was quite religious. My paternal grandmother was religious, she had a wig, and so did my mother and my maternal grandmother. They cut off their hair, but I never saw them bald, they were very careful with this. The Jewish women usually wore a shawl. The shawl was on the wig. Everyone [the women] had wigs in Magyarlapos. At most 15% of them had no wigs, everybody else had. Although my father wasn't a Jew with beard, he went to the synagogue each morning and evening. He used tzitzit and a tallit at the prayers. I also used tzitzit in the cheder after I became 13. In my family it wasn't accustomed to pray with tallit, it was compulsory only after one got married. At the evening prayer one didn't use tallit, nor tzitzit, one only needed it at the morning prayer. My father wore modern clothes. We wore tzitzit, but under our shirts. There was a square material, which was cut and one put it around their neck, and we kept our tzitzit in our trousers. This is prescribed by our laws, we are obligated to wear them all day long.

Our family respected the traditions right until the deportation, we had separate pots for meat and milk. For example, you weren't allowed to eat curds dumplings with the fork you ate meat before. We also had a separate washing bowl for the pots. We had special Pesach pots, and we used to store them in chests – we had a large chest in the loft. On Pesach we brought these Pesach pots and ate from them. We never ate pork meat and never had lard. But we had to store some lard, and we bought either a duck or a goose. They started to buy goose in fall. My mother always crammed 6-10 geese. I still remember how my poor mother sat and choked down the geese with corn. They usually fed them up until they had 5-6 kgs. They were quite big. The poorer families, when they slaughtered the goose in winter, they preferred to sell the goose-liver to the wealthier families, because it was much in demand.

My poor mother used to wake up at 4am. There were 7 of us in the family, so she kneaded 2 troughs of flour in carved troughs. We had plenty of wood in that area, so they made quite a lot of these troughs. When I grew bigger, I used to help her out, especially after her illness began to develop, I used to do the kneading. Almost everywhere the custom was that the first thing people did on Friday morning was to cook cheese-cake. This was a speciality of the Jews, and I will never forget how it tasted, I haven't eaten anything like it ever since. The cheese was inside the cake,

which had to be eaten hot, or warm, with sour cream. There is something special about this decilitre of sour cream. On Friday noon bread for the whole week was already baked. My mother also used to bake challah in the oven, and she always glazed the top: we had two for Friday evening, two for Saturday noon and two for Saturday afternoon or sunset, because on Saturday we only ate white challah. The challah was not made with milk, but with plain water. It had a simple mass, just like bread, only it was braided. On Friday afternoon my mother cooked the meal for Saturday, as well. For lunch, on Friday we used to eat cracklings and goose-liver with mashed potatoes.

In the evening, of course, we had to celebrate Sabbath. There was the candle-lighting on Friday evening – this always had to be done by the woman. My mother lit the candles and blessed Sabbath. My father, too, had to tell a blessing. He blessed his sons and kept the Sabbath day holy with a glass of wine. He then gave everybody a dip from that glass. And not because we had little wine, but because only that wine was holy, and each of us had to drink from it. For Friday evening we had fish aspic, gefilte fish or the so-called fake fish: they made dumplings out of chicken or hen breast, but spiced it just like the fish. This was kind of a sweet mince. We even used to make the aspic sweet, it tasted sweetish. We also had meat soup with farfel, and from time to time my mother baked some pastries, as well.

There were these so-called shabesgoyim, the Sabbath Christians. Each of them used to go to 10-15 or 20 families. On Friday evening they went to each family and put some wood in the stove. We only had wood heating, but in Magyarlapos there was plenty of wood, and cheap, too. My father always bought 15-20 stacks of wood in the spring, and it had time to dry. In fall, when the wood dried up, the villagers came and cut it up, then they placed it in the shed where the hens were, but to a different level. He prepared the firewood and the lighter already on Friday evening, then he came on Saturday dawn and put the fire. It was the shabesgoy's duty to come back every one and a half hours, and during winter to put some wood on the fire, because Jews were not allowed to light or put the fire. On Saturdays we weren't allowed to cook, you know. One was forbidden to put the meat-soup to on a hot, heated stove, but one was allowed to put it on a cold stove. So the soup was on the cold stove, then the shabesgoy came and lit the fire, and thus the soup warmed up. Everything was cooked in advance. We were allowed to take off the soup from the stove. In the morning he lit the kerosene lamp, and he turned it out in the evening. He knew when people used to go to bed. He lowered the lamps, and people went to sleep. One hour after dawn, or when it already was daylight, he turned off the lamps. This went on until Saturday evening. Each month this was counted as 4 days of work, that is 100 lei per month. So, for 10 families he got 1000 lei, and this was a big salary then. Payment was made upon common agreement.

The Jewish kitchen has a very specific national food, the cholent. It is an extremely delicious food, people cook it in different ways in each house, but it tastes almost the same everywhere. Its preparation is as follows: one puts in a big pot beans, vegetables, meat, fat, then one puts a lid on. On Friday afternoon it must be brought to the baker, who takes out the coal from the oven before Saturday and puts the pots in the heated oven, all of them, some hundred or a hundred and fifty. The fee for a pot was 5-6 lei, depending on how big it was, and how much place it occupied in the oven. Everybody knew their pot. After that the baker luted the oven-mouth to keep it hot and left the pots to boil slowly until Saturday noon. In Lapos only two Jewish families didn't keep kosher household, 2 lawyers: dr. Samu Biro and dr. Harnic. They were not religious at all, never went to



the synagogue, didn't eat kosher meal. Interestingly they cooked cholent, probably with pork meat. When they brought the pot, they covered it with a bigger one and only after that they put it in the oven to protect the other pots from the treyf steam.

Saturday morning we weren't allowed to take breakfast before going to the synagogue. It was approximately 12am-1pm when we got home. The service was longer than those I'm conducting nowadays. [Editor's note: For the moment, Bernat conducts the service in Marosvasarhely.]

Saturday, after we went home from the synagogue, until I turned 13, I used to bring home the cholent. When all my brothers and sisters passed this age, only the shabesgoyim did it. He came in with 5-6 pots, and it occurred that he misplaced the pots.

The Saturday dinner was such a feast, that you can imagine everybody had their bellies overstuffed. They used to begin the Saturday noon lunch with a small glass of spirit. We used to have onion with egg or fish aspic for side-dish. The fish is a very common meal for Jews. After each bite of fish one used to lick the glass of spirit, because if one drank from it they would get drunk. By the way even now I can only eat jelly if I have a glass of maximum half deciliter of spirit to lick after each bite. (We used to have a glass of spirit on Saturday morning, as well, but only my father and rarely my mother) The fowl liver previously cooked with onion was cut with a hatchet and mixed it with the onion with eggs. One used to eat radish with it. The Saturday lunch consisted of meat soup. We used to eat meat soup with radish, we couldn't even imagine it otherwise. In the meat soup my mother used to put soup stick, or she used to make a very thin sheet from eggs, spiced it with pepper, and cooked it. This gave a very exquisite taste to the soup. I haven't eaten such a soup since. Then we had the good fatty cholent, it had both beef and poultry, one used to mix them, this was the custom. One used to fell chicken skin with corn-flour, and flavored it with pepper and sugar. Then sewed over the two ends of the skin and put it in to the pot. This was called kugli. One use to put gershli with the bean in to the cholent, this was a kind of skinned wheat. Or they put dried farfel. In our house this wasn't a custom, we didn't put any of these in it. There was a special cookie baked by my mother on the stove in advance, on Friday afternoon. It was made with eggs, flour, sugar, and this congeries was baked on the stove. It was like matzah, and she baked it in pieces. It was thin, easy to bake and very delicious. After lunch we used to pray and sing Saturday laudative songs, we called them zmires le shabat in Hebrew. Its meaning in English: Saturday Laudative Songs. After lunch, hose who got used to it, had one or two wine-and-sodas. After lunch 70% of the adult Jewish men used to sleep on Saturday afternoon. Their stomach was so full, that they could hardly move.

On Saturday we went to play outside. The temple had a beautiful large garden and yard with lawn, where the boys and girls used to play in separately. The girls didn't came to play with us because it wasn't allowed. The girls were allowed to enter the yard, but they were forbid to play with the boys. They were even prohibited to go to the rabbi. I used to go to the rabbi on each Saturday afternoon. There was a house in synagogue yard were the rabbi used to read and explain the weekly perek, which were studies written centuries ago by the rabbinate. There were the followers of the rabbi there were all bearded hasid Jewish men with payes. It wasn't for the children, we just went in, and stood there gaping. We looked because we enjoyed how they ate, drank and sang.

I wasn't able to study with my father on Saturdays because he was unable to. He was familiarly with all the prescriptions but if he took a Hebrew book, he didn't understand it completely. Usually 60% of the people who went to pray didn't understand the prayers since they were held in Hebrew.

I understood them because I have studied it, unlike those who never attended cheder or those who attended it only for a short period, who forgot it. My father was very young when he got to Pest and he had a completely different life there.

On Saturday afternoon we had a third lunch, which wasn't basically lunch, but more like a supper. It was a cold meal, mince or roast. On Saturday afternoon we didn't eat by any means meal which contained milk. On Saturday evening we looked for the stars appearing. We had to light the candle while my father said the prayer for the end of the holiday [Havdalah]. At the end of Saturday, my father lit a cigarette. That was the first thing he did, because he didn't smoke on Saturday. My father didn't work on Saturday.

My father's mother tongue was Hungarian. At home we used to speak in Hungarian, that was the everyday language. We spoke Yiddish on holidays, or when we went to the synagogue. At the synagogue we spoke in Yiddish, but we used Hungarian at home. My father learned Yiddish at home, as child. He was a big fan of books. I can clearly remember that he read the Miserable We have no electricity, he used to read at the light of a kerosene lamp placed on the night-table. There were some problems because my mother asked him to turn off the light because she couldn't sleep. One time the kerosene ran out, and my father went to bring some. It was in a bottle and he poured it. He spilled some kerosene on several pages of a book. It was a huge scandal, because the book wasn't ours. I don't know how we cleaned it, I think with blotting-paper. We put the blotting-paper on the pages and ironed it with hot iron, thus absorbed the kerosene.

Back home at Magyarlapos there was no Hungarian public library. The Jewish community only had a Hebrew library, where you could find just religious books. There were Reformed and Catholic confessional libraries, but Jewish people didn't go there. There you could find literature, not only religious books. But they didn't borrow books for Jews, so they borrowed books from each other. There were well-situated people who bought books, and these books circulated in the Jewish community. Usually Jews enjoyed reading very much. My father really liked reading, in the morning, or in the afternoon, when he had nothing to do, he read books or newspapers. My father read rather classical literature. He read just Hungarian books, he practically didn't know Romanian, then he learned it, but he never spoke it perfect. I used to go for the books, they told me go now to X and ask him for that book. It happened that X told me: 'I don't have the book, Y has it, please come after 5 days' and then Y sent me to somebody else. My father had a few books, because we bought books, too, so he used to lend out books himself. Books were very expensive, but we still bought them. Back home we had some sixty-seventy books. Not every Jew, but 10-15% had libraries at home, comprised of several books. There were well-situated Jews, who bought every serious thematic novels and itineraries. There were also those traveling traders who sold books.

There was a store where they sold newspapers, and books, too, books which was required reading in elementary school, edited by Biblioteca pentru toti [Library for Everybody]. But my father didn't read Romanian literature. He read usually the Új Kelet [New East, journal] from Kolozsvár. It was a very high level journal that even included literature, it had a special column for literature, especially in the Friday's edition. It didn't appear on Saturday, but the Friday edition had eight-ten pages. Usually was edited on four pages. He also read the Brassói Lapok paper, which had more pages than the New East, but it was edited just once a week. Then there was the Jó Estet [Good Evening] that used to be out in the evening and contained colorful stories and tabloid stories about what people enjoyed, about what has happened to an actor or in the world. My mother used to

read, too. We, the children, didn't read because we had more than enough to read for school. We had no time to read novels, because we hardly had time for required reading. I was quite young, around 13-14, when I began to read these shilling shockers. I was devouring them. They were edited in Pest, each novel cost one shilling. These were adventure and wild west stories intended exclusively for the young. We read cowboy stories, as well. In Temesvar there was a kind of pornographic journal, which was pornographic only in the context of those times, which appeared now and then. I don't remember its title. We, the young boys, were eager to see it. When a number was out, it was passed along, in secret, of course.

I began to listen to the radio since early childhood. I was 10 or 12 years old when I already listened to Radio London and Radio Moscow. I didn't have a radio, one of my friend's father, a baker had one. We used to go to them to listen to the radio. We were about 10 people listening. We didn't listen music, only news. Radio London always began its broadcast with drumming, while Radio Moscow began it with the melody of the Internationale. We gathered there towards the evening, 2-3 times a week. We gathered especially on Saturday and Sunday evening, and on one evening during the week. These stations could only be received in the evening. During the day we couldn't receive them. We couldn't receive Budapest, either. They weren't jamming the broadcast, we just couldn't receive it because we lived between mountains, and they didn't come through. My cousin had a radio, too, he was the wealthiest Jew there. I was 7 years old, and I used to stand at his window. He said: 'Come in and put the earphone on.' I couldn't put them on, so he had to help me, and I had the impression I was hearing a telephone discussion. The earphone could be unplugged, and thus everybody could listen to the radio. I was familiar with politics and with what was happening throughout world. I read the newspapers all the time, at 13 the adults had to treat me like each other. 'What are you talking about?' They told me many times I was spreading rumors (The rumors they told me I was spreading, were in 1936-37, and they were about the situation of the front, and how much this or that cost.)

## Religious life

For us, children, this holiday was a separate event, right until I became 10-12. We have lots of holidays, and each has a different meaning. For example, the first holiday, the Rosh Hashanah means the head of the year, that is the New Year's Day. This lasts for two days. For us, every holiday begins the evening before. On the next day, at 8am, we have to be in the synagogue, and the prayer lasts until 2pm. Yom Kippur is the highest holiday. The evening begins with fasting. At 6pm we take the supper, and on the next evening, after the morning star rises. We are not allowed neither to drink, eat or smoke, anything at all. Only those who are on medication are allowed to drink some water. Children fasted around 10-12 hours, but if one turned 13, there was no getting away from it, one had to fast for the whole day.

After Yom Kippur comes Sukkot. The custom was that every Jewish family puts up a tent in the yard. This is to symbolize that when Jews were coming out of Egypt, they lived in such tents. There were four walls of board prepared, joined them with catches and this construction was in the yard of every Jew. They assembled them, put some pine branches on top and decorated them with beautiful ornaments. There were these colored sheets of paper, there were all kinds of colors, and shiny golden sheets, as well. Children used to make ornaments from these. We learned how to cut out the forms. There was a long paper band, wrapped around a nut and hanged. There were Magen Davids, different biblical scenes and pictures about how the Jews were walking [in the desert]. They

hanged these ornaments on the walls of the tent. We used to keep these ornaments for the coming years. We also used to hang apples and grapes, as well.

The truth is that the religious Jew has to eat in the morning, noon and evening and sleep in that tent for five days [a whole week, to be precise]. Regardless of the weather, in cold or heat, they had a couch to sleep on. We had such a tent, as well, but my father didn't sleep there. The religion prescribes people to sleep there, but it was already cold outside, and there were very few who slept in the tent. [Editor's note: if it's raining or it's very cold, it's not obligatory to sleep in the tent.] There were other solutions, as well, some of the Jews, when building their house, they built a room slightly higher than the others so one had to go up 2-3 steps. The roof wasn't fixed, the boards were placed on top of each other, so they were easy to remove. The two sides were opened using a rope on a pulley. Mainly the wealthier Jews could afford to build such houses, the others didn't have such constructions in their houses. We, the children, used to go and take supper inside the tent in the evening, but for breakfast we didn't go there, we ate inside the house. But my father, who observed the religion, he used to. In the tent we sang some religious songs with Jewish theme.

