

# Bella Steinmetz

Bella Steinmetz (nee Bacher)

Marosvasarhely

Romania

Interviewer: Ildiko Molnar

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*Bella Steinmetz is a 94 years old tiny, lean lady. She lives in a spacious apartment in the city center. On the basis of an agreement a married couple looks after her by turns, she always has company. Aunt Bella reads regularly, and she always watches the tennis games shown on television. In the mornings, if the weather is fine, she takes a walk in the vicinity with the person looking after her. She receives many letters, photos and gifts from the descendants of the distant relatives emigrated abroad and from the members of the Tirgu Mures Trust, a Jewish organization in Scotland, which meets the needs (for medicine among others) of the elder Jewish persons in Marosvasarhely. The 'Scots', as the locals refer to them, visit regularly the persons listed in their registry, aunt Bella is one of the favorites. Her kindness charms everybody off his feet.*



## [My family background](#)

### [Growing up](#)

### [During the war](#)

### [After the war](#)

## [Glossary](#)

### **My family background**

My paternal grandparents lived in Maramarossziget [today Sighetu Marmatiei], we lived in Gyergyoszentmiklos [today Gheorgheni]. My paternal grandfather came to Maramarossziget with his family, the **Bachers**, with his parents from Poland. Nadvirna [from where they came; today in Ukraine] was a large settlement. That is why my grandfather spoke so many languages. People fled before World War I, from Russia downwards, but in Poland too the persecution of Jews had already begun. I don't know in which year my grandfather arrived, but he must have come at the end of the 1800s. I have no idea whether he got married here or back in Poland. Grandma, **Beile** died very early, I didn't even know her. I knew my grandfather, **Pinkasz Bacher**, because he died in 1939, he lived until the age of 93 years. I remember him very well. I got married in 1931, and I

visited him. Me and my mother, we went together to visit grandpa. He called me 'mama'. He was in bed for about two months, with a big pipe in his mouth. He was very glad that we came, that I visited him, since it was a great distance back then. [Editor's note: Maramarossziget is 267 km far from Gyergyoszentmiklos.] The trains didn't run [like now], but one had to change three times.

**Maramarossziget** was a great Jewish center. There were several communities, my grandfather was the clerk of a small Jewish community, he did office work for the Orthodox community. They also had accounts, a budget on what they were spending money: funerals, expenditures, incomes. So my grandfather was a literate. He was a simple poor man, but a self-taught person, as he spoke four languages. And he tried to provide education for his children. I understand that he spoke Romanian, Hungarian and Hebrew, but I have no idea where did he learn German perfectly. I only know that when I went home once in 1936 [from Marosvasarhely] to visit my parents, my father had just received [from my grandfather] a letter informing him on the fact that grandpa hadn't received the Wienerische Zeitung, the journal from Vienna for two weeks, and it seemed they had forgotten to order it for him. We lived too far from each other to know his political views, we were happy that he was alive. He didn't have financial problems, because he had two sons who supported him. He rented all his life the flat where he was living. There was a long house, with three other tenants. He had two rooms and a kitchen, the other three tenants lived separately.

He was observant, well, he was the manager of a community office, but I never saw him praying. He observed Sabbath strictly. He was Orthodox, a bearded man. He would never work on Sabbath. Every Saturday he had some brandy, beautiful snow-white challah, meat-soup. They were simple persons, but they never hungered. His sons had a more progressive way of thinking. Grandfather ate only kosher meals. He had a divorced daughter, who moved to his house, and she took care of him to the end. We didn't go too often to Maramarossziget, as until grandpa was able to move, until the age of 70-75, an uncle who got married in Torokszenmiklos, in Hungary, always came and brought him to us to Toplica for four weeks. My father was no longer alive, and grandpa stayed with us for four weeks. Last time I visited him in Maramarossziget for three days, he was confined to bed, and he could only speak.

There were six siblings in my father's family. The eldest was Sari Bacher, the second was my father. Eszti was the third. The rich uncle, who established a family in Torokszenmiklos was called Jakab Bacher. He was younger than my father. Mirjam, the wife of uncle Ganz was the fifth, and the sixth was Manci. She was the youngest. I don't know the names of my aunts' husbands.

Aunt **Sari Bacher** left for America, I don't know in which year. She had left before I was born, before World War I. She got married here, and she left from Maramarossziget for America with two children already, because life conditions were very bad here. They went to America to find work. Actually his husband left earlier, and he could bring there his family one year after. I suppose he found a place where to bring his family. Well, I didn't know her, but I know that's how it happened. I know they provided education for their two sons, they became teachers. 25 years ago one of them was sent to Israel to teach. English language obviously, well I don't know, but he didn't have to teach Hebrew. So I only know that my aunt's son was alive 25 years ago. I know nothing about the other.