They used to bring long palm-branches from Israel, called lulav, etrog, myrtle branches and there were these very nice smelling wickers, which had to be brought each day from the riverside and were also placed in the tent. These had a support, plaited from old lulav, and next to it there was the etrog. On the first day of Sukkot, each Jew had to go inside the sukkot to pray, holding the lulav and the etrog in their hands. They picked up the etrog [Editor's note: etrog, which wasn't tied together with the other 3 plants], a plant between the lemon and the orange [lime fruit]. It has a small sphere at the end, which wasn't allowed to be broken off, it had to be there, and people were very careful with it. There was a prayer that had to be said. And what about the poorer Jews? Etrog had to be paid for, and it wasn't cheap at all. In these cases, for example, the Jewish children went from house to house, I did, too, we took it [the etrog] and visited several houses. There they said the prayer, this branch had to be shaken – there's a ceremony to that. It was only allowed to be carried by men, women were forbidden to. Women had no say in this matter. In addition, there was one at the synagogue: those who couldn't afford to buy or pay for the etrog, came to the temple and did the ceremony there. This had a special prayer, it is taken round the synagogue, and is shaken towards different directions: to the East, to the West [to the North and to the South, as well], up towards God and down towards hell. Each [direction] had a different prayer. This was on the first and second day of Sukkot. The third day is a half holiday. But this ceremony was repeated in every morning of the holiday. On the last but one day of the holiday, in the morning of the seventh day, every Jew had to come to the synagogue, each of them with a bunch of 5 wickers, called haishanes in Hebrew, and they had to knock together them until no leaves were left on them. Thus people redeem their sins, then they threw the bunch away. This was a day of atonement, the Hashanah Rabba.

In the seventh evening of Sukkot, that is, on the eighth day, everyone was called to the Torah, this is called to step up to the Torah, and each had to say the prayer and to read a pericope, a verse from the Torah. They used to read from the first and the last pericope of the Torah, but from its middle, as well. Well, this took quite long, it could last until the evening, so in communities where there were, let's say, 300 Jews, there were 5 Torah scrolls, and people read from them in different corners. 15-25 people said the prayer, nobody was left out from Torah reading, it was organized

this way. In the center the notabilities and wealthy people were called up, the others gathered in the corners. Everybody over 13 had to be called to the Torah. In a community like ours was in Magyarlapos, there were 10-15 Torahs. After the reading processions followed, these had to be done 7 times. People walked round inside the temple carrying Torah scrolls, these were the Hasids, the very religious Jews, and they expressed their joy by loud singing, they used to dance and sing with the Torahs. This was the holiday of Torah [the Simchat Torah]. Everyone had their turn to do the procession. Such a procession lasted 2-3 hours in our community. On these occasions, the children made for themselves flags out of colored paper, and, I remember that, we used to put an apple in the tip of the flag, we made a hole in the apple and put a candle in it, which we lit. Children walked round in the synagogue with these flags.

On the last day they selected 3 bridegrooms. There was the bridegroom of the Torah, the bridegroom of The Creation and the so-called Maftir. [Editor's note: Chatan Torah – the one who finishes the 5th book of Moses, Chatan Bereshit – the one who starts the first book of Moses, Maftir – the one who reads the verse referring to Shmini Atzeret, the next holiday after Sukkot. These are coming one after the other during the Torah reading on Simchat Torah, and they're all great privileges, but only the first two are called bridegrooms. The Maftir is the one who 'finishes' the Torah reading on each Saturday and holiday.] When these three bridegrooms were praying, usually 3 notabilities, women used to throw nut, sugar and hazel-nut. This was for the joy of the children, who picked them up. These were all wealthy Jews, and in the following three weeks, on Saturday, they were bound to bring to the synagogue cake, beverage to invite all to dinner. This was much to the liking of children, and the temple was packed with them, each picking up the hazel-nut, nut.

The holiday of Torah was a festival for children. On the two days of the holiday it was a custom to play with nuts, children amused themselves this way. In the afternoon they gathered and there were several games. One of them was the brekli. Brekli means board. We leant the board cater-cornered against a chair, stood beside it let's say five of us, and each let a nut rolling down the board. The winner was the one who managed to knock someone else's, and the winner picked up all the nuts on the ground. There was another game, the resh, meaning head, and each player had three nuts to play with. They put the nuts next to each other on a level surface, if there was any cement, they preferred it, otherwise they put them on the ground, and the game began by choosing the one who will throw first. The first player put a nut next to the line of nuts. The second one came saying he occupied a certain length, let's say 5 meters and put his nut next to the nut line. Then another came and put two more nuts, occupying 2 meters, and so on. The first to throw was the one who put the last nut down, because he put the most nuts. So we had a 5-6 meters long nut line. The children selected in advance the most round nuts, smoothed them, put a hole in them and pored lead or tin, that substance one used to solder. They did this to make them heavier and to make them to go [roll] straight when thrown. So the player threw the nut and, if it hit the head of the line, the whole line was his, and if he hit only the back of the line, he could only pick up those nuts. This was a very common entertainment, children used to play it from morning to evening. As I look back, I'm always feel the nostalgia thinking what a holiday was that for us. When we went home, our pockets were full of nuts. This wasn't a question of bringing home some nuts, because we had enough at home, but it was a special feeling to win 50 or 30 nuts. The other, the loser, began to cry so the others gave him a nut or two just to have something in his pocket. We played mainly in the yard of the synagogue, because there was plenty of room there, but we also played at some houses. There were several wealthy Jews who had some 10 meters long porch-like construction in



front of the house, which was covered with concrete. Only the rich Jews could afford to build their houses with such porches.

In the countryside where we lived grape did not grow. People were bringing grape from other places and sold it, and if they didn't sell all of it, they had an empty house where they used to store it. We had no money to buy grapes. I think I was 11-12, and one time we went to that house some 8 of us, Jewish children, broke in and stuffed ourselves with grapes. The real problem wasn't that we ate some 20 kgs of grape, but that we destroyed almost all of it. This happened on a Saturday afternoon, even though our religion forbid us to do that on Saturday. Of course, the gendarmes came on Monday and took us in. Eventually it had no consequences, because we weren't responsible for our deed, since we all were underage, but they forced our parents to pay the damages. Another example was that they brought water-melon from hundreds of kilometers away, because it didn't grow there. They were piled up in gigantic heaps, with I don't know how many buyers around them. Then we went there and began touching the melons, but in the meantime I took another one and threw it backwards through my legs to another kid, who then gave it to a third one, who ran away with it. Or there was another prank we used to do, when people brought fruits: apple, pear or plum in cross-overs. These were long-shaped baskets that country people used to carry on their backs, put them on the ground and placed two stones between them in order to prevent them from falling over. This was a specificity of our region. A whole bunch, some 10-12 children, walk around until one of us 'accidentally' stumbled over a basket. The basket fell over and the apples scattered. The man or the woman began running after some of us, but it was no way they could catch us, since the market was full of carriages and one could hide anywhere, even under these carriages so they were unable to catch them. In the meantime we packed our pockets with apple, pear or plum, anything we could get. We used to do these kind of pranks.

## Magyarlapos

Magyarlapos had some 5 and a half thousand inhabitants. They were mainly Hungarians, some 60-70% of the population were Hungarians, that's why it was called Magyarlapos [Hungarian Lapos]. Some 18-20% were Jewish, and the rest were Romanians and Gypsies. Magyarlapos was a district residence, it even had a courthouse. In Magyarlapos, the some 900 Jews who lived there were all religious, with 2-3 exceptions. They used to go to the synagogue every morning, evening and Saturday. As I see it now, they had a quite harsh life. There were three wholesalers who supplied food for the countryside with flour, sugar, rice etc., pots, cotton, iron, horseshoe iron, horseshoe nails and kerosene. One of them was an uncle of mine from the maternal side, called Lazar Karl, Mihgaly's father, he was the wealthiest.

This is a very interesting thing what we were doing, and it began around March, when there were lots of lambs. The main occupation in the region was lamb-breeding, sheep-breeding respectively. There were enormous pastures there, and lots of lambs and cheese. So, me or my father went to the market, because I was already an expert in it, I checked the lamb, and I was able to tell it weighed around 6, 7 or 8 kgs, so I started to haggle and finally bought it. I took it to the butcher, there they slaughtered it, I paid out the butcher, skinned and sold it. Let's say, for example, that I bought the lamb with 60 lei, I paid 2 lei for the slaughter and 3 for the skinning, that's 5 lei. Another one gathered the bowels of the lamb, cut them up and mixed them with bran, and I think they fed the ducks with it. But I wasn't alone, we were some 50 buying lamb. Then I took the back side of the lamb and began walking around the market, the main square. There were three

churches there: the Reformed, the Catholic, and later, I think in 1926, they built a Greek Catholic church, as well. So we were walking up and down the area, and people were asking us: 'So how much for the lamb?' '45 lei' – I said. There were some 3-4 kgs of meat. We haggled, we were quite skilled in this, we knew we must ask a higher price, with, say, 10-15 lei, in order to be able to lower it, and in the end I sold it with 30 lei. I sold the skin separately for 20 or 25 lei, so I had 50 lei. I bought it with 60 lei, and it cost me another 5 lei, but I was left with the meat, almost for free. In the summer, from March until June, we ate only lamb meat. every dinner was with lamb: lamb stew, roast lamb, lamb fried in breadcrumbs, 'Parisian' cutlet, everything, we were fed up with lamb. In October the sheep season began. There were lambs they couldn't sell in the spring, so they grew up and became sheep. Then I went to the market and bought a say sheep of 10-15 kgs. And we did the same as for the lambs: got it slaughtered, sold the skin and the rest, and we were left with the forepart. I still like very much sheep meat, I'm considering it a delicacy.

Then there was a shochet – he was a Hasid shochet. He went each week to the slaughterhouse and his duty was to butcher a certain number of cattle. He examined them, of course, for any illness: this meant they inflated its lungs, and if they found small TB utricles in it, Jews weren't allowed to eat it, it was treyf (trejf food is eaten by Christians). The shochet slaughtered the cattle following a special procedure, then they took it to the butchery. There were 3 Jewish butchers who processed the slaughtered cattle. My grandfather Mendel Berkovits also had a butchery where they used to take cattle. Usually the shochet slaughtered for the Jews each Friday or Thursday some fowls, one or two hen, geese or anything, but mainly crammed fowls, since those had fat. Then they collected some 40-50 liters of fowl fat in cans, because Jews weren't allowed to cook with lard. Oil was still relatively rare to find, people only began using it in the early 1930s. There was a Jewish miller who had an oil-press, and he used to make oil. People somewhat despised those who cooked with oil. They even said it: you can smell this man is cooking with oil, and he is a poor man – the goose and duck fat was very expensive. In the winter, the poorer ones bought 8-10 kgs of meat, cured it just like pork meat and smoked it to be totally dry, then they ate it through the year, once a week, on Wednesday, with the bean soup. This was a common menu for everyone in Magyarlapos: on Wednesday there was bean soup with smoked meat. By the way, I was and still am a big fan of bean, I can still eat bean seven times a week, in any form.

There was plenty of fish in the river of Lapos, and there were people who had this occupation: fishing. only the Jews bought fish. The fishers didn't even went to the Christian houses when they wanted to sell fish. The went from house to house, and each of them had their usual customers. He knew Sauber needed 3 kgs of fish, so he was there on Friday morning with those 3 kgs of fish. My mother scraped the fish, cooked it, and from the rest she made aspic. We only ate scaly fish, we were not allowed to eat pike because it is a predator fish.

There were 6 retailers and 2 wholesalers, who also sold by the piece. My father was a trader, as well. He bought each week two sacks of flour, a chest of sugar – the sugar cubes were in chests, granulated sugar wasn't yet that popular, people preferred sugar cubes. He also bought 300 l of kerosene, 50 kgs of copper cable, rice, coffee and everything. These traders all had their own territories, and mainly Jews, but Christians, as well, used to buy from the Jewish stores. There was only one Christian store, owned by a Romanian, but it went broke. 70% of the customers bought on credit. This usually took place as follows: the customers who came in had a small booklet, and the trader had a large book. The customer said: 'I would like two kilos of 0 flour, four kilos of 0000 flour,

one kilo of rice, 2 liters of kerosene etc.' They both wrote in their books all these goods. At the end of the month they settled the debts, usually without any problems.

There were two board warehouses where they sold boards, and there were two carpenters, around five tailors, a Jewish doctor and three Jewish lawyers. The other Jews lived anyhow. and how did they sustained themselves? On Thursday they went to the market in Lapos and bought up eggs, there were no egg factories yet. Each week on Sunday and Thursday the villagers came to the market and sold eggs, they came from as far as 20-25-30 kms. I remember an egg cost 25 banis. One used to look at the eggs to see how big they were, and bought some 3,000-4,000 eggs for 20 banis each. There were 2 meters long and half a meter wide chests, and they used to put some 1,200 eggs in such a chest, this was the standard, and they used hay, straw and offal timber to prevent them from breaking as easily as today. This had to be done very quickly, because it was quite hard work. They had such skill, they could hold 6 eggs in their hands. They nailed down the chest, hooped it with thin bands, then in the afternoon the wholetraders from Des came and bought three or four such chests, so who they made a profit of 10 banis, or 5 banis per egg. They couldn't sell all the eggs, because everyone had hen at home. We too had 5-8 hen, so we didn't have to buy eggs, everyone had. The villagers had no one to sell the eggs to, so when these traders came they bought it all up. These eggs were all exported. There were at least 30 families with such occupation, and they got by, but just.

I only worked for a short while beside my father, until I turned 12-13, then I was sent to the rabbi school. There were others who remained there to work with their fathers, but others became traveler agents for different companies. There were these sheets with pieces of linen, called patterns. They cost 100-120 lei per square meter, and the agents went to every house and showed them to people. They even sold it in installments. This ensured a good living. Others, especially the younger ones, got commissions to make arrangements in the shire-town. It wasn't easy to get to Des, the trip cost some 100 lei, some four day-wages. So it wasn't possible to go to Des for every smallness, such as going to the public finances or buying drugs.

We only had electricity since 1938, and even then it was just some improvisation. There was a steam-boiler that worked with wood, and attached to it with straps there was a generator that generated electricity. They connected then the offices and the stores to it. It only functioned in the evening and in the morning. Some people had radio sets. the first radio in the village was my wealthy cousin's. I will never forget that when I was 6 he allowed me to put on the earphones and to listen to it. It could only be listened to with earphones, but two or three people could listen to it by connecting several earphones. These radios functioned with batteries, which had to be recharged from time to time. In Des there was electricity and the batteries could be recharged there. There were people whose sole occupation was to collect 50 batteries and to carry them to Des. Two days later he went there and brought them back, then he took another 100, and this went on. This was an occupation, too.

People were ingenious and look for something they could make money from. There were people who bought up the apple even when it was still on the tree: someone had twenty trees, I worked there, as well, and once, when I got off the ladder, someone just bought two or three truckful of apple. We had to harvest it and to sort them into chests, for export.

5 kms from Lapos there was a mine. Some people used to mine some cellophane-like, totally thermotolerant material. They brought up the pieces from the mine, and those had to be cleaned, and there were some thick pieces that had to be cut into 20 or 50 pieces, in order to attain the half a mm thickness. And they exported them. There were only two of three such places in the country. This material was mainly used as isolation, or for 200 degree boilers or melting furnaces to close the observation-slit, because at that time thermoresistant glass did not exist yet. It was quite remarkable, and one of my cousins had such an activity, and I worked there, as well, because I had no other job.