Aunt **Eszti Bacher's** family lived in Maramarossziget. My father worked in the defile of the Maros river as an office-holder, we lived in Gyergyoszentmiklos, and they in Maramarossziget. In those

times it was a great distance, and traveling wasn't too easy. My dad had holidays once in a year, and then he visited grandpa. And I suppose he visited his sister Eszti as well. Her husband was a merchant. I mean by merchant a shopkeeper. Eszti didn't work. Back then women didn't work at all. Not only my mother wasn't allowed to work, my husband didn't let me work either. She had about five children. They were deported. Eszti too died in Auschwitz with her husband. And a miracle occurred, as all the five children returned. They got deported to different places. Some did work service, some were in Germany in different concentration camps. But not even after one year all of them, as they could, left for Palestine, as Israel wasn't established yet. And they all died there one after the other.

**Mirjam** was married in Viso [*Felsoviso or Alsovisio, today Viseul de Sus or Viseul de Jos*], it's a somewhat larger settlement near Maramarossziget. They lived there. Her husband was called **Ganz**. They had two children, David Ganz and Bernat Ganz. One of them established a family in Szatmar [*today Satu Mare*], the other in Nagyvarad [*today Oradea*]. And both left from Israel from there. The grandchildren of my father's sister live in Israel. I didn't know the elder's, David's children, but Bernat Ganz has two children, and I was in touch with them. Bernat contacted me through a letter sent via the militia, because he never came to Marosvasarhely. And he started to write me, and to gather the existing members of the family. For example he knew that my uncle from Torokszentmiklos wasn't alive anymore, but that his wife escaped, so he did research so persistently in the community and via the police that he found out where she lived. A former servant of her supported her until her death, because she was old. They corresponded all the time. In Israel, in Bnei Brak Bernat had three children. His daughter is called Mirjam. Her husband is Chaim Birnbaum. They call me sometimes. They are my second cousins, because their father was my first cousin. Bernat was a very warm-hearted person, and he sent me sometimes small packages. And this man wasn't wealthy. I know that they lived from day to day. I met them when I was in Israel, in 1973. I met Bernat too, he was alive yet. Bernat died after that. David too has sons, but I'm not in touch with him. I only know that one of the children is in America, and he is a rabbi.

There was one more sister, the youngest sister of my father, Manci – her name was **Margit Bacher** I suppose – who got divorced. I don't know what her husband's name was. She didn't assume her husband's name, she remained Bacher. She had a son, who joined the Youth's Communist Movement, and disappeared at the age of 14, before World War II. [*Editor's note: The Youth's Communist Movement was considered illegal between the two world wars. The Romanian Communist Party and the related organizations were prohibited at the beginning of the 1920s.*] Well, it was a sin [*illegal*] in those times to be a communist. Manci stayed with grandpa until the end. She was deported too, and she didn't come back.

The Ganz family, who lived in Viso was religious. In fact all of the siblings from Maramarossziget were observant, they were Orthodox. They didn't eat milky meals with meat. Those from Maramarossziget [*the women*] had wigs too. My mother didn't have any wig, nor had my aunt from Torokszentmiklos, despite the fact that they kept a kosher household. Only my father who moved here and his brother who moved to Torokszentmiklos were religious only in a moderate degree. I don't even know how to call this, since we got chopped [*animals by the shochet*], and we didn't eat pork. But my father worked on Saturdays. In this case he couldn't have been called an Orthodox. And if needed, he traveled, he wrote and did other things too which an Orthodox is not allowed to.

But otherwise we never had pork in the house. And before the meat was prepared, there was a ceremony, it had to stay salted for half an hour, after that they threw water over it and it had to stay for one hour in clean water, and only after that they started to cook it. My mother always proceeded so. Me as well. Well, not me, but the servant. It was enough for me if the girl did it. We had a kosher household at home, at my home as well until 1940, until it was possible.

My father, **Izidor Bacher** was a high school graduate. In Maramarossziget, at the catholic gymnasium it was possible, as they were humane; it was possible to bring the books to the gymnasium Friday after-noon *[and to leave them there]*. I don't know if they had exams on Saturdays, but they didn't have to write for sure. On Saturday evenings they went to take the books, they learnt on Sundays, and Mondays the ordinary lessons begun.

After the final examination daddy got employed first in Szeged, he was a cashier, he lived there for more than one year. And he knew that there was wood and woodwork here by the side of the Maros river, and he came to Gyergyoszentmiklos and settled here. My grandfather lived in Maramarossziget, and my father moved to Transylvania [1](#) alone. He met mammy here, she was from Gyergyovarhegy *[today Subcetate Mures]*. He got married there, he married my mother.

I know nothing about my maternal grandparents. When I was born or I was a little child nor my grandfather, nor my grandmother was alive. They were from Gyergyovarhegy. My grandfather lived in a small village. It still exists, I think the train stops there: you pass by Toplica *[today Toplita]*, Galocas *[today Galautas]* and then Gyergyovarhegy. This small village was on the hillside. It was completely Romanian, there wasn't any Hungarian family. My grandparents spoke Romanian perfectly. And my mother too, as she was among Romanian children. There is a photo too, it shows my mother dressed up in Romanian clothes. My grandfather was a shopkeeper, everywhere the Jew was a shopkeeper. It is important that in 1880, in the Bach era – that's how they call it – there was a law saying that Jews couldn't own land. *[Editor's note: Until the 1850s Jews weren't allowed to own land, plot and real estate, and they couldn't have state functions either. The restrictions were abolished after the Compromise (after 1867).]* Thus a Jewish farmer class couldn't be formed. He took his 'pintli', it's a kind of haversack called 'pintli', but maybe just here in Transylvania, or it may come from a Polish word. He went from one to village to the other, and he shouted "'Handle!' What is for sale?" *[Editor's note: 'Handle' is a word derived from the Yiddish verb 'handlen' meaning to bargain, bargaining.]* But they did the same in Budapest too. These are all Jewish words. This was an exclamation. When I was a grown-up, 18 years old girl, and later too, poor Jews still did this in Budapest. They stopped down in the yard – these storied houses all had small yards – and they shouted: "'Handle!' What is for sale?" And there were worn-out clothes, shoes that people gave them for free or for peanuts, well for two times nothing. He brought these to the villages, sold them and earned some money. The Jew was like this in order to make his living. He couldn't be a farmer, he wasn't good in agricultural work. One had to support his family.

My grandfather's family, the **Alschuchs** was the only Jewish family in the village. People are angry about Jews, because the Jew was always a merchant. What did he sell? What needed the villagers? Carriage grease, dressing, since there weren't motors then *[cars]*. And people needed horseshoes, as horses had to be shod, boot-polish, needle, salt, maybe corn flour, sugar... He might have sold rice, because at pigsticking people prepared white pudding, and it needed some rice. He didn't have to sell pork bacon, as they *[the villagers]* cut pigs. They didn't need curd cheese either, since they had sheep. Well, these were his merchandise, and what a rural merchant could sell. What did

a farmer need? Such a retailer was glad if he could earn his living, not and let's not talk about employing someone. He had five children, he had to bring them up. And he raised five children from this. And he could manage to bring them up so that the eldest sister of my mother got married to an elder, rich man from the Regat. He fell in love with her, and married her. But they didn't live in the Regat, but in Gyergyoszentmiklos. And when mammy and the other children grew up a little, they all went to her. None of my maternal grandparents was alive in 1944.

My mother, Helen had four siblings: aunt Berta – the eldest, in fact she raised my mother –, aunt Netti and two brothers, Henrik and Salamon. I was very small when **Henrik Alschuch** died, I don't know anything about him, I don't remember his occupation either. I only know things about aunt Berta and aunt Netti. I stayed at them when I was in school. There was aunt **Berta**, who married someone from Piata Neamt. The uncle was called Berko Mozes, he was from the Regat. Berko Mozes was engaged in wine-growing, he had a wine cellar in Gyergyoszentmiklos, where they lived. He sold wine for shops and transported to villages. At vintage he went south to the wine region, and bought in bulk the prepared wine, that's what he did. My aunt was also a great a businesswoman, she also bought all kinds of brandies. In one word they traded. They were well-off. They didn't have any children, but they brought up two [*the children of Salamon Alschuch, the brother*]. But one after the other, as they adopted one, they paved the way for her and married her, then took the other.