3 kms away from Lapos there was a monastery, a manastire, on the top of the hill. I went there two or three times, we had to climb up there on all fours. In August, on the Ascension of Mary, people came from 100-150 or 300 kms on foot, 30-50 people from one village. This pilgrimage lasted for a week. It was already very hot outside, so we made lemonade with sugar and saccharin and were selling it.

The saccharin was the subject of another trade, because it wasn't allowed to be sold, because it was much cheaper than sugar and there was a sugar monopoly. There was a Jewish old lady in Lapos who got the saccharin smuggled in from Czechoslovakia, through Sziget. [Maramarossziget is neighboring Transcarpathia that was part of Czechoslovakia between 1920 and 1939.] She used to stand in front of her small store, always dressed in a patched, quite dirty apron, with her hands in her pockets. The dress had two pockets: back then the saccharin pills were packed in paper packages, folded into bags. Sugar was very expensive and people didn't really buy it. In Czechoslovakia sugar was cheaper, and people used to smuggle in from there the sugar exported there Romania. I was already a big boy, around 17, so I also bought saccharin from the old lady. She didn't give just to anybody, but she knew me. Saccharin didn't look like today, it was called ezeredes [thousand sweet], and looked like rice. One put two pieces in half a liter of water, and there was enough to sweeten coffee, white coffee or anything else for a whole week. It was very cheap compared to sugar, and it was very good. Then I went to Sziget: I had some poor shoes on my feet, a pair of poor trousers, a poor jacket, a poor shirt and I took a goose with me. I went to Czechoslovakia, sold the goose and from the money I got I bought myself some clothes and threw away the old ones. Food was so expensive in Czechoslovakia, that from the price of a goose one could dress oneself from head to foot.

Another person was selling rock-flint smuggled in from Czechoslovakia. It wasn't allowed to use a lighter then, because it was match monopoly. [Editor's note: Between the wars it was a characteristic of the Romanian economic policy that due to the lack of some goods (salt, kerosene, match, etc.) the state had monopoly over them.] If one was caught selling them, one was punished. One wasn't allowed even to sell tobacco. Villagers used to dry tobacco leaves and surrender them to the state, but they were careful to hide and then sell some. Cigarettes were relatively expensive, so people used to buy tobacco and cut it up. Cigarette paper was also smuggled in from Czechoslovakia, because in Romania it was no technology suitable to make it. It was just as thin as you see today, and they used to put in it the dried tobacco.

Now I will discuss a social issue: there were at least 150 people in Magyarlapos who had no income at all. There was no such thing as a retired, only those got pensions who worked for the gendarmerie or the town-hall and have been retired. If one worked as assistant of a trader, after they weren't able to work anymore, what happened with them? There were no international Jewish

world organizations then who could finance them, like today. In the synagogue, at each prayer, in the morning and in the evening, there were two or three religious people walking from one person to the other and collecting in their palms just enough money to ensure the necessary food for those without any income. My father, amongst others, got involved in this action [at the local aid organization], in the sense that he got a list of people who had children: three, four, five or eight, and for each the needed amount of flour, sugar, kerosene, rice or shoe sole, because shoes needed soling or patching. They commissioned a man to distribute these goods. The Jewish community used to organize these actions, they drew up the list, so the community itself supported these people, from the money they collected through the donations at the synagogue. The community paid for the delivered goods. If someone died in such a family, from then on they got less quantities, as required. Nobody knew what the others were getting and where from. These people lived on these goods: they got 3-5 kgs of meat, depending on how many members the family had. Almost 30% of the Jewish population were in need. There were lots of poor people.

I only remember one case when someone convert from Judaism. The Markovitses were a very observant family. They had a small booth where they were selling soda and sweets. His daughter worked in that store. She was a very pretty girl. There was a collector, a very good-looking Romanian man, the head of the public finances, they were about the same age, or the man was slightly older, and they fell in love with each other. One day the girl disappeared. They looked for her everywhere for months, but nobody knew what happened to her. In the end, one of the neighbors told them she is in the house of the collector. Moreover, they have been married by a Romanian priest. The whole family was totally devastated. For a Jew, a convert Jew is the same as a dead one. The whole community was talking only about what happened – she has been excluded from the community. She was disown even from her family and broke any contact with her. For us children this was a very unusual thing for a Jewish girl or boy to marry a Christian, this was equivalent to your death. (And interestingly, she haven't been deported and had 2 children. She died already, she was 6 years older than me.)

There was a famous rabbi dynasty, the Teitelbaums [5](#), they were originally from Sziget. My rabbi was also a descendant of this dynasty, and had a younger cousin who was in Szatmar around 1933-1934. His name was Jajlis Rebbe. He came to Szatmar from Nagykaroly, and managed to gather so many followers that he became world famous and people came to him even from America or Switzerland. But our rabbi was equally religious, he was too a Hasid rabbi. This rabbi was an older man, I remember that when I was a child he was already 60, and 10-12 years later he died. He was bearded and had a fur cap, like the Polish boyars, called shtraymel, the Polish Hasids used to wear them. He had a black caftan, white stockings and low shoes – in that period low shoes were something exceptional. Back then everyone wore legged shoes. The low shoes were black shoes the country women used to wear, just that theirs was made from rubber, while the rabbi's was leather, of course. His son-in-law was the judge, that is the dayyan. He had two sons, both rabbis, one of them in Hungary, the other one in Czechoslovakia. I don't recall their names.

The rabbi's wife had duties, for example, before marriage, she walked the bride to the mikveh for the ritual bath. There was a mikveh in Magyarlapos, and one could go there on each Friday afternoon. This was something people really enjoyed, since there was no bathroom in the whole village. There were 16 wooden tubs with hot water, one had to bathe there. Next people went to the large pool in which people had to go underwater. You were not allowed to go directly into the



pool, except for one occasion during the autumn holidays. On the holidays of fall one had to wake up at 4am on seven days, and had to go to the synagogue to do penance. Long prayers had to be said there, then it was obligatory to go to the mikveh, and people went directly into the pool, without washing themselves, had to dive three times in the water, dry oneself with a towel and got out. Women had their special day when they went to the mikveh. They had to go there each month after their menstruation. There were very severe rules. The man was prohibited by law from accepting even a glass of water from his wife in this period of impurity, to prevent the lust after his wife. This rule was observed in our family, as well.

If you had a problem, the first one you should turn to was the rabbi. Everybody did this. The rabbi settled the litigations, but as far as I remember, there were no such cases in our family. For example, if someone owed me 500,000 lei, we agreed whether to go to court or to the rabbi. If one agreed to go to the rabbi, there was no further discussion. If the rabbi said it's white, it was white, there was no room for appeal, one had to obey the decision. Usually people turned to the rabbi with serious issues, and the rabbi normally had a very loyal attitude towards these problems. The son-in-law of the rabbi from Lapos was called Gross. He was the dayyan. After my mother got the hen slaughtered with the shochet, took it home and cut it up and found some deformation, she had to go to the dayyan. The dayyan examined it and decided whether it can be eaten or not. If he decided it was not good, it had to be thrown away. They were very decent, though: if a poor man went to him and there was something wrong with his hen, the dayyan knew how many children the family had, he told him: 'Cut this out, throw it away and eat the rest.'

## Going to school

After I turned 5, I began to attend the cheder, the Jewish school. The Jewish school meant that we only studied Hebrew and religion. Children usually began the cheder at the age of 6 and attended it until 14. Some continued to attend it even after bar mitzvah, those who wanted, could go to yeshivah. Girls, of course, weren't allowed to go to cheder. But there was the melamed, the teacher, and, at home, his wife was teaching the girls to read and write in Hebrew. Some 20-30 girls were going there, at different hours. They were taught 2-3 hours a day. they didn't learn pericope, but the 613 commandments a Jew should know, they had to learn. They learned the prayers, especially the Saturday and the holiday prayers. Women held a great responsibility in observing the prescriptions and in educating the children.

The children begin learning to write and read in Hebrew. As the child advances in age, teaching had several levels. Around the first year they learn the letters, to write and read. They get a general idea about the holidays and their meaning. In the second year they begin the weekly pericope. The Torah is divided in 54 sections, one for each week. In the first week they learn that God created the world, Adam, Eve, what did they do and so on. Then comes Noah and so on, for a whole year, until they learn all of it. The teaching method was that I had to read in Hebrew and to translate it immediately into Yiddish. For example 'Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve'et ha'arets'. That is: In the beginning God created heaven and earth, and I had to translate it right away. Next it says: 'vyhi mavdil beyn mayim lamayim' divided between water and earth [Editor's note: to be correct, it's divided between water and waters]. So we had to learn this way. Each of these pericopes, these stories, have 10-15 pages, and it went on like this. We didn't learn any comments, we had to learn them literally. In the third or fourth year we began studying the Rashi [6](#). The Bible has many comments, included in the biblical reading book: the main commentator is

Rashi, one of the most renowned scientists, even more famous than Maimonides, who wrote the comment on the entire Torah. [Editor's note: To be more precise, Rashi wrote a comment on the Mishnah, while Maimonides' comment is on the Mishnah Torah.] But only a few studied it because it was quite difficult. The comment itself was quite abstract and the structure of sentences is quite complex. In the third year we began studying the Talmud. We learned all this in the cheder, in Hebrew.

I began the regular public school at the age of 6. There were two Christian schools in Magyarlapos, a Catholic and a Reformed one. But they were only admitting children of the respective confessions. The Romanians had no confessional school, they attended the public school. So we had to go to the Romanian school, of course. This was eight years after Transylvania was annexed to Romania [following the Trianon Peace Treaty] [7](#), and my parents hardly knew several words in Romanian, and it was quite difficult for us in school, as well.

From 6am to 7am I used to go to the cheder, and the first thing we did was praying, and this lasted half an hour. In the next half an hour we learned the weekly pericope. We prayed just like at the synagogue, there was a chazzan and the others followed him. There was no schoolbag at that time, we just tied a wire around the books, we had two books or so, and at 7am we went to the school because teaching began, and lasted until 12am-1pm. In the afternoon we went home, had dinner and then we went again to the cheder and were there until 6-7pm. Children learned then 7-8 hours a day, that was mandatory. And usually every family followed these rules. There were teachers specially trained for it, called melamedim. Of course, the comment of the Talmud wasn't at the level they used to do it in the yeshivah. There weren't small desks like we had in school, we only had a long table. At the head of the table was the melamed, the teacher, and we, the children were sitting in front of him, in line. Each of us had a small booklet. Each year the weekly pericope, the 52 verses of the Torah, was edited in Kolozsvár. This included the Torah, the Targum, that is, the Torah translated into Aramaic, and under it, the Rashi comments. This went on for years. We learned the same thing each year, over and over again. I, for instance, had three editions of the pericope, and they were all identical. I remember they cost 3 lei, and it had the format of a larger copy-book.

On Saturday we gathered at the Jewish school or at the rabbi's, and he examined us. Usually we went there at 2pm or 3pm, after lunch. The rabbi's house had a large room that was full of books, from the ground to the ceiling. I wouldn't say it was an office, but a room where he studied the books day in day out, it was more like a study room. I don't even know what was gathered there. He didn't do anything else all day long, just studied the different Torah, Talmud and Kabbala editions and comments, and wrote his own comments, as well. This basically was a library, one wouldn't believe the rabbi had, to say the least, 1,200 Hebrew books. He came on Saturday afternoon and asked each of us one at a time to explain this or that section. If the rabbi had no time to come, some Talmud scientist examined us. There were these erudite Jews who studied in the yeshivah, but they didn't become rabbis, they remained laical, but they had a very extensive knowledge, and they examined us. In these cases we went to the school, the cheder. They examined us one at a time. In Magyarlapos I finished all four years of cheder.

The rabbi had a rabbi school, and there always were some 50 young bocherim. The rabbi gave lectures, and then he examined them, and he did that each week and even gave grades. The grades were corresponding to the order number of the Hebrew letters. These bocherim had a

canteen, and a boarding house to live. It was quite difficult for them to sustain themselves, because the community had no money to finance it. Instead, the trainees, when summer came and the harvesting season began, they began to wander around these parts of Transylvania: many Jews had threshing-machines. They went out and gathered some two truckloads of wheat and sold it, sent it by train, thus supporting the canteen. There were some wealthier boys among them who paid for their studies. Everyone got a meal ticket, for which they got three quarters of a kg of bread, for breakfast a cup of white coffee, for lunch they got a plate of bean soup, with something or meat soup with a piece of meat, or pasta or semolina. They had a canteen and they used to eat there. Apart from that, they were not eating in the canteen, because it was forbidden to cook. On Saturdays they were assigned to go to one of the families for lunch. We too had one or two trainees over for lunch. It wasn't allowed to eat breakfast, because it was prohibited to eat before the prayer, but at noon they had lunch.

In the afternoon the rabbi organized a common table for the departing of Saturday, which was a special event. The observant Jews were all there, it was full of bearded Jews, because the very religious Jews all had beards. They used to draw up to the table. They used to prepare fish, but they didn't cook it, only in the form of fish aspic, and usually they put in front of the rabbi a fish aspic of around one and a half kilos. Everyone went to wash their hands, then the rabbi graced the food. There were three or four plates of such aspic, but nobody touched them until the rabbi didn't eat the head of the fish. After he ate the heads of the three fishes, this was the custom, the plates were put in front of the followers and everyone took a piece of it. The rest, everyone ate as they could, some had larger, others smaller bits, another had the tail. This meal, after everyone ate from it, was called in Hebrew shrayim, the rabbi's leftovers. There were other dishes, as well, but this was distinctive feature, and the glass of spirit or wine that followed. The prayer-book includes all the songs with lyrics one has to sing to honor the Saturday. After that the prayer and the departing of Saturday followed. I attended these suppers after I turned 11-12, even before bar mitzvah. We thought this was a matter of course. At least I strongly believed in everything until I turned 15.

The religious ones observed very strictly the religion. On Pesach, for example, it wasn't allowed to eat anything raised, that is, containing yeast. The custom back in Lapos was that they bought two trucks of wheat from a landlord, cleaned the mill, floured it and made the matzah from it. Baking matzah for the whole community usually took four weeks. The procedure was that they had the adequate room, and there was the water man, the flour man, the kneader, and there were the rollers, and another who punched the [batter] with a special tool, another one handed it to the stove, one who put it in and took it out from the oven. The water had to be I don't know how meters away from the flour. There were say 30 women, they cut up the batter into 30 pieces on special boards. They kneaded just as much they could roll out, because there shouldn't be left any remains. There was a supervisor who, after they rolled out the batter, took the citling (this is a Hungarian word) [scraper], a piece of iron with a small edge, and cleaned and scraped off the boards, in order to remove any remains, because that would have raised. Preparation was that strict to ensure that the Pesach matzah would comply with the prescriptions.

The matzah for the rabbi had to be done as follows: he called together the whole yeshivah, I attended the yeshiva from Lapos for a short period after cheder, all the children, in a large room with long tables. We put the wheat on the table, and we had to pick out the sprouted wheat grains, just like they do with the rice, because those were not adequate. Only men were allowed to

prepare the matzah for the rabbi, from kneading to rolling out, women were not allowed to touch it. And the matzah was quite thick. And what did the rabbi do with it? For both Seder nights three matzot are required, and he sent to the wealthier or very observant Jews six pieces of matzah. There were richer, well-situated Jews, say fifty families, and they donated so much money the rabbi could sustain himself for almost a year. They gave out the matzah symbolically, as recompense for the donations.