I stayed at aunt **Netti's** in Sepsiszentgyorgy [*today Sfantu Gheorghe*] for one year, when I was eleven, in the first year at the gymnasium. I got to know her as a widow, I didn't know her husband, I don't even remember his name. Aunt Netti's husband died during World War I. They had four children: Stefi, Henrik, Misi and one more girl. I have no idea how, from what she supported her family. Perhaps she received some kind of indemnification or aid for her husband had died on the battle field. And presumably her children were grown-up, and they supported her. I know that one of them – he must have been the eldest – was an office-holder at the weaving mill in Sepsiszentgyorgy. And I also know that all of them finished four grades at gymnasium. The apartment was furnished in a bourgeois manner. Henrik lived in Sepsiszentgyorgy, but I didn't know him. When I lived for one year in Sepsiszentgyorgy, I don't know, he was already dead, or worked in Kolozsvar. I think he didn't get married, and I don't know what his occupation was. Henrik didn't live at home, but he sent money. When I stayed at aunt Netti, mammy provided for my living. They were badly off, very badly off. They always were very hard up. A Jew was forced to use his mind and to learn in order to earn his living, because anti-Semitism exists since time immemorial. So generally it wasn't easy. There was nothing interesting at my aunts, they had a smooth life, there was nothing interesting around it. They were simple middle-class people. My mother's siblings all died in Auschwitz. As far as I know, nobody survived deportation. Maybe some of them died before. I didn't have any contact with them.

My mother's youngest brother, **Salamon Alschuch** was the black sheep of the family. He was a shady character, he didn't like to work. He didn't drink, but he played cards, and that's a drogue too. But he had, I don't know, about four or five children. Salamon had a store, but he sold I don't know what: salted bacon, salt and shoe-polish. Salamon's wife was Jewish, but I don't know how she looked like. He lived in Toplica. Toplica was five kilometers long and it had one street, which led to Borszek [*today Borsec*]. One should know that one has to get off [*the train*] in Toplica in order to go to Borszek... The mineral water was gold. Only the water of Borszek could stand up



transportation through the see. There were three or four fountains, they streamed constantly. There was a main fountain, it was built up beautifully. Whoever wanted to could go there. We weren't in touch, because he was a loon. I lived already in Marosvasarhely. My father supported him, but when he found out that his brother was playing cards until the morning, and he was gambling away his last penny, so that he couldn't buy a piece of bread for his children in the morning, my father forbade him to enter our house. But my mother helped him in secret. The poor woman, she found the way to do it, she always brought the food to a family from the village. She brought them milk, butter, bread, fat, rice, food. Always without my father's knowledge. Since my father was such a straight person, he couldn't bear that someone gambled away his money.

So Berko Mozes' family adopted two of their children. They raised two children, and both abandoned them. One left for America, and the other was a crook. He was such a disgraceful character, that he wrote all the family fortune to his name in secret. He lived there though, since the house had eight rooms, so they lived together. *[After Berko Mozes died]* he just simply kicked out aunt Berta from her own house. His wife *[as he got married in the meantime]* had some relatives somewhere in the Mezőség *[area in the historical region of Transylvania in Cluj County]*, near Panit, in a village, and he brought poor aunt Berta there. They were Jews too, because he married a Jewish woman surely. She found out later *[that his foster-son wrote the house on his name]*, but it was already the Hungarian era [2](#), so aunt Berta couldn't do anything, besides she was at least eighty years old. I remember that once she came to the town to visit mammy. And I was shocked because of what I heard. She had a ragged room, she said, and she got hardly to eat. Then she went back, and I never heard anything about them. Those were already such times, it wasn't possible for mammy to go there and take a look. Aunt Berta was deported, I suppose together with those who she lived with. She had no chance to return, because she was very old. Berko Mozes had died a long time before, he didn't live to experience deportation.

My mammy attended the convent for eight years in Gyergyószentmiklós. She also finished two years of I don't know what, so she qualified as a teacher. Of course she had a Hungarian qualification. She said then 'I'll go to look for a job.' She went home, my grandfather lived a few kilometers from Gyergyóváros, on the hillside, in a completely Romanian village. Only an Armenian family lived there, and there was a teacher in that family too, who was commuting to Ditrau *[today Ditrau]*, to Gyergyószarhegy *[today Lazareu]*, and the husband worked in a factory, he was a clerk. My grandfather was desperate that a daughter would go to a foreign place to work, to Marosvasarhely or somewhere else. Back then it was something inconceivable. And my grandpa wouldn't let her go. My mother was crying, and she said: 'Why did you let me learn then?' He answered 'Listen to me! - that's how my mother related it to me - If you learnt well the lesson in Hungarian, and you speak Romanian perfectly, here is a four grades primary school - there was a Romanian school in Gyergyóalfalu *[today Joseni]* -, pay a visit to the schoolmaster, and ask him if he could employ you.' My mother had no choice, she went there, they employed her, and she was teaching there. There was a schoolmaster, a teacher and a Romanian teacher, so there was room for my mammy too, because there were quite a lot of children. So mammy was teaching in Romanian, but not for long, since dad came and married her. And in older times it wasn't fashionable that a woman who got married went to work. My father didn't let my mother work as a teacher, he used to say: 'What's in your mind? What would people say, that I can't support a wife?'