My father wanted me to become religious and to be able to carry out the tasks, if not the rabbi's, at least related to the synagogue. I spent the first one and a half year at the yeshivah in Magyarlapos, but then my father didn't want me to be there anymore, because he knew that if I remain in Magyarlapos, it wouldn't work out. And the yeshiva in Szekelyhid [Sacueni, in today's Romania] was the most distinguished one in Romania, and all the great rabbis finished that yeshivah, and it was my father's obsession. These great rabbis were in Nagykaroly or Szatmar, but their title wasn't just rabbi, they were rather miracle rabbis. Their occupation was to browse the Bible, the different studies and rules. The rabbi of Szekelyhid also had this speciality. He was a laical rabbi, and taught rabbis or shochetim, anyone who ended up there. I hadn't the faintest idea about Kabbala, even though I was a quite good pupil.

My father sent me to Szekelyhid, together with my younger cousin Jaszi Nemes. I was around 14 when I got there. It was quite costly to be there, we had a regular canteen there, and we stayed in a sector until a very rich American Jew came and built a beautiful, storied boarding house, and we moved in there. I was there for two and a half years. Dr. Rosner was the rabbi there, he was one of the most erudite rabbis in the country. In Vienna there was a Hebrew university and he took his doctorate there. The system was the same as in Magyarlapos, the rabbi explained. There you could see which class people were coming from. The rich Jewish boys had a separate canteen, they ate goose meat, cracklings and goose liver there, anything was prepared especially for them. We, the middle-class and the poor, got around one kg of bread that we had to portion. Breakfast consisted of white coffee, the lunch was consistent, and we had supper, too. Everything was kosher, of course. I met there some very religious Jewish boys. I was religious, too, but I didn't have a long payes, just short ones, and I used to put them behind my ear. (I never had beard, only moustache, because after 1940 in Northern Transylvania moustache was in vogue, as opposed to Hungary.)

In the yeshivah from Szekelyhid we didn't take up the weekly pericope anymore, we were beyond that. Instead, we studied the Talmud. The rabbi had some quite large, very thick books he used to teach from. He extracted something from them, for instance the Gitn [the tract of Talmud by Gitn], the divorce. What were the rules in order for a Jew to be separated from his wife? There was no such thing that a woman divorced her husband, only the husband could divorce his wife. There were around 250-300 pages on this issue. And it had 2 or 3 interpretations. This wasn't working as simple as one took it and read it, and gave a simple explanation. Instead, one had to provide an explanation for each section, which wasn't in the text, it had to be said based on a deduction. The rabbi gave a lecture on these issues, but we didn't take notes, we only paid attention to what he was saying. The interesting thing was that these comments were not written down, these were just coming by themselves. I'm not saying that those who finished yeshivah knew everything word for word, but they knew the essence of all the comments. Regardless whether you went to the yehsivot in Szatmar, Vizhnits or Tasnad, or to the yeshivah in Szekelyhid, there were the same explanations, with minor differences. I often wondered how this was possible. It's true these people

studied the books not once, but five or six, even ten times. There were, I don't know this, some 70 books they studied for 4-5 years. There were the beginners, then the second year students, then the advanced ones, and those who were in the last years they were actually able to teach.

We learned together. We stayed in something like a campus. The wealthier Jewish boys rented rooms, in these rooms there were 4 or 5 beds, and they slept there. There were such students, 5-6 years older than me, who also attended the yeshivah, these were the bocherim, bocher means in fact young man. They were called hazr-bocherim. Hazr means repetition, so they were the repeater bocherim. The bocher already finished yeshiva, some 4, 5 or 6 years, and they were able to teach almost at the rabbi's level. We had one older bocher beside, they helped us rehearsing. In the morning we went to pray. If the rabbi gave a lecture, we listened to it, after that we went home and until noon, 1 or 2pm, the four of us, five with the bocher, we rehearsed one step at a time everything, because we had to learn everything that was said at the lecture, since each weekend, on Friday, the rabbi examined us. In fact the examinations began already on Thursday afternoon and lasted until Friday noon. Everybody had to be there for the examination, and each time we got grades. There was the small alef, that is the a for satisfactory, the middle alef for good and the big alef for very good. There were only these three grades. There was a register with all the students registered in it, written in Hebrew, and the rabbi recorded there your grades. This is how the teaching took place back then. There was no such thing that someone had no satisfactory knowledge. It wasn't possible because only talented and clever people were admitted there. Otherwise it would have been impossible to understand those things, even if they would talk about a verse for 5 days. Only those boys went there, who were in the first place children of religious parents, and furthermore, if they were smart enough. For those who were unable, it was just an unnecessary trip, since after 2-3 weeks they were advised to leave and learn a profession. I got to this yeshivah in mid 1933 and studied there for 2 and a half years. It had 250 trainees, and this was quite a large number.

I ended up with the children of some wealthy Jews, but I don't remember their names anymore. They were atheists. How on earth I came across them, I don't know, I just did. Opposite to the sector I was staying in a Jewish family with five girls lived, each more beautiful than the other. We, who lived in that sector, dated them in secret, but we never even kissed. We only talked, took her hand and these kind of things. It was quite a sin for a bocher to court, just like stealing today, we would have been expelled at once. This was around 1936-1937. Then they roped me into the Red Aid [9](#), and that was my other sin. They found this out and after half a year they expelled us. After two and a half years they discharged us.

I joined the Red Aid in 1937, or maybe earlier. This meant I collected 1,000 lei from 4 or 5 people and handed it over to another person, let's say to you. I don't know what you'll do with it. You only know you got 1,000 lei from Sauber and Ausch. Then you pass it to Grun. Grun doesn't know where the money is from, he only knows you gave it to him. Grun collected such money from 8 people and gave it to Schwarz. [Editor's note: The above people are employees of the Jewish community, and Mr. Bernat used them only to illustrate the situation.] They gave the collected money to families of people who had been sentenced to prison due to their activities as communists. Or if they were social democrats and they needed help. They had nothing to sustain themselves if the head of the family was convicted, and the duty of the Red Aid was to help them out. They even sent packages to the prisons using different cover-names, this also was their activity. This was



entirely illegal, since the communist party was banned both in Romania and Hungary. The Red Aid, apart from this assistance, never organized any meetings. Its members knew absolutely nothing about the other members.

After I have been expelled, I went to Cojocna [Kolozs in Hungarian, some 20 kms away from Kolozsvár] and worked there. My father's cousin had a small store there, a grocery store. I spent there around 6 months. This was already in 1938-1939, and the times of war were closing in, but it was before Transylvania was re-annexed to Hungary [in 1940]. Then I went to work in a bakery in Kolozsvár that made bread for the army. I worked there until 1940.

My mother was skilled in cotton coloring. There was white cotton and yellowish cotton in bundles. I don't know where they were coming from, probably from Africa. Some of the houses had looms and everyone wove the linen for themselves. They needed different colors, so my mother learned how to color cotton and I helped her out. We had to color enormous quantities of cotton, because especially the villagers used 100% cotton to weave, or mixed with line or something I don't know. This was a supplementary income for the family, in addition to the pub my grandmother had.

My poor mother died from lung-disease in 1938. Back then lung disease was equal to death, only very few recovered from it. Her older sister, Zsuzsa Nemes, died one year later. (If I look at it now, it was better she died then, and didn't have to wait another 3 or 4 years to be deported, because she most probably would have died during the holocaust. At least she has her grave and tombstone in Magyarlapos, which I visit every year.) From then on I made this coloring.

## During the War

In 1940, following the Second Vienna Dictate, but before the Hungarians came in, Lapos was a district residence, and had a district courthouse, and they knew we were doing this coloring. The Hungarians from Lapos came to us to color linen in red, white and green. The Romanian army even caught us in the process, because they didn't leave yet, and said to us: 'What, we didn't even get out from the country, and you Jews are already loving the Hungarians and make flags for them?' I replied: 'First of all, we don't love Hungarians, we are Romanian citizens, but the situation is clear now, the decision to re-annex Transylvania to Hungary was already made in Vienna, and this is what we do for a living.' What was I to do, to start painting red, yellow and blue flags? We did it before. The whole village, the main square was full of our flags, from the small ones to the quite large ones, we painted them all before 1940.

I remember for instance the first thing that happened. They came and bought all the dry goods they could find: wool, fabric, linen, everything there was to buy. At that time only Jewish stores existed, and the Hungarian traders came from Hungary – they were called small-ware merchants – and bought up everything within 2-3 weeks and took everything to Hungary, because one couldn't buy such things there anymore. This is how it happened: One of the more important small-ware merchants asked: how many bales of 10 or 30 pengo fabric do you have? The other said the amount. Here's the money! They packed up the goods and took it away. This was the situation throughout Transylvania. They converted the money, I can clearly remember that, 1 pengo was 20 lei. And money was converted similarly. So probably it was very cheap here, and although it might have been in Hungary, as well, but it was very expensive. Then, 2-3 months later, the goods made from synthetic fiber appeared here, the traders brought them from Hungary. I don't know what they were made of, but I know that was much to my misfortune, I bought some fabric because I

wanted to make myself some clothes, so I bought 2 and a half meters or 3 meters of synthetic fiber. The truth is they looked very good, but they were of poor quality. This happened until the Hungarians occupied Transylvania.

The Romanian army retreated unit by unit, and the Hungarian occupation took place in the same manner. They came in this order: today they had Nagyvarad, then Csucs, Kolozsvár, then Szatmar, Nagybánya and so on. I know the orchestra of the Hungarian army was on the main square, and it was a quite important event. Everybody was out on the streets, everyone was happy, then they slowly realized that the situation wasn't that rosy at all. As they came in, just a few months later the great neediness began. In 1940 they introduced the ticket system for bread. In 1941 everything was given based on tickets, from bread to shoe sole, every products that was important. For meat we had no tickets, because there were villagers who butchered animals, and so did the butchers, but bread was hard to find. Even though I was 21, I couldn't really understand what was going on. I didn't know that, by then, there were two Anti-Jewish laws in effect in Hungary, and Jews had economic restrictions, and in schools the *numerus clausus* [8](#), and later the *numerus nullus* [9](#) was applied.

There weren't any major changes in our family. We never had any difficulties getting bread, because there was a landowner who was my father's fellow-soldier. He was a lieutenant, while my father was a sergeant at the same company. He had some 120 hectares of land, an enormous sheep-farm and we were lucky to have him as friend, because he always provided for us what we needed. It wasn't for free, of course, we had to buy everything, and we took the wheat to the mill, they floured it there. From this flour we baked the bread for a whole week, so we had no problems. Unfortunately many were starving. There also was another type of bread, baked from flour mixed with corn and rye flour. Rye wasn't too bad, but with corn flour it was almost uneatable. At first, the bread portion was quite big, but it decreased constantly.

When Poland was invaded by the Germans, at the start of World War II, I was at home. Then every Jewish community had to send some, I don't know, 100 kgs of matzah for the Jews in Poland, even though our situation wasn't too rosy. After 1941 they began to get out of Poland, and even in our village we had 20 such families, which were supported by the community. But they left after a while.

I continued my activity within the Red Aid in Magyarlapos, as well. My family didn't participate in these actions, I was the only one involved, it was kind of a private matter. Nor my father, nor my brother, nobody knew anything about this. The fliers only circulated in secret about what the Soviet Union, communism and equality meant, and which stated that hatred between nations should be prohibited. And this is exactly what we needed to hear in the situation we were in. Why should we be 'budos zsidó' or 'jidan imputit'? [In Hungarian and in Romanian, both meaning 'dirty kike'.] Or why should we be thrown out of the stores? And bearded Jews were seized in the night, got their beard pulled, then cut off. These actions began already in 1937-1938. There were several such cases in Magyarlapos. This made us believe everything was to be changed, and this is our redemption. No longer I would be a Jew, but equal to the Romanians and the Hungarians. Because what was it all about? Anything happened in the country, the Jews were to blame for it. It's true there were many very wealthy Jews, in Magyarlapos, for example, every trader was Jewish. And this was the reason the entire Jewry had to suffer, because it was considered that Jews traded and they had properties. But if they knew what trading meant... My father bought 1 kg of flour for 3.50 lei

and sold it for 3.75 or 4 lei, because it wasn't like today, when the profit margin is 20, 30, 50 or 100%. One couldn't afford to do that those days, because there were 6-7 such small stores, and if you tried to sell it for more, the customer went to the other trader and asked him whether they would sell him for less, say for 3.90 instead of 4 lei, and if they did, the client would buy from them.

I lived in Magyarlapos until September 1941, when I was arrested. We, that is me and my friends, were already prepared for it. We expected it to happen, because we were aware about what was going on, so we knew we would be arrested for our activities within the Red Aid. One day, at dawn, the gendarmes gathered us, put us on carriages and took us 40 kms away to Nagybanya. I brought with me a small package, some clothes, because we weren't allowed to take with us anything else. There was the DEF department, the so-called Department D, the D or fourth department of the counter-intelligence. I don't know anything else about this department of the counter-intelligence. There were these long stables, modern for that period, which have been used before by the Romanian cavalry. There were separate boxes for each horse, at least 100-120 boxes. In front there were two of room-like boxes, and they had us in one of these rooms. They already had every information on us, our names, so I got the instruction to go to box no. 46. There was a stack of straw and a blanket. they told me I should stand and look at the wall, and I wasn't allowed to look to the left or to the right. I was only allowed to talk if the gendarme asked me to or if my number was called. They didn't call you by your name, but by your number. I was number 46. When I got there I had no idea what awaited me there. I can still see the boys and girls standing in the other end of the room, just like in a temple in front of the saints, without a grumble, you could even here the flies.

They didn't call me for two days. I don't know how many gendarmes were walking in the stable just to prevent us from talking to each other. On the third day I've heard the call for number 46. It was told that if they called number 46, I should run, no looking to the right or to the left, I just had to go in the first room, the office. There were some 5 people there: 2 detectives and 3 interrogators. they had different functions. The first thing they said to me was: 'Well, Beri – this was my nickname, from Bernat – tell us now why you are here?!' They began asking questions, but finally they got to the point: 'How did you raise money for the Red Aid? Did you hand it over to this man?' At first I denied everything. Then he told me: 'All right..., so you won't tell us?! Nevermind! I will call you back in the afternoon, and then you will even remember how your mother breast-fed you!' I couldn't imagine what would happen. The interrogations began around 7 or 8pm. They called me again, and I ran to them rightaway. And there I stood. 'Tell us now! We have it all here, we know exactly how much money you raised, when you handed it over and where that money was from.' Only then I noticed on one of the walls – I don't want to exaggerate – 15 types of beating tools, canes, black-jacks and anything you could imagine, it was all there on that wall. The black-jack was the genital organ of the bull, processed and put on a steel wire, it had around 50-70 cms. Then he said: 'Hold out your palms!' It was a thin cane, but how bad it hurt, it was just unbearable. He gave me some 10 hits, and then I began screaming for him to stop. But this was only the beginning: 'Tell me, if you don't want me to continue, whom did you raise the money from?!' I knew if I told them whom I was raising money from, they would punish those people, too. Even when we had no idea what was to happen, we had an agreement. There was a very poor Jewish family, an old woman and 2 other persons, three in all, who had absolutely no means of subsistence. We always gave 1% of the money to this old woman. We had an agreement that whatever should happen, we would say we raised money from YX, but he thought we were raising money for that poor old lady. I wouldn't tell

them, though. 'Take off your shoes!' They seated me on a bench that had a back, tied up my legs and hands, then they began hitting my sole. Next they forced me to dance barefoot. My feet swelled up from the beatings so much, I thought I couldn't take it anymore and I would have to tell them everything, but in the end I didn't. This was the second torture. After that they didn't call me for two weeks.

We were allowed to sleep from 10pm to 6 am. In the morning, when we went to the closet, they tied us together in pairs. When we had to pee, we had to touch the other one. when we had to wipe with straw or some grass, since we didn't have anything else, so we had to touch each other again, and that was terrible. Just horrible. There was no hygiene whatsoever, we had some cold water in the morning, and that was just about it. We didn't even get a sip of water all day long. For lunch they gave us some poor meal, but we pulled it through somehow, we were young. After 10 or 12 days or more have passed, they called me in. 'So – the man told me – it's your turn now.' I was already looking at my shoes, I thought they will begin beating my foot again. Then he said to me: 'No, just pull down your pants!' They hog-tied me. Do you know what hog-tying means? When you bind the hands and the feet together. Then he put on a glove on one of his hands and began massaging, pressing one's... testicles. Just for half a minute. It was so painful... Only a man can tell, how painful it is. Nobody could stand it, everyone fainted. Or they kick you in the balls like you can only see in movies... they used to hit the women's breasts with canes. And the girls showed us the marks. When I saw them... At this third torture there was no getting away from it, I confessed I was raising money. Then they only called me in once, but they only beat me up. They asked me whether I recruited anyone else to raise money for me. The fact was that I wasn't authorized to do so, I had no such function.

We were there for almost 35-40 days, approximately. After that the whole group was put on trucks, in chains, and they took us to Pest in prison. This was kind of a gatherer prison, even worse than a regular prison. The prison had enormous buildings, 6 or 7 of them. The girls were in other places. There was a room of 8 meters by 10, and we put some matting on the cement and slept on them. I don't know, we were some 150, 200, but we had no room to sleep on our backs, only sideways, packed like sardines. And if one wanted to turn over, one had to move two or three other people, because otherwise it wasn't possible. There was a toilet there, and one had to wait a quarter of an hour for one's turn. It was horrible. It was light all through the night in order to prevent us from doing anything. The meal was catastrophic, not only for us, but for the population, as well. I think our daily portion of bread was 180 or 200 grams. In the prison we were like in communism, in communities. I had visitors, my brother and my father came to visit me – it was humane from their part to let visitors to come –, they brought me, I don't know, I think 2 pieces of bread and 1 kg of salami, placed in a chest. After I brought it in, we sat around it, just like in a community. Ten of us were from Magyarlapos. Then everyone of us got 50 grams of bread, 1 slice of salami and half of a sugar cube. This was already in the spirit of communism: equality. There were some wealthier guys amongst us, and they shared everything. In addition, we were lucky because there was a Jewish organization called Omzsa. [OMZSA – National Aiding Action of Hungarian Jews]. They used to also bring us one or two plates of food from the Jewish kitchen for us to eat. Probably this kept our spirit alive. I was in that terrible situation for three months.

Should I tell you about our life in this deportee camp? When they took us away from home, my father gave me 300 Pengos. That was quite a sum. In the camp they took it away from me and

recorded the sum I had on me. It was interesting that you could buy anything on the black market, if you had money. The commander of the department we were detained was a Jew – there were only Jews there –, and he was the king of the pickpockets, a very slick man. He was taken in without any trial, but he was released after 3 months. When they apprehended him, in Pest it was forbidden to go to some streets. They caught him in one of those streets, took him in and he was locked for another 3 months. I will never forget his name, Mr. Frid. I said to him: 'Mr. Frid, I would like to ask for 100 Pengos from my money. 'OK', he said. This was on a Saturday. Sunday he came to me saying: 'Come here! Here you are, 90 Pengos. 10 Pengos, that's the fee.' He had an entire network, involving guards, everybody. I didn't ask for more, just 100, but I only got 90. It cost me 10 Pengos because the money was issued to me by the guard, the accountant and the cashier. So eventually the amount of money I had to give away got quite high. Let's say I wanted to buy bread, and a piece of bread cost 10 florins. Then, just for bringing it to me, they took 1 forint, they always added 10%. If I wanted to break 50, it cost me 5 florins. I calculated that from 100 florins I was left with half, the rest was taken away by this Frid and the people around him. He collaborated with anyone, and every 3 months he left with several thousand Pengos.

I was there for 3 months, then I was transferred to Garany. There were 2 camps: in Kistarcsa and in Garany. Garany [today Hran, Slovakia] was a village in Czechoslovakia, then Northern-Hungary. In that camp there were not only communists, just like in the prison, but also black marketeers and alarmists. If one said ... the Germans [Editor's note: Mr. Bernat didn't say the swear], or one sold the bread for a price of 50 cents higher than the average, one got deported without trial to Garany or Kistarcsa. It even determined a proverb to appear: 'Silence is golden, speech is Garany.' We lived just like in the prison, but in better conditions. We were not 10 people anymore, but we were 50 in one such community. And then came the help from the Red Aid. Thus we saw our help returned, they sent us packages and corn flour. I received these packages because my father used to dispatch them. We were not starving, even though we didn't eat meat, but we had hominy every day. This was one of our primary meals. One ate one plate of hominy and one felt full. I was in Garany until St. Nicholas Day, because Horthy [10](#) pardoned on St. Nicholas Day. This was in December 1941. He didn't pardon everybody, just those convicted for lighter crimes, like me. It wasn't an amnesty, he only set free several dozens of people on his name-day. Those who committed more severe crimes, have not been released.

When I arrived home, my summon for forced labor already awaited me. All the 10 of us had about the same age, and everyone of us had their summons waiting for them. We had to make foot-lockers, but we had no money. We went to a carpenter who made and planed the boards, and we had to assemble them. One of us had more skills and thus we managed to assemble them. We had to join up in Nagybanya, our battalion was there. We rented a carriage, that's how we traveled to Nagybanya, just like 4 or 5 months earlier, when the counter-espionage agents took us there. They assigned us to different companies, we weren't in the same company. We ended up around two of us in each company. I was in Nagybanya for some 2 weeks, and then I was transferred to Disznajo, near Szaszregen [15 kms from Szaszregen]. The forced laborers worked there at the Deda-Szeretfalva railroad line. Hungarians worked there, as well, because there were these famous Hungarian construction workers. They had special pushcarts, in which one could put some half a cubic meter. Its two wings were tied with a rope, and the man only had to guide it. We had some good meals there, we got the usual army food. Already when we joined up, we got uniforms. In 1942, for I don't know how long, we had the regular Hungarian soldier uniform, with that three-



colored rose in the national colors removed. The captain, Antal Alsopathy, was a hard drinker, that's exactly why he was sent there. These people were usually sent to the forced labor companies. Beside work we had 3 days of field exercise weekly, just like the draftees: crawling, lying down and double march. When it was mud, after 20 meters of crawling we looked like pigs. Fortunately the Maros was near, and it was already early spring or summer. We took a bath in the Maros and washed our clothes without taking them off. There was some landowner there, and the captain courted his daughter. When it came into his mind to court her, he woke us up in the middle of the night and called us out to sing serenades – we sang marching songs. This happened several times, and we sang 'Horthy Miklos katonaja vagyunk, a legszebb katonaja...' (We are Miklos Horthy's soldiers, the most good-looking ones...) As forced laborers we sang these kind of songs, among others. We had to sing for him all the time, when we went to work we had to sing, the whole company. You can imagine he was drunk when we did this.

I don't have to tell you the beatings we got there. And there was this skeleton crew – these guys were the brutal ones –, they beat us up. If they called you and your hand wasn't in the right position when you had to salute, they slapped you in the face twice. They were walking around with beating canes, and if they hit your hand with them, it hurt like hell. I came across one of them after the war herein Marosvasarhely, he was a Hungarian called Seres. He was from Marosvasarhely originally. He slapped me twice one day. But otherwise, since he was from Marosvasarhely, he helped quite a lot the boys from Marosvasarhely: he brought letters, food, packages, and he let them go home, because Disznajo was not far away from Vasarhely [47 kms]. One day, after the war, one of my friends came to me, a former fellow forced laborer, and he said to me: 'Hey, do you remember Seres?' 'Of course, because he slapped me twice so hard I couldn't hear for 3 weeks.' 'Now look, he is in despair. He is frightened that you want revenge' – I was appointed as district attorney to Marosvasarhely. 'Look! – I said. – I know Seres wasn't that mean to you, but he was to the others. But don't worry, I will not have my revenge. I got two slaps, but this was the least of all the awful things that happened there.' From Disznajo we were transferred to Zsibo, also to the railroad, then to Nagybanya to a lumbering.

There's another episode in my life: during the period of forced labor, I have been brought to trial. While I was in the forced labor camp, I received an accusation, in which they charged me with participation in an organization aiming to overthrow the public order. This was basically for my activities within the Red Aid. From Nagybanya I went to Szatmar and I reported to the local headquarters. There they put us in a cell. We were some 7 in one cell, and we had decent meal. There was a so-called famous council of five, that is five judges who held the hearings in different places: Maramaros, Kolozsvar, Szatmar and Marosvasarhely. Judge Lanyi Zoltan was presiding. We were some 600-700 people here in Northern Transylvania involved in different communist activities. In Szatmar we were some 130 in the courtroom, and the lasted for three weeks. Approximately 30% of the accused were Hungarians, the rest were Jews. But none of them was Romanian. We have been accused of subversion of public order – this included accusations of different severity. All the big boys were there: Mihaly Gombo, an important activist, Lajos Csupor, who later became regional secretary general, Julianna Szabo, a woman from Vasarhely, a Szekler girl, who I don't know how got there, I never found this out. Each morning 3 soldiers with bayonets came and took us to the city court, until 2 or 3pm, when they took us back. It wasn't much of a trial, they just asked me whether I adhere to my statement.

In those days there were around 17,000 Jews, including very rich ones. When the local Jews saw us with yellow arm-bands [Editor's note: because some of us have been summoned there from forced labor] – we didn't have uniforms yet, we were in civil clothes – and everybody asked us: 'What are these guys doing here? Why are they taken to the courthouse?' One Sunday morning we went to the headquarters, escorted, of course. When we entered, one of the sergeants said to us: 'Wait until the colonel calls you.' The local commander was a colonel in the Hungarian army. 10 minutes later they called us and when we walked in we almost fell flat. The colonel sat at a small table having coffee with a bearded Jew wearing kippah, talking to each other. Oh God, what's this? Then he said: 'So, you good for nothing communists, you're lucky with my friend Mr. Freund here.' The Jew was called Freund, he was the president of the Jewish community. This Freund family was very wealthy, now the whole family is in America. He was on good terms with this local colonel, and he arranged for us to get rid of the arm-bands and to go to the court by ourselves in the morning, without escort. He guaranteed that we would not flee. I was sentenced to one and a half years in prison, being charged with the fact that with the money I raised I helped the communists from Northern Transylvania.

From Szatmar they took us directly to the prison in Budapest. They brought us back where I was released before. I was there for 2 weeks. It was an awful situation. Then someone came from the Omzsa and asked me how I ended up there again, after one and a half year. A man called Klein was the contact with the Jews in the prison. Then I told them. The people from Omzsa then arranged for me to be released from this prison and to be transferred to a prison in Kolozsvár. So I was transferred to a prison in Kolozsvár, together with Geza Simo. He also was an illegal communist, a teacher. We were 6 or 7 in one cell. The lifestyle was the same, we shared everything. At first, when I got there, they were reluctant, because they thought I was sent there to spy, but after they asked me some questions, they realized my situation was similar to theirs.

Interestingly, after 2 months I was sent back to the company in Nagybánya. We worked there for approximately a month, then they transferred us into a company-on-the-march and we went to Bácska and we worked there. This was in the fall of 1942. From there we went to Transcarpathia. Then we stayed for a month in a small town, I think in Nagyszollos. From there we took us as forced laborers with a company-on-the-march to the front at Kolomea. This was in Ukraine, already in January 1943. We stayed on the front for more than one year. We were assigned to an engineer company. We went to work every day. We built bunkers, fire-trenches, roads for them to be able to move their mechanized equipment. We worked in very difficult conditions. The meal was very bad. In 1944 the front was in retreat. The Eastern front was breached to such extent that one day, while working, we could hear the whizzing of bullets. We saw everyone running, carriages, cars, motorcycles, bicycles, as the Hungarian soldiers were running away from the Russians. We had to retreat.

In April or May 1944 another incident happened on the front during the Holocaust. The company commander, a teacher from Kolozsvár, a very decent man, came one day, gathered us and said to us: 'You have two possibilities. We either retreat together, or everybody is for himself. If we retreat and I'm taking you in the country, you will be deported.' So, we couldn't decide what to do. He then said to us: 'If you listen to me, you will not return to your homes. None of your family members are at home. And probably the same fate awaits you, too.' But he didn't tell us what to do, he only wanted us not to come home. And many of us went home, and as soon as they got there, they had

been deported to Auschwitz. We remained there and worked. In August we began talking about what we should do, where should we go. We couldn't use the roads because the Hungarian soldiers took it on the lam, I could never imagine this could happen. Then we gathered to talk it over whether we would go with them or we would stay. It was a fearful mess. In the end we decided not to go with them.

We stayed in a kolkhoz [11](#) and could hear the grenades exploding around the kolkhoz, but in the building, as well. How could we save ourselves? If they captured us or we got involved in firing, they would surely have slaughtered us. In the kolkhoz there were these 100 meters long, 2 meters high large dunghills. They didn't take it out for several years, because it was occupied and they just stacked it up. One of our guards had an idea, and told us: 'You know what? Each of you should dig a hole in this dunghill. And when the attacks will come, you will just hide in there.' Many died in the kolkhoz, but none of us. It seems it stopped the bullets, it functioned as a shelter, and thus we managed to escape. On the next day the Russians came. Then I had my first big, big disappointment, when one of us, who knew a little Russian, because he was from Maramarossziget [Editor's note: Amongst the heterogeneous population of Maramaros there lived Ruthenians, as well, and their language is very close to Ukrainian]. He went to one of the Russians – we didn't know the ranks then – and told him we were not Hungarians, but Jews. He got two such slaps in the face... Then we learnt how to swear in Russian and told him to go and screw himself. They surrounded us and the Hungarian soldiers and rounded us up. There were almost 10,000 prisoners. It was August 1944, we were out on the field, we were surrounded by Russian guards with dogs. On that night, everyone of us heard some wailing. The Hungarian soldiers killed I don't know how many officers of their own because the way they treated us on the front. In the morning we saw the bodies: the Russians came, or who did this? In deed, who did it? Now, could you find the criminal among 10,000 people? They took us right away to Sztri [Stry]. We spent there some 3 or 4 weeks. The daily meal was 250 grams of biscuits. It was quite enough, because 250 grams of biscuit was equivalent to 1 kg of bread. We dipped it in water or tea, and ate it like this. Then they took us to Stalino [Donetsk, in today's Ukraine]. Thus the 4 years of Russian captivity began.

### **Russian captivity after the War**

We became prisoners in 1944. There were 4 of us from Magyarlapos. The Romanians were the first ones to get home, but they wouldn't let us go because we were Hungarians, and not Romanians. They told us they would let us go home when [Northern] Transylvania will be given back to Romania. Transylvania was then part of Hungary, and we have been taken prisoners together with the Hungarian soldiers. But the soldiers went home in 1946 saying that there would be elections held in Hungary and people were needed to vote for the Communist Party. [Editor's note: The 'blue slip' elections took place on 31st August 1947.] The Jewish boys originally from Hungary have gone home. Well, since we came with the Hungarians, we were expecting to be set free, as well. Transylvania was handed back to Romania [following the peace treaty from Paris in 1947], so we became Romanians. They said to us: 'You are not Hungarians, Transylvania is Romania!' and didn't let us go. The Hungarian prisoners went home, the Russians allowed them to. It's funny that one of us, by God knows what circumstances, ended up with the Hungarians and came home.