Not far from Gyergyovarhegy, about five kilometers far from where grandpa lived there was a huge timber mill with 6 frame-saws. The factory was installed in Gyegyovarhegy and Toplica. These two locations are quite close to each other. It takes half an hour by train. The one in Toplica was a large factory, with a few hundreds of workers, and if we take into account the employees working in the forest, it had a few thousands. The factory in Gyegyovarhegy had 6 log frames, the one in Toplica had 12 log frames and 12 saws. It had a few thousands of employees. At the beginning papa was cashier in Gyergyovarhegy. Well, it was close, and I don't know how, but he met mammy, who married him. Perhaps there was a cultural performance on May 10th, and perhaps the office-holders were invited and they went to see it. Mammy couldn't be more than twenty years old. They had a religious wedding surely, because there were many Jews in Gyergyoszentmiklos. Mammy lived in Gyergyovarhegy. I think they lived there for two years, dad was cashier there, and he got promoted, so they moved then to Toplica. When the director saw that my father was very good in his profession – actually he was a mathematical genius – he became a factory manager. The factory had two directors: a technical and an administrative director. My father was the technical director. He had a secure job and a great salary. He was the expert.

The owner was a Swiss tycoon, and he had a Romanian partner here in Romania, so they established a Swiss-Romanian firm in fact. Its center was in Brasso [*today Brasov*]. The owner didn't live here, he lived in Switzerland. The Swiss enterprise had three factories in Romania: in Gyergyovarhegy, in Toplica and in Kommando [*today Comandau*]. The enterprise had a narrow-gauge railway, the train went up to the forest at dawn, and it carried down all the logs cut down by the woodworkers. The whole enterprise employed a few thousand persons. Dad took his holiday once in a year, at Christmas, because the enterprise in Toplica ceased work four weeks before Christmas to repair, clean, maintain the machines.

It was a very beautiful and modern enterprise. For example when the boss came here from Switzerland, he built such a tennis court for the office-holders... In Toplica we belonged to the illustrious society: those who worked on the timber-yard, the enterprise employees considered themselves a separate class. They [*the contemporaneous enterprises*] could have learnt democracy [*from this one*] by the way. As imagine, the Swiss boss built a public bath in both places [*in Gyergyovarhegy and in Toplica*], separately for the workers and the office-holders. The sole difference was that the office-holders' bath had sauna too – I didn't even know this word back then. Sauna, can you image? It consisted of a small cabin with multi-leveled benches, for everybody. Somebody went in, and the vapor started. But of course, only office-holders were allowed to use it. The workers' bath didn't have a sauna. In the bath there were two bathtubs next to each other and about two showers. The office-holders' bath – not all office-holders had their own bathroom at home, we did – had bathtub, shower and a basin. So there were madams who went in and soaked themselves. There was a person responsible for the bath, she was staying there like a policewoman, since first one had to wash under the shower from head to foot, and could enter the basin only after that. I never was there, nor was mammy. We weren't. But those who didn't have a bathroom, or it was agreeable, I don't know to rub their sore feet... they were sitting inside and chatted. In my childhood, when I wasn't married yet, I saw it, I even went to the sauna. I didn't need it, but how to say, the vapor was good... It [*the bath*] was used alternately by women and men. They didn't stay there for hours, and most of them didn't use the bathtub, but mainly the shower. It was a great thing, no such thing in other places. And we didn't have to pay a penny.

There was a difference of age of 6 years between my brother [*born in 1905*] and me. My mother didn't want more children, and she already was so modern and clever – though there weren't contraceptive pills yet. My father wanted a girl. My mother withstood it for 6 years, then she gave up, and she became pregnant, that's how I was born after 6 years. A scene took place then, because they say I weighted 5 kilos and I was wonderful, and when they placed me into my father's arms, he went to my mother's room and told her: 'Well dear, with all this pain why didn't you born one more such beautiful child?' And my mother got so angry, that she didn't talk for three days. Since she was struggling for three days. There was a midwife at a village, it turned out at the end that she wasn't a midwife in fact. She was struggling for three days, but there weren't any problems.

## Growing up

Before school, I couldn't read and write yet, but my father taught me the French and the Hungarian cards. And how to play dominoes and chess. And it's also due to my father that I know the Hungarian history. He was a great Hungarian patriot. He brought me toys related to the Hungarian history. When he heard the Hungarian national anthem at the radio at noon – we didn't have television yet –, his tears were always flowing. The national anthem was always at noon. He was always a reader, he talked politics, and so he was aware of politics. My father was always a great admirer of Kossuth, therefore he brought me toys, for example a pack of cards with thirty-forty pieces, with questions related to history. When was the Battle of Mohacs? What does the Golden Bull mean? Things like this, and the answers were on the back. I had to learn all these, and from time to time he asked me the questions. My mother gave me books fit to my age. We had such a library, one could transform it into a public one. I read the newspaper since then, I order the newspapers even today. So I had a middle-class family. In 1923, at the age of 12, I was given a radio, it even had earphones, but I don't remember its name. The radio was installed in my room, and it was connected to my parents' bedroom through earphones. But we could pick up only Pest then. It was a battery radio, we always had to recharge it. I don't know what my parents were listening to. I don't remember anymore what I was listening to, but surely only music. News? Who cared about the news in those times?

My parents sent me to school to different towns. I attended the first grade of primary school in Gyergyoszentmiklos, my aunt Berta, the eldest sister of mammy was living there. I attended the catholic convent for four years. I finished there the four grades of primary school. I attended religious classes, I had to. The nuns didn't care about it. The religious education was shallow. We had a teacher of religion, he didn't even give lessons in the synagogue, but in a room, where he lived. We were a few girls in the convent who attended it. Those were observant Jews, they didn't eat bacon or pork at home.

The convent had a higher elementary school too. My father wanted me to attend a gymnasium, and since there wasn't a gymnasium for girls there [*in Gyergyoszentmiklos*], and my mother had a married sister in Sepsiszentgyorgy too, aunt Netti, they sent me to the Szekely Miko College. I attended it for one year. When I went home, I had a Szekler dialect: 'Nay, nay, I don't wanna. I won't go there!' Well, when my mother heard this: 'Well, you won't go there anymore, you can be sure of that!' That's how I got to Marosvasarhely. I finished the second and third grades of gymnasium there, at the Hungarian section, in the Liceul Unirea de Fete. [*Editor's note: The Unirea (Union) High School was called the Ferenc Rakoczi II Roman Catholic Gymnasium previously to*



*Marosvasarhely's annexation to Romania. Until the nationalization in 1948 the school was a Roman Catholic gymnasium, then with the occasion of the educational reform carried out in the same year the building was given to the Hungarian girls' grammar school, which in 1962 was unified with the Romanian girls' grammar school.]* I couldn't write correctly after four years of primary school, my father taught me later. And he invented such tricks! I had to correspond with him, he underlined where I made a mistake in the Hungarian spelling, and he sent me back the paper.

When I was already here [*in Marosvasarhely*], I was still attending the gymnasium, my father paid a teacher, so that I really learnt our religion. Until the forth grade in gymnasium a student, a bocher came once in a week, in the after-noon to teach me. He taught me how to write the Hebrew letters, to read in Hebrew. He taught me prayers, the blessing over bread, how to wash hands before every meal. That is to say that the Jewish religion outdoes all the religions in hygiene. I can read in Hebrew, I know the letters, I know some prayers. Both my grandfather and my father had a progressive mentality in the sense that he provided us everything a Jewish girl or a Jewish boy should know on religion. My father always used to say: 'I give you and your brother everything a Jewish child is ought to be given. It's your own business what you will keep of this. My conscience requires me to do so.' This was the principle.

When I started the forth grade, a law entered into force: a Jewish child might attend only a state or a religious [*that is Jewish*] school [3](#). There wasn't religious school here, only primary, the Jewish school was in the present Horea street, but there wasn't any secondary school. My father said then: 'If there isn't, you'll go to the Romanian school.' I finished the forth grade in a Romanian gymnasium. I was 14 years old. I had hard luck that the Iron Guard [4](#) movement had begun already. And in an after-noon they beat soundly a Jewish girl, a classmate of mine on the Bulgar square – it wasn't built up that much as now – in the evening. We were desperate. But we had friends too, Jewish boys at the gymnasium. We told them: 'You see what happened to Juci, just like that!' They had heard for sure about the beating of Jews in Iasi. And of course, our boys watched them, recognized one boy who had beaten the Jewish girl, when he was going home in the Ballada street, since he lived there. They beat him so hard that he couldn't walk for one week. All this should have been ok, but my father found out the story. He came instantly from Toplica, as he was employed there at a large firm: 'Oh my God, my child is in danger! I'm taking you home.' 'Oh, dear daddy, thus I will finish not even four years of gymnasium!' I implored him to let me finish that year. He agreed to it with difficulty.