They transferred us to transferred to different camps. I found myself in a Romanian camp – I don't remember its name, but it was in the Ukraine, between Kiev and Sztalino, I believe, where pickpockets and murderers were kept, sent sometime by Antonescu [12](#) to the front. As soon as

these people reached the front, the next day they surrendered to the Russians. It was horrible to live among these people. We were afraid to go to the toilet at night, because they waited for us with knives: 'Get us your money, or else...!' I spent there 2 or 3 months.

I ended up in Stalino, on the Don, now called Donetsk. Anyway, it was a big city, and there is the largest coal-mine, the Donbas. [Donbas is its Russian name, in English is the Dnepr-Donetsk depression] Now is part of Ukraine. In Donbas were the largest coal reserves of Russia. The first big surprise was when we arrived there. These were organized camps for the Germans. We had to work in the mine there. when we got there, we were some 170, but only 60 of us came home, due to the awful conditions we had to work in. We were not starving, because we miners had decent meals. Strangely, we were again supervised by Germans. We were in a very, very desperate situation, and what is more, a Russian commander said Hitler left alive too many Jews. And this was a Soviet colonel! We were so desperate we were sure we would perish. Above all, the situation was difficult due to the poor hygiene. The Germans were managing everything, and there was a hospital-like facility, but it was very difficult to get in there. We didn't know how to get out of this situation, how we could escape. Moreover, our guards were Germans, the brigade leader was a German, and beside the Russian guards there were 2 or 3 German POW guards, as well. Can you imagine that we were guarded by Germans even in Russia?

The morning started there with 10,000 prisoners of war, split into brigades, and working in shifts in the mine. We were working in three shifts of eight hours. In addition, there were the internal workers: at the kitchen, the needlework workshop, the shoemaker, at the dryer, the wash-house and the laundry. These positions were all occupied, of course, by the Germans, we had no access there. You can imagine: the mine was wet all over, and we were working in asbestos clothes. Every day we went down into the mine, we got undressed in a changing room and went to work. There we had to bathe, because we were black from the coal. Each of us had a number, the clothes were put in the dryer, and after they dried, we put them on and went for breakfast.

In the mine we worked together with the Russian workers. These were regular pitmen, regular miners. Pitmen are the who cave the coal with hackers. They conducted the work, we only were subworkers. Later we came across with the Saxon girls from Segesvar and Beszterce, and worked together with them in that mine. I was 23-24, and a 20 year old girl was working beside me, who was taken to the Soviet Union after the war. We became friends with the Russians, and we gave them presents, because we managed to save some valuables, rings, but especially watches, and the Russians would do anything for a bottle of spirit. We finally managed to meet some very decent people. I had some history with the movement, so I knew what the Soviet Union and who its leaders are. We knew that many of them were Jewish. We began to write letters in Russian, we got them translated by the Romanians from Bessarabia, who were also there in captivity, and the Russian workers mailed them. We explained our situation: we were supervised by Germans, the camp commander was Anti-Semite and that daily there were a number of Jews dying. It wasn't enough that we lost our families in Germany, now the Jewish youth left alive would not go home from there. We wrote to Kaganovich [Kaganovich, Lasar] [13](#), Ilya Erenburg [14](#), who was a famous Russian writer, he has some serious novels. He flee the country under the Stalin terror, and lived in Paris for I don't know how many years. Stalin insisted to bring him back and gave him the proper appreciation. Quite a long period has passed – I don't know how long, I think several months –, and we thought our letters never reached the addressees.

One day, when I was working in the night shift – I can clearly remember that –, we came out from the mine at approximately 8am. We saw three men standing in the gates. We knew they were from the NKGB [People's Commissariat for State Security], because they were wearing leather clothes. They stopped us saying we have been called in. So we stopped. The German went to them and reported in German that the so-and-so Jewish brigade has arrived. Then one of these Russians asked him: 'Who are you?' 'Me? I'm not Jewish!' So everything went on just like before we got there. I already understood some Russian. So one of the Russians rapped out an oath: 'How on earth could this be, that a German is the ganger of a Jewish group?' Then he asked us: 'Is there anyone among you, who knows Russian?' Those from Sziget, who knew Ukrainian, also spoke good Russian, so two of them came forward. Hew then asked: 'And who knows German?' Well, I spoke German, but I knew Yiddish, and I managed to communicate quite well with the Germans. He wrote down our names and numbers, and after we washed up, they called us to the office. There were only the two of them there, and a commentator. They showed us our letters. 'Do you admit you wrote these letters?' 'Yes, we do.' We thought: 'Oh my God, what will happen next?'

Almost two months have passed and nothing happened. Suddenly a delegation of Russian officers came. They relieved, even arrested the camp commander for his statements and because he allowed the Germans to treat us like they did – at least thirty had died in just a few months. They introduced the new camp commander: a Jewish lieutenant called Levin. He was blind in one eye and had the 'Hero of the Soviet Union' star on his jacket. In the end I found out that he was among those soldiers who put the red flag on the Reichstag, the Parliament of Germany, in Berlin. After a few days he summoned the whole camp and declared: 'YX is the head-cook and YX is the cook', so they put Jews everywhere. 'It will be order in this camp! Order! There will be no exceptions, Jews or Germans, there will be no exceptions! I only ask you one thing: don't come to me with complaints.' He wanted to say 'Whatever you do, do it in such way that the other couldn't complain.' He was young and he had a two and a half years old son. They appointed me to take care of the boy. I had a pass to get out of the camp, I went to his apartment and spent there ten hours. I played with the kid, and I ate, because there were all kinds of delicacies there. They were receiving packages from America, took out the chocolate and canned food and distributed them among the Russians. Some of this food was brought into the camp, but most of it was distributed by the Russians among themselves. I worked there until one day they took us away from there saying we would go home.

They took us to Odessa, there were some six transit camps there, and they told us they would let us go home from there. We had a relatively good time there. I was the head-cook there. Then we worked for the Secutitate [15](#), they made us steal coal and wood. Our duty was to carry coal and wood for the employees and the offices of the Securitate. We lived in the camp, but we went out to work in the morning, and we only returned in the evening. The load was in the harbor of Odessa. Back then each company got a load of wood and half a load of coal. At dawn, we went by car to a heap and loaded the car with coal and wood. One of us knew perfect Russian, he looked for customers. We didn't had to look for them, because we always found someone right away, due to the lack of wood and coal. Every day we sold one or two trucks of coal and wood, it sell like hot cakes, because everyone needed it for the winter. And we sold them relatively at a low price, unlike those on the black market. From the money we raised our commanding Russian officer took his share. There was an under-officer, and a driver, and the money was split between them. The guards, who were there all night long, saw us while we were stealing, so, in order to let us go, they had to receive their part, as well. They supervised us while loading the trucks, it was a well



organized action. Corruption in the Soviet Union was so high it's inconceivable. The sum we were left with we split among us. This still was a very large amount. Sometimes we had so much money in just one day that even an average Russian couldn't raise in a whole month.

By then the inhabitants were getting more bread, people weren't starving like before. One could buy things from the store, for money, of course. But until then this was not possible, because you could find anything there, unless you paid the three or five times its price. The Russians wore simple clothes, that regular quilted coat and that rubashka. This was a jacket with closed collar, or a thick shirt like the Cossacks used to wear, with a row of buttons, bound round with a waist-belt. They usually wore tight pants and boots. This was their regular clothing. Women were dressing somewhat better.

We had a free pass, and went to the opera, theater or restaurant in Odessa. I was for the first time in an opera house. A man from Kolozsvar convinced us to go to the opera. I was a country boy, I didn't even know what an opera was. I have seen operettas, because there were some touring companies, and I used to attend their operetta shows. The opera house was a true copy of the Scala from Milan. Everything was the same, but the characters were stylized Russian characters from the past. As we went up the stairs, in the lobby, or along the stairs, I don't remember anymore, there were some statues. We couldn't believe such things can exist in the Soviet Union. That style and tidiness... We watched the Traviata [Giuseppe Verdi's opera], the Lakme [by Leo Delibes], and also some ballet performances, such as Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker or Swan Lake. I don't want to brag about it, but we had our own box there, we were gentlemen. In order to get in, we didn't pay 10 roubles for the ticket, but 20, so we always had a box or two booked. We were some ten POWs, and we went there not wearing very elegant, but anyway decent clothes. After that we used to go to the restaurant, women etc..., in one word we had a rich life. The guards weren't there, because we had passes. There was no way to escape. One could walk for some 50 kms, but then they were asked for their papers and brought back. And if they heard you saying one or two words, they could realize that you are not Russian. We knew Russian, but we had to look for words. And it wasn't in our interest to flee, though. Moreover, we even had thoughts of settling there. We had such a life..., why should we go to Romania, who knows what awaits us there? Several of us even courted some girls. We spent one year in Odessa. Then, after one year, we had enough of it and started some kind of a strike.

When they set us free, the horrible thing was that they took everything away: photos, postcards, everything we got as forced laborers and kept for ourselves. I had some, too, from my father and my little sister Emma, even since before the Holocaust. I received letters and photos from my other brothers and sisters, as well, which I brought with me. They took them away and threw them into the fire. They burnt up everything. This was the most terrible thing to do. I don't know how, but I left one of the postcards in my pocket, where my little sister's boy, who was born in that period, was one years old. It was stuck on a postcard, which I somehow left in my pocket, so it survived. I received it in early 1948, some 6-7 months before I got home. I don't remember the addressee, but it arrived to the camp in Odessa. How did thy find out I was there, I don't know. There was nothing interesting on the postcard, it was one of those standard postcards and there were only several words written on it: 'This is my son, Joska. We are all well and we hope you are, too.' But it was not allowed to write anything about other family members. I gave it to my sister, because she was collecting the photos of her son. The photo is now in Israel. The boy is now 53.

In the end, none of us remained in Odessa. We came home not by cattle trucks, but by normal passenger carriages, and we had to get off in Focsani. They retained us there in quarantine. This was in June 1948. Each of us got papers and I think 350 lei – quite a sum then. Trains weren't yet circulating normally. In order to get to Des, I had to go to Iasi and get on another train that took me to Des, where my sister was living. I wanted to go to Magyarlapos, but there was no one left there.

### After the War

Matild Weis (née Sauber), was a housewife in Szaszregen, she lived there with her husband. Armin Weis was a tailor and they had a decent situation. They were orthodox, observant Jews. They had no children. My younger brother Dezso Sauber worked in Disznajo in a grocery store. His wife's name was Lotti, and she was Jewish. They also were religious. In 1954 they emigrated to Israel to Kiryat Tivon. He worked as technician in an iron mill, while his wife was a housewife even in Israel. They have two children, a boy called Hillel and a girl, Orli. My younger sister Judit Henzel (nee Sauber) was a sewing-woman. She lived in Magyarlapos and got married in 1945 with Tibor Henzel. They emigrated to Israel in 1946, to Kiryat Tivon. Both of them went there because they wanted to be together. Judit was a housewife in Israel, while her husband a construction sub-engineer. They have a daughter, Gilla, who is single. Emma Farkas (nee Sauber) was too a sewing-woman in Magyarlapos. In 1945 she got married with Dezso Farkas, a trader. They have a son, Jozsef, who is a sapper. My other younger sister Zelma Sauber was deported from Magyarlapos. She perished in Auschwitz. All my other sisters have been deported, but they came home. I don't know where they were, in which camp. Even though we talked about where we were taken, and related how they helped each other out in the camp, and probably that's why they got away [lived], but I don't remember the details. My younger brother was taken to forced labor to Ukraine. By the time I arrived home, two of them were already in Israel, one of them was living in Disznajo, here, near Szaszregen. I didn't know anything about any of them, I only knew my little sister was living in Des. We knew our parents and the rest were deported, but we had no idea what happened to them.

So I came home and started off my life. I finished seven grades of elementary school, but I had to graduate. I finished two other grades in private, because high-school had nine years then. I graduated within one year in Des and received my graduate certificate. After that I was elected lay judge. I worked for some three months, but then a decree came that stated that the lay judges who are only high-school graduates, but show great promise, should attend a one and a half year college to study law. The former judges and prosecuting attorneys had to be replaced, but not due to ethnic reasons, it didn't matter whether you were Romanian or Hungarian, the decree only enforced the replacement. Many lawyers had been replaced then.

I was sent to Kolozsvar, and we had this cram-course for one and a half year. We mainly studied the disciplines related to the practical applications of law: code of penal procedure, code of civil procedure, civil code. We didn't study any theoretical disciplines, such as legal history. Then, after we had been examined by a commission, they appointed us temporarily, under the condition that we would enter the law school or we would finish three years of law school in private, otherwise we had to step down. In 1950 I was transferred here, to Marosvasarhely. I wanted to go to Des, but they didn't let me considering that I was originally from the area, and they told me they couldn't allow it. I entered right away the Law school in Kolozsvar, and graduated it after four and a half years in the distance learning classes. I had to go there every three months to take the regular examinations. There we studied theory, as well. I had no physical time, because I had to work in

the meantime. That much is true, they granted us leave before each terminal examination and exam. I don't want to brag about it, but only two of us from the distance learning class managed to graduate from the faculty, the others couldn't manage to do that. The other one was Rozsa Kelemen, who also lives here in Vasarhely, and she is a 78 years old arbitress.

Until 1952 I worked in Vasarhely at the county public prosecutor's office. But then the county ceased to exist, and 8 regions were formed [after the territorial reorganization in 1952] [16](#). I found myself at the regional prosecutor's office here in Vasarhely. After six months I have been appointed assistant of the public prosecutor. 75% of the prosecutors were Hungarians, and, unfortunately, several of my colleagues could hardly speak Romanian. They studied in Hungarian at the Bolyai University in Kolozsvár, and when they began their activity, they didn't know Romanian – this was a fact. All of my colleagues graduated from the Bolyai University, the Hungarian university, while I finished the Babes university, therefore I was speaking very good Romanian. [Editor's note: In 1959 the Hungarian Bolyai University was amalgamated with the Romanian Babes University, and today's Babes-Bolyai University came into being.]

In spite that I had some history within the movement, and worked for the Red Aid since I was a child, they didn't accepted me in the Party. In 1952 I still wasn't a party member. They appointed me assistant of the regional public prosecutor, but shortly after that I became the public prosecutor. Then I plainly told the regional judge that I was not a member of the party. He said: 'Comrade Sauber, don't give us hints, we know who we should put there!' I joined the party only in 1963.

One of my sisters, Matild Weis, came to me saying: 'Leave everything behind and come with us to Israel.' They emigrated. They made aliyah in 1965 to Kiryat Tivon. She and her husband were both retired in Israel. Matild still lives there. My other sister, Emma, had asthma and was afraid to go to Israel. She asked me to stay with her if I can, because she wanted someone to stay with her. So I remained here. In the end she emigrated with her family, but I remained here. She decided it would be better for her son, because she saw no future for him here. They emigrated to Israel in 1974, to Nazareth. The poor thing still lives there at 79, and so is her son and husband. Her husband is 92, and he is blind and deaf, seriously ill.