Luckily for me the French language and French culture started to be promoted. And they established three French institutions in Romania: in Marosvasarhely, in Bucharest and in Iasi. My father made arrangements immediately, he bought shares, he ensured my right to certification. [*Editor's note: Usually the right to certification was granted to institutions, which meant that such institution had the right to issue final examination certificates.*] It was in the French Institution, up in the clerks' district. The French Institution was placed in three villas. French teachers came from France, they didn't speak Hungarian or Romanian, they couldn't even say yes or no. And I got enrolled in the fifth grade. I was fifteen years old when I entered the fifth grade of gymnasium, and finally I finished eight grades of gymnasium in the French school. When I attended the French school, I was helped, a teacher came to me in the after-noon, and helped me to do my lessons, to learn the language. I even ate frog in the French Institute, they adored it. In the spring the whole school went out up on the hills, and we were catching frogs for the French teachers. As there were

only French teachers. They loved it, and they offered us too. I tasted it, I ate it, I didn't get sick, but I don't want anymore. I wasn't a gourmand, I didn't have a favorite meal, I wasn't a hearty eater. But I tasted everything, I ate everything.

In Marosvasarhely I always stayed at families with board. One had to pay for that. And I always stayed at families where they educated me how to eat, how to wash myself regularly, how to wash my teeth. A child has to be taught good manners. First I stayed at a Jewish widow, her name was Mrs. Nagy, she was a piano teacher. She had a daughter. I stayed at them for four years. Then they moved to Bucharest, because the piano teacher's daughter got married to someone from there, and she took her widow mother with her. Then I found other family, where there was a piano too, as my parents checked that, because I attended piano lessons to. I have a qualification of piano teacher, I finished it simultaneously at the conservatory. *[Editor's note: The conservatory was established in 1908 by dr. Gyorgy Bernady, and it functioned until 1949 in the Palace of Culture in Marosvasarhely. The conservatory organized from time to time concerts too. After the educational reform in 1948 the institution was transformed into an art school; today it is installed in the High School of Arts.]* It wasn't that hard in those times. I always went home for holidays, we lived in Toplica then.

The family connections were very strong on both sides. There was no place for envy, there weren't disagreements. But people lived far from each other. Everybody was minding his own business. Traveling wasn't that easy as today. We knew about cars only from books. When I got married in 1931, there were two cars in Marosvasarhely, as far as know. We didn't care about its brand, as it was such a rarity. I only knew that a very rich Jewish family owned them. One belonged to Reti, but he didn't even use it. *[The company called]* 'Szekely es Reti' had a furniture factory here, which became later the 'Augusztus 23' factory. They were very wealthy people. The other car belonged also to a rich Jew, he was a flashy Jew. He liked to come into sight. For example on Sundays he got in the car – the husband didn't even know how to drive *[he had a driver]* –, and he circled two or three times the center. As it was a habit to saunter on Sunday morning. Everybody from the middle-class, where I belonged too, dressed up elegantly, and they took a walk.

These were peaceful times. For example when I got married, there were Romanian families, they moved recently to Marosvasarhely. And we lived so peacefully. We went to cafes, to nice pubs to have a barbecue: here set the Jewish family, there the Romanian family. The Gypsy played for the Romanian his own songs, for us Hungarian music. None of the songs bothered the other. We clinked. They spoke our language. We spoke theirs too, I spoke Romanian better due to my mother. Most of the Romanian intellectuals were studying in Budapest. We didn't go to Kolozsvár, but to Budapest. Marosvasarhely was famous because of its pubs, but those were in fact small high-class restaurants, for example the Surlott Gradics *[the Scrubbed Steps]*, that's how they called it. *[Editor's note: The restaurant-tavern called Surlott Gradics was in the present Mihai Viteazul (former Klastrom) street no. 3. "The small tavern consisted in fact of 2-3 small intercommunicating rooms, which represented a small part of the owner's house, counting the garden, his apartment and the kitchen. The table societies were taking a glass of wine in the small, whitewashed rooms with the timber beam ceiling, at their usual table. (...) The owner or his wife was welcoming and serving the guests. They expected the company of teachers from the schools around the Surlott Gradics as permanent guests, but after funerals the people paying a tribute entered too for refreshments or for a glass of boiled wine." (Gyula Keresztes: Marosvasarhely regi epuletei / Old*

*Buildings of Marosvasarhely, Difprescar, Marosvasarhely, 1998)* It was in an old, small house, but inside it was gleaming clean, not a drunken man, a coachman or I don't know who could enter there. These were all distinguished places. We used to go to the Maros restaurant Saturday evening, after dinner of course. Jews usually don't drink, but one had to order, so we asked a liter of wine, as we were sitting four or five persons, half of the wine was drunken by the musicians, the rest by us. The Jew would rather play cards. I was a great card-player too all my life.