I could see life pulsating from all directions. The economy, agriculture, culture and politics were all of our competence. The initial period was very sad and awful. In 1949-1950 collectivization [nationalization] [17](#) began, and went on until 1952. It's not a period to remember. I had all kinds of difficulties all along, because I was originally from a middle-class, bourgeois family, since my father owned a store. Why didn't they throw me out from the prosecutor's office on grounds of kulak descendance, I don't know. The kulak [18](#) problem and the collectivization were very sore points. For example, what did it mean to be a kulak with five hectares of land? If one didn't carry out the manure from the stable within 48 hours to the land, it was considered a sabotage and he was convicted for five years in prison. If following the harvest they didn't plough up the land, and didn't do stubble ploughing, it was again sabotage. If they didn't hand in their quota, it was sabotage. Some of the punishments often meant confiscating their fortune. Collective farms had to be established, so they took a kulak with a beautiful house and beautiful stable, confiscated them and threw him in the prison. I had many inconveniences arising from these situations. I will never forget that one of these kulaks managed to flee, after he was sentenced for seven years in prison. He hid for seven years and I knew that. I didn't know where he was hiding, just that he was. Only I knew,

because his younger sister came weekly with complaints to the public prosecutor's office, asking why their house was taken away. Sometimes she got some answers, but other times she didn't. It was an awful situation. For example, if they went to someone's house and found 20 kgs of sugar, they considered it a sabotage. Because the Romanian laws said 'Aprovizionarea peste masura constituie infractiune.' [Over-stockpiling is considered an infringement.] Even boot-sole was portioned, and if they found five pairs of them, it was an infringement. Then the gold-related problems began to appear. They went for gold like crazy. They used to beat up people. Even we, prosecutors, were helpless. They detained people without waiting for us to make a proper decision.

We were 11 prosecutors in Vasarhely, and, for a period, I was the public prosecutor. There was one Romanian prosecutor and nine Hungarian ones. And I was the public prosecutor, a Jew. We used to speak Hungarian at the trials. The Penal Code and the Code of Penal Procedure, the Civil Code and the Code of Civil Procedure have all been translated into Hungarian – it was a certified translation from Bucharest. This existed in the 1950s, until the early 1960s, under the Gheorghiu Dej [19](#) regime. We, the prosecutors, were compelled to speak in Hungarian with the parties who didn't know Romanian. But now they are keeping the silence about it. Why don't they tell people that under the Ceausescu [20](#) regime, trials could be held in Hungarian in Vasarhely? A year or so ago, when at a trial an old woman couldn't answer the judge, he asked: 'Is there anybody who knows Hungarian?' I said: 'If I may, I will translate.' What a 'great' achievement this is, that you are allowed to speak in Hungarian using an commentator. But there was no such thing before 1989 [the Romanian revolution] [21](#). There were two lay judges, and if one of them was Romanian, the other one had to know Hungarian. Moreover, they even wanted to draw up the documents and the sentence in Hungarian, as well, but the central leadership rejected this proposal.

I don't want to praise that period, but I can tell you that in those 38 years I worked there, the prime secretary never called me on the phone to close any case if someone committed a fraud. (Back then the prime secretary was Lajos Csupor. He was a tailor, but he wasn't a dull man at all.) There were situations when we reduced the sentence, that is, we didn't convict the man to five years, but for three, and if it was possible we suspended the sentence, but everything within legal limits. There were instructions to convict people they caught within 24 hours. In 1957-1958-1959, there were cases when they caught peasants coming from the land with a sack of corn, some 20 corn-cobs. They apprehended him, took him in and within 24 hours he was sentenced to two years. I don't say there weren't crimes for which no documents have been drawn up, have not been submitted to the police and the prosecutor's office. Most probably there were such situations. But if a document has been handed to us, we solved them responsibly.

From time to time we had to report to the People's Council, which analyzed our activities. They said stealing is that frequent because the punishment is not severe enough, or they reprehended us because we ruled too hard sentences for small offences. They summoned us to Bucharest, because assistant of the state prosecutor, as well as all the regional prosecutors were there. Then I said: 'Please understand, this is a peasant, a worker who steals a pound of salami or five cans from the factory, and we sentence him for three years, leaving his family without any income.' They replied: 'The comrade has no courage and is too good-hearted, and, if so, you don't belong here. You better tell us now and we will replace you.' At the end of the meeting, the state prosecutor drew the conclusions: he mentioned me by name or the public prosecutor's office in Marosvasarhely in every fifth phrase, with the number of people we sent to prison. This was Law 324, the summary

procedure regarding people caught in the act. This went on for a year, and it was horrible. The prisons got filled with poor peasants or workers who stole that pound of salami. The managers didn't steal a pound, because they got ten pounds of it, carried out from the factory by car, because cars weren't checked, not even by the police, because they knew anyway what was going on. There were the low registration numbers, between 100 and 1000, given only to certain people or institutions, very well known by the police. No policeman would stop and check a car with the license plate no. 105! Within 24 hours he would have been fired. And in spite all this, they still criticized us for not applying the law correctly.

One year, one and a half year later, this law was abolished, but by then some ten thousand people ended up in prison. The policeman or the commercial inspector went by a pub, and if they went in, they always carried a 50 ml measure, produced it and measured the drink he got. If two units were missing, he drew up a proces-verbal and the bar tender got 6 months in prison. So you had to lock him up because he gave less to that stenchy drunkard. It's true he was stealing from his boss' money, but his situation forced him to do that. I asked for a suspension in many of these cases. If the convict didn't do anything wrong in the next two years, his sentence was repealed. But if he committed some crime within these 2 years, he had to do in addition the remaining time. So they were very careful not to do anything. We could also rule fines, 2-3000 lei worth, the average salary for two-three months. I held my ground, and I had no fear. I knew if they would fire me I would get my hat and would walk off.

We didn't want to emigrate to Israel, but for a while I was thinking about it, because in 1968 [the territorial reorganization in 1968] [22](#), when the regions have been replaced by counties, that is, an administrative reorganization took place, considering that I was speaking Hungarian and they didn't have a right man for it there, they wanted to transfer me to Csikszereda. I wouldn't want to go there, though, so I resigned and told them I would go away. We even decided to pack up everything, to hand in our papers and to emigrate. Two week later they called me back and thus I remained here in Marosvasarhely.

I'm not saying communism was heaven on earth. People were generally not doing well, but they got by. Today the majority don't have a life. There was nobody over 18 doing nothing: they either studied or worked. There was a law regarding this, stating that not working is a crime and was treated accordingly. This was called absenteeism. One was not released from prison until they didn't have work. It didn't matter if there was no vacancy. They used to say: 'No matter! You will pay the others less with 100 lei , but you'll give work to these ten people.' This was my job for a period, to get jobs for people, because I was responsible for the prison, as well. I notified in advance the companies on the people who were about to get out of prison, with their professions, and instructed them to give these people work. And they hired them. Or there was no such thing that if you are 30 or 50, no one hires you. Try to obtain a job now if you are 40, it's out of the question! There were canteens, and that was good, because it was cheap. I remember that we ate in a canteen, as well. I had a salary of 19,000 lei, while the average was 6-7000.

Socialism had beautiful ideals, only not the ones they applied. There were positive things, but also lots of bad things. We weren't allowed to comment any of the government's or the party's measures. We had to accept everything, there was no, alternative. There was pretty bad that I couldn't express my opinion. There was another awful thing, that everyone has to go weekly to Marxism class. They did it separately for each profession, separately for the prosecutors office and



for the court, separately for the medics, and so on. They held it in our school, the Bolyai Farkas high school, or in the Papiu high school, or at the party headquarters. Weekly, on Monday afternoon, there were Marxism-Leninism classes. We had to recite, and at the end we had an exam. There wasn't anything more terrible than to study all that nonsense, who said what at each congress, especially what Ceausescu said. If the Party edited a congress material, we had to process it for several months. There were small booklets which described how many pigs we would produce in 1968, how many chickens or how many eggs, or how many oxes we should export - that was all included in the Party's material and we had to learn it. Usually everyone took the prescribed material and read out what was required. But every employee had to be there, from the simple workers to clerks. There was a time when every morning before starting to work we had to read out the editorial of the Scanteia [Spark in English, the Communist Party's journal] at the workplace. I was forced to buy the Scanteia and I had to read it to know what was written in it. There wasn't any other source of information. It was prohibited to listen to foreign radio stations. We had to watch them in the television two hours per day. We were totally in the dark.

At that time you had to learn to read between the lines in literature, and in newspapers, too, in order to understand what the writer wanted to say. If you just read it superficially, everything was so nice, and praised the Party, but inside he was screaming. Here in Vasarhely there were 3-4 defiers who weren't afraid to speak out, like Mera, a lawyer, and Tarnaveanu - I think he was a department manager at some company, and he dared to say at a meeting that Ceausescu shouldn't be reelected - I remember them. (There were some elections every four years, but it was more like voting, than elections. The difference is that at elections you can choose from several candidates, but when voting you only had one. Presence at the elections was mandatory.) They didn't hurt, but recorded these people. For instance when Ceausescu came visiting, the police took Mera in and retained him for two days to prevent him from doing anything, but then they released him. There were other such groups, as well, like groups of Hungarians who used to gather and sang the Hungarian anthem. One of them had to be an informer. They didn't just say: 'So, come to the police station! What happened yesterday evening at Sauber's?' Several months passed, maybe half a year, and then they began citing people. People didn't know what to say, they told all contradicting stories. The sentence was for criticizing the state and the system. Some people have been convicted. There were students who got expelled from the university. The activity of the court-martial was terrible until 1963.

Practically we didn't have any cultural life at all. All we had was the theatre, and there were some pretty good performances at the theatre, which suggested things... I will never forget Paul Everac's lov, Romanian for prophet Job. I think that was the last performance what I saw at that time. It was a performance which could easily send the writer, the actors and the public to prison: the ironic praising that everything get so well, and what is the reality - all these moved in prophet Job's time. The public laughed. Everybody knew there was water in the cup and not coffee, but on the stage they praised up the coffee, saying how delicious the coffee was. And they praised up the salami too, but we knew, that was made by Soya, not meat. They praised up how nice and cheep was everything, but certainly we knew that you had to wait in line 4 hours to get 200gs of salami. In the play they said exactly the opposite to what it was happening. Curiously, they tolerated this kind of performances. These performances were written for the middle-class, the workers didn't use to go to watch them. They went to worker clubs, every big enterprise has a worker club. There they arranged performances and stage-plays with Janos and Mariska, who were quarreling about 'How

many piece-rates did you make? You are behind, you are not a success worker!'

In 1975 I would go to America to visit my friend but they wouldn't let me out. In that situation I said 'If you don't let me go, if you don't trust me enough after more than twenty years of work to let me go, I will quit.' So they allowed me to go there with my wife. My daughter, my mother-in-law and my house remained here as gage. I managed to bring a VCR and tapes from America. Every evening my house was full, we couldn't sleep, because 10-15 people were watching movies on my VCR.

During the communist era people used to buy 2 Christmas trees. Not everybody, mostly the civil servants. The simple workers weren't afraid, because in the worst case they were thrown out of the party, and didn't have to pay the membership fee. But usually this didn't happen. Those who bought two decorated one in the house, and left the other one outside on the balcony until the New Year, because the winter tree had to be decorated on New Years Day. [Editor's note: In the communist era was prohibited to decorate Christmas tree, just winter tree was allowed. So the people left one tree on the balcony to delude the authorities, and decorate the other one inside.] This wasn't a singular case. It was interesting, that they didn't sell the most beautiful trees for Christmas, they put them aside. Who want a nice tree, he can obtained after Christmas. So I bought a little tree, and expose it on the balcony. 'Of course this man is a communist, he didn't celebrate Christmas' To be honest we didn't decorated Christmas tree for Jesus' birthday, since he wasn't born at that day, we only did it for our children.

Now I don't observe Seder eve at home. Interestingly, during the communist era I did it. I have a friend, Feri Marosan, and we spent together every Pesach evening. I lead the Seder because he was an oshgelait – this is a Yiddish expression for those who don't know, or don't observe the religion. He had a son, and we all follow the prescriptions. We were on visiting terms with each other for 8-10 years. In the early 1970s they emigrated to Israel. I had one other friend, called Jeno Israel, and we lead Seder alternately. At Rosh Hashanah I use visit them, they always cook festive dinner and my whole family was invited. The communists had nothing against that I go to somebody to have dinner. But if they saw me, Bernat Sauber the public prosecutor of Marosvasarhely, the communist, in front of the temple, chatting, they suspected me that I use to go to the synagogue.

I met my wife, Maria Zikh here in Vasarhely. She was originally from Nagykaroly, and she worked as greffier at the court. She wasn't Jewish, just my father-in-law was originally Jewish, but his parents (my wife's grandparents) convert to Roman Catholicism – I didn't try to find out when and why they convert. My father-in-law was a trader, originally from Csernovic [Chernowitz, in today's Ukraine], he bought eggs and fowls, he transported and sold them. I didn't know him, because he was already dead. Her mother worked at home, then she came to Vasarhely, she stayed with us for a while, then she moved to one of her little sisters and later she died. My wife has four brothers and sisters, she has three brothers – Jozsef, Sandor, Antal, and a sister, Magda. My brothers and sisters weren't excited for a while that I married a Christian woman, but eventually they got along very well. We kept in touch with all my brothers and sisters in Israel. We have been three times to Israel, first time in 1978, last time in 1986. We stayed 1-2 months there.

We observed the Jewish holidays. My wife doesn't light a candle on Saturday, in stead she uses to cook a festive dinner. We use to celebrate their holidays, as well. She used to come to the

synagogue: when other people come along, she used to come, too. She doesn't come anymore, since two years ago, because she is ill. In the communist era we didn't use to celebrate Chanukkah at home, only after 1990. Now I'm celebrating it regularly. It is a simple ceremony: I read the prayer, light the candles, and that's just about it.

We have an adopted daughter. Zsuzsa is the daughter of my wife's cousin. She was four when we adopted her and brought her with us, and she is with us since. Her mother lives in Nagykaroly. Zsuzsa was born there. Her father died, and she has an older brother. He graduated the arts school. It is my fault, I insisted on her choosing the lawyer career, although she would have liked to enter the arts school, but we knew then what meant to graduate the arts school: if one wasn't a sheer talent, they would end up as drawing-teacher in some village. When my wife retired, she was exactly 20, and replaced her mother as court greffier. Currently she is working at the court of appeal. She is in charge with the statistics and she also works as greffier. She is working since 1981. Unfortunately she didn't want to get married. She may have been influenced by the situations she saw at the court, how easily marriages are broken, and probably this discouraged her, although she is a very warm-hearted and friendly character. She stays in her own apartment and has her own life, but she comes over for dinner or supper, of course. We even made her snacks, so she doesn't have to spend money on food. To tell the truth, we raised her as atheist, but still she attends Ivrit classes. On every holiday when young people come to the synagogue, she comes, as well, she is rather attracted to my side.

The Ivrit classes are held by a Romanian man called Darabant. He was a post clerk, and his daughter married a Jew from Tulcea, an engineer. They emigrated to Israel and have good jobs, they are quite well situated. Darabant is a stubborn Romanian gentleman. He said: 'How can it be that I cannot talk to my grandchildren?', so he started to study Ivrit by himself. He learned Ivrit so good, his relatives from Israel are really amazed – he visits them almost every year. He is now the Hebrew teacher here at the community. Unfortunately there are very few Jews among those who are attending the Ivrit classes, 12 in all, once a week.

In 1982, after I retired, I became the president of the Jewish community from Marosvasarhely. There was an older gentleman he was the president of the community before me, called Aladar Scheiner, his wife, Juci Scheiner is still alive. He once told me: 'Listen, I want to step down, but I can't find a retired who could be appropriate for the job.' He knew I'm familiar with the Jewish laws and prayers. Little did he know that I did not pray and haven't been in a synagogue for more than 30 years. When I got in this position I started over and I everything came back to me. I can't even imagine how I haven't forgotten everything, because when I learned all these things I was 14-15, and I still remembered them at the age of 60. All this time I never said a prayer. Let's say I was an atheist. How did all these things come back to my memory, I don't know. This is a miracle. Everything I knew before, the customs, prayers, what should be said from memory or read on the holidays, the melodies, everything came back to me as if it was pored back in my mind. There were some good chazzanim, but unfortunately they died out. 3 years ago, when Grunstein was still alive, I sat in the synagogue just like any other simple prayer, only later I got involved in the preface. Now mainly me and dr. Marmor are leading it, and another 87-88 years old man, Lederer, who helps us out now and then. Dr. Marmor, who is two years older than me, and myself lead the prayer, he did it very nicely.

Now I'm conducting the prayer, each Saturday and on the other holidays, as well, for two hours. I know from memory almost three quarters of the ceremony. One time a community members told to another one: 'How can Sauber do this for two hours, him, who was an illegal communist and worked at the public prosecutor's office?' The other ones in the community who know something are Sandor Ausch and Laszlo Grun. (Sandor Ausch and myself were together in captivity. I kept in touch with him when I was still working, and we came together again here at the community.) The service starts each Saturday at 11am and ends at a quarter past 11am. I'm reading every week the Torah, because only dr. Marmor and me can read from it. There is a portion equivalent to some 30 pages to read for each week. The prayer took place before and after the reading, which I lead, as well. 15 years ago there were people praying here each morning with tzitzit and tallit. Now everyone uses tallit, but tzitzit only when a rabbi comes here.

Currently, on Sukkot, after we finish the prayer in the synagogue, it's mandatory to eat honey in the tent put up in the yard of the community. In that week it is obligatory to eat honey at each meal. The tent was made sometime after the World War II. It is a symbolic tent. The truth is that the tent is decorated by the children and the women, especially by Zsuzsa Kuszto [the senior clerk of the community] and Gyula Kuszto, a man [who is also employed by the community to carry out different tasks]. On Sukkot everybody gets a roll, and on the table there are several small plates with honey. People use to tear a bit of bread and dip it in the honey, and not using a teaspoon. And everyone must drink a glass of wine. They bless the holiday on which we entered by God's command the sukkot that God prescribed. Then everybody eats, and, at the end, we say a little prayer, thanking God for the food, honey and wine he provided us on the holiday. And thus ends the ritual. Nowadays that's how we celebrate the holiday of Sukkot.

On Yom Kippur I spoke with one of my friends from Des. In Des there were some 3500 Jews, and there was a large community with wealthy people. The president is my friend, he is some 10 years younger than me, and his name is Joska Farkas. As we talked on the phone, he told me: 'Imagine this, on Yom kippur I went to the synagogue and we were only two people. Symbolically we sat there for 2 hours.' He doesn't know how to read in Hebrew, during the communist era he was in quite good positions, he was a manager. I said to him: 'Well, look, sooner or later this will be the situation here in Vasarhely, as well.' The days of the Jewry are numbered.

Unfortunately I am in the position – which I never imagined it can happen – to bury people. The Jews have a ritual when dressing up the deceased. They must be washed, their finger-nails have to be cut off, if they grew long, but it is forbidden to shave them. The clothes they have to be dressed with consisted of several parts. No one has kvitli here, and, amongst others, we make kvitlis, as well. The pieces of clothes: 2 stockings, 2 pants, one lounge-jacket and a larger jacket made of linen, over them the kvitli and the tallit. On their hands we put some kind of gloves, and some other things used to tie together the clothes, because there are no buttons on them. Two pieces of shard must be put on the eyelids, and on the mouth a form of a lock must be made out of wicker, in order to prevent them to talk before the judgment. Of course, it's not me who dresses them, because there are people assign to do it, I only have to be there and say the prayers. Then some soil must be put in a bag and placed under the head of the deceased, in place of a pillow. I have to put the tallit on their head. At the end I tell him not to forget their Jewish name, and I tell them their name. Then I conduct the ceremony: I read a prayer and I sing. I told them I will do it as long as I'm able to, but then they will close down the community.

We made a club for the youth, which is working now for several months. There will be some computers, Internet, books, a TV set and a VCR, and movies with Jewish theme. But who will come here to watch movies? This is how we want to attract the youth. We have several buildings, rented, and the rent amounts are accounted for in Bucharest, because the Federation in Bucharest, the central management handles these sums, which are then split between the communities, because some of them have no income at all. The members pay the membership fee. The community has 50 cemeteries in the county and once a year, before the holidays of fall, someone inspects each of them in order to establish what repairs are required and whether all the gravestones are in place and haven't been stolen, whether the fences are intact – because our fences are stolen all the time, and these make up the life of the community. Moreover, some of the communities have Christian secretaries and these people are managing the community because there were no Jews around. There are several communities in this situation, especially in Moldova. And this will happen here, as well, because the parents of the current generation were all atheists, and they don't know any of the prayers. The Christians, regardless of how communists they have been, they all know the Lord's prayer. But these people don't know anything. They don't even come to the synagogue, and is very difficult to convince them to come to the synagogue from time to time. Their children were usually brought up as Christians, so they don't even come this way. This is the situation.

## Glossary:

### **1 Italian front, 1915-1918**

Also known as Isonzo front. Isonzo (Soca) is an alpine river today in Slovenia, which ran parallel with the pre-World War I Austro-Hungarian and Italian border. During World War I Italy was primarily interested in capturing the ethnic Italian parts of Austria-Hungary (Triest, Fiume, Istria and some of the islands) as well as the Adriatic litoral. The Italian army tried to enter Austria-Hungary via the Isonzo river, but the Austro-Hungarian army was dug in alongside the river. After 18 months of continuous fighting without any territorial gain, the Austro-Hungarian army finally succeeded to enter Italian territory in October 1917.

### **2 Hungarian era (1940-1944)**

The expression Hungarian era refers to the period between 30 August 1940 - 15 October 1944 in Transylvania. As a result of the Trianon peace treaties in 1920 the eastern part of Hungary (Maramures, Partium, Banat, Transylvania) was annexed to Romania. Two million inhabitants of Hungarian nationality came under Romanian rule. In the summer of 1940, under pressure from Berlin and Rome, the Romanian government agreed to return Northern Transylvania, where the majority of the Hungarians lived, to Hungary. The anti-Jewish laws introduced in 1938 and 1939 in Hungary were also applied in Northern Transylvania. Following the German occupation of Hungary on 19th March 1944, Jews from Northern Transylvania were deported to and killed in concentration camps along with Jews from all over Hungary except for Budapest. Northern Transylvania belonged to Hungary until the fall of 1944, when the Soviet troops entered and introduced a regime of military administration that sustained local autonomy. The military administration ended on 9th March 1945 when the Romanian administration was reintroduced in all the Western territories lost in 1940 - as a reward for the fact that Romania formed the first communist-led government in the region.



### **3 Anti-Jewish laws in Hungary**

Following similar legislation in Nazi Germany, Hungary enacted three Jewish laws in 1938, 1939 and 1941. The first law restricted the number of Jews in industrial and commercial enterprises, banks and in certain occupations, such as legal, medical and engineering professions, and journalism to 20% of the total number. This law defined Jews on the basis of their religion, so those who converted before the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, as well as those who fought in World War I, and their widows and orphans were exempted from the law. The second Jewish law introduced further restrictions, limiting the number of Jews in the above fields to 6%, prohibiting the employment of Jews completely in certain professions such as high school and university teaching, civil and municipal services, etc. It also forbade Jews to buy or sell land and so forth. This law already defined Jews on more racial grounds in that it regarded baptized children that had at least one non-converted Jewish parent as Jewish. The third Jewish law prohibited intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, and defined anyone who had at least one Jewish grandparent as Jewish.

### **4 World economic crisis between 1929-1933**

also known as the Great Depression, was a severe worldwide economic crisis in the decade before World War II. It was the longest, most widespread and deepest depression of the 20th century and started with the stock market crash of October 29th, 1929 in the US.

### **5 Teitelbaum dynasty**

dynasty of religious leader of the Satmar Hasidim, originally from Hungary and Romania who are spread out all over the world. It is believed that the Satmar Hasidim is the biggest community of Hasidim worldwide.

### **6 Rashi**

Shlomo Yitzhaki, (1040-1105) was a medieval French rabbi and is considered as the father of all commentaries on the Talmud and Tanach, through his comprehensive commentaries on both of these holy books.

### **7 Trianon Peace Treaty**

Trianon is a palace in Versailles where, as part of the Paris Peace Conference, the peace treaty was signed with Hungary on 4th June 1920. It was the official end of World War I for the countries concerned. The Trianon Peace Treaty validated the annexation of huge parts of pre-war Hungary by the states of Austria (the province of Burgenland) and Romania (Transylvania, and parts of Eastern Hungary). The northern part of pre-war Hungary was attached to the newly created Czechoslovak state (Slovakia and Subcarpathia) while Croatia-Slavonia as well as parts of Southern Hungary (Voivodina, Baranja, Medjumurje and Prekmurje) were to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (later Yugoslavia). Hungary lost 67.3% of its pre-war territory, including huge areas populated mostly or mainly by Hungarians, and 58.4% of its population. As a result approximately one third of the Hungarians became an - often oppressed - ethnic minority in some of the

predominantly hostile neighboring countries. Trianon became the major point of reference of interwar nationalistic and anti-Semitic Hungarian regimes.

## **8 Numerus clausus in Hungary**

The general meaning of the term is restriction of admission to secondary school or university for economic and/or political reasons. The Numerus Clausus Act passed in Hungary in 1920 was the first anti-Jewish law in Europe. It regulated the admission of students to higher educational institutions by stating that aside from the applicants' national loyalty and moral reliability, their origin had to be taken into account as well. The number of students of the various ethnic and national minorities had to correspond to their proportion in the population of Hungary. After the introduction of this act the number of students of Jewish origin at Hungarian universities declined dramatically.

## **9 Numerus nullus in Hungary**

With the series of 'numerus nullus' regulations Jews were excluded from practically all trade, economic and intellectual professions during World War II.

## **10 Horthy, Miklos (1868-1957)**

Regent of Hungary from 1920 to 1944. Relying on the conservative plutocrats and the great landowners and Christian middle classes, he maintained a right-wing regime in interwar Hungary. In foreign policy he tried to attain the revision of the Trianon peace treaty - on the basis of which two thirds of Hungary's territory were seceded after WWI - which led to Hungary entering WWII as an ally of Germany and Italy. When the Germans occupied Hungary in March 1944, Horthy was forced to appoint as Prime Minister the former ambassador of Hungary in Berlin, who organized the deportations of Hungarian Jews. On 15th October 1944 Horthy announced on the radio that he would ask the Allied Powers for truce. The leader of the extreme right-wing fascist Arrow Cross Party, Ferenc Szalasi, supported by the German army, took over power. Horthy was detained in Germany and was later liberated by American troops. He moved to Portugal in 1949 and died there in 1957.

## **11 Kolkhoz**

In the Soviet Union the policy of gradual and voluntary collectivization of agriculture was adopted in 1927 to encourage food production while freeing labor and capital for industrial development. In 1929, with only 4% of farms in kolkhozes, Stalin ordered the confiscation of peasants' land, tools, and animals; the kolkhoz replaced the family farm.

## **12 Antonescu, Ion (1882-1946)**

Political and military leader of the Romanian state, president of the Ministers' Council from 1940 to 1944. In 1940 he formed a coalition with the Legionary leaders. From 1941 he introduced a dictatorial regime that continued to pursue the depreciation of the Romanian political system started by King Carol II. His strong anti-Semitic beliefs led to the persecution, deportation and killing of many Jews in Romania. He was arrested on 23rd August 1944 and sent into prison in the

USSR until he was put on trial in the election year of 1946. He was sentenced to death for his crimes as a war criminal and shot in the same year.

### **13 Kaganovich, Lazar (1893-1991)**

Soviet Communist leader. A Jewish shoemaker and labor organizer, he joined the Communist Party in 1911. He rose quickly through the party ranks and by 1930 he had become Moscow party secretary-general and a member of the Politburo. He was an influential proponent of forced collectivization and played a role in the purges of 1936-38. He was known for his ruthless and merciless personality. He became commissar for transportation (1935) and after the purges was responsible for heavy industrial policy in the Soviet Union. In 1957, he joined in an unsuccessful attempt to oust Khrushchev and was stripped of all his posts.

### **14 Erenburg, Ilya Grigorievich (1891-1967)**

Famous Russian Jewish novelist, poet and journalist who spent his early years in France. His first important novel, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurento* (1922) is a satire on modern European civilization. His other novels include *The Thaw* (1955), a forthright piece about Stalin's régime which gave its name to the period of relaxation of censorship after Stalin's death.

### **15 Securitate (in Romanian**

DGSP - Directia generala a Securitatii Poporului): General Board of the People's Security. Its structure was established in 1948 with direct participation of Soviet advisors named by the NKVD. The primary purpose was to 'defend all democratic accomplishments and to ensure the security of the Romanian Popular Republic against plots of both domestic and foreign enemies'. Its leader was Pantelimon Bondarenko, later known as Gheorghe Pintilie, a former NKVD agent. It carried out the arrests, physical torture and brutal imprisonment of people who became undesirable for the leaders of the Romanian Communist Party, and also kept the life of ordinary civilians under strict observation.

### **16 Territorial reorganization in 1952**

The new constitution adopted in 1952 declared Romania a country, which started to build up communism. The old administrative system was abolished, and the new one followed the Soviet pattern: the administrative partition of the country consisted of 18 regions ('regiune'), each of them subdivided into so called 'raions'. In the same year the so-called Hungarian Autonomous Region was founded, a third of which was made up by the Hungarian inhabitants living in Romania. The administrative center of this region was Targu Mures/Marosvasarhely, and it was subdivided into ten 'raions': Csik, Erdoszentgyorgy, Gyergyoszentmiklos, Kezdivasarhely, Marosheviz, Marosvasarhely, Regen, Sepsiszentgyörgy, Szekelyudvarhely.

### **17 Nationalization in Romania**

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

## **18 Kulak**

Between 1949-1959 peasants in Romania, who had 10-50 hectares of land were called kulaks, those who owned more than 50 exploiters. Their land was confiscated. They were either expelled from their houses and deported to the Baragan Steppes and the Danube Delta, where they had to work under inhuman conditions, or they were discriminated in every possible way (by forcing them to pay impossibly high taxes, preventing their children from entering higher education, etc.).

## **19 Gheorghiu-Dej, Gheorghe (1901-1965)**

Leader of the Romanian Communist Party between 1952 and 1965. Originally an electrician and railway worker, he was imprisoned in 1933 and became the underground leader of all imprisoned communists. He was prime minister between 1952-55 and first secretary of the Communist Party between 1945-1953 and from 1955 until his death. In his later years, he led a policy that drifted away from the directive in Moscow, keeping the Stalinist system untouched by the Krushchevian reforms.

## **20 Ceausescu, Nicolae (1918-1989)**

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

## **21 Romanian Revolution of 1989**

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

## **22 Territorial reorganization in 1968**

: By the law adopted by *Marea Adunare Națională* (the Great National Assembly) the old county administrative and territorial division came into act. On January 14, 1968 a project-map was published and was discussed within the organisations of the Communist Party, subsequently undergoing some changes. The final result, substantially different from the original territorial organisation prior to 1950, comprised 39 counties, the Bucharest municipality, 236 cities and towns, of which 47 municipalities and 2,706 communes having 13,149 villages.