Marosvasarhely was famous because of its barbecue and the varga strudel-cake. *[Editor's note: Marosvasarhely is called sometimes even today ironically 'The Village of Barbecue' in the Szekler's Land.]* When I went to Budapest *[in those times]*, sometimes I saw written at restaurants: 'Today we have varga strudel-cake a la Marosvasarhely'. They didn't sell it, you could get it only if you entered and ate it there. The varga strudel-cake was a specialty for restaurants. I prepare it too: the upper and lower part is made of strudel, between them pasta boiled in milk, with curd cheese, two or three eggs – one has to beat it up –, and full with raisin. Not any kind of pasta, but vermicelli, in milk with vanilla. It has to be boiled so that the milk pervades the pasta. It is so delicious!

My brother was born in 1905. He was called **Sandor Bacher**. He lived in Maramarossziget at grandfather's until he finished four grades of gymnasium. But he lived there under very strict rules, he had to pray a lot. At dawn my grandfather woke him up to teach him how to pray in the morning and in the night. The Jewish religion is an extremely rigorous, so difficult religion. And my brother said that 'I would rather go to chop wood, but I won't go back to Maramarossziget.' And he got then here *[to Marosvasarhely]* in the fifth grade, and he took his final examination here. I still have the photo on his fiftieth class reunion. In Maramarossziget he didn't have to have payes, there wasn't such a demand, my mother stipulated that. He attended the catholic gymnasium there. Back then life was very different there. The schoolmaster let the Jewish children to bring into the classroom the books *[and they let them there until Saturday]*. And they didn't have to write on Saturdays. They compiled the timetable intentionally or accidentally *[or it was the schoolmaster who allowed this]* in such a way that they didn't have to write, as a Jewish child is forbidden to write on Sabbath. And Saturday evening, after dark they brought home the coursebooks. A catholic gymnasium for example was capable of this. World was different then! Such a world that this could have happened. When my brother got here in Marosvasarhely, he wasn't religious anymore. In Maramarossziget he didn't attend the cheder, my grandfather taught him enough – my mother stipulated that what my grandfather taught him was enough. That was too bad, because he taught so much the poor child: he woke him up at dawn, and he went to bed late in order to learn, so that he became an atheist by the time he got here.

We had a good relationship, though he was spanked many times because of me. I was a bad child, because I always wanted his toys, of course. I wanted to play football, to climb the trees. He went with his sixteen-seventeen years old friends to pick raspberry in the wood. And I was crying to take me with him. They had to play football with me. What was to do with a snotty child? They put me to keep the goal, but they played in front of the other goal. I noticed that, and I started to bite my hands and to claw myself, and I went home. As I was approaching our house, I shouted: 'Sanyi beat me, Sanyi did this, Sanyi did that!' And when Sanyi came home, he got some slaps. He was saying that he didn't do anything, but they didn't believe him. Luckily for me once a worker returning from the factory saw me clawing myself with a willow branch in my hand. Everybody knew the director's

children, so he asked me: 'Belluska, what are you doing?' 'Well, nothing.' Then the worker followed me, and he saw why my brother was getting slaps and beatings. He came in and said: 'Madam, please forgive me, but don't beat Sanyika, because I saw the girl biting and clawing her arm.' Thus I got beaten. Sanyi was spanked many times because of me. I started to smoke in a similar way. He was smoking. I asked him a puff. 'Go away, you snotty!' 'Won't you give me? I will tell them that you stole the cigarettes from daddy's drawer!' 'Here you have, snotty, smoke!' Of course I was dying of smoking it, I was coughing, stifling, but after three days I was blackmailing him again. I kept on doing this until I was seventeen-eighteen, when I started to smoke on my own.

When we were both here in Marosvasarhely for a short time, he was blackmailing me as well. He got pocket money, I got too separately, because we stayed at different families, not at the same. I hated mathematics. 'My dear Sanyi, take a look *[at my mathematics home-work]*.' 'You have pocket money, I want one lei.' He did it, but I had to pay. I gave him, let's say one lei. He came every third day, and he did all my math home-work. This cost me much more later. As he was older, he took his final examination at the end of the 1920s, and he left, he went to Vienna to study. I stayed here, and stupid me, I didn't even know how much two times two was; I didn't have any grounds. Thus I had had only ten in math, then I failed. *[Editor's note: In the Romanian educational system ten is the best mark and four means unsatisfactory.]* After a while he discovered where I was keeping my money, and he stole from it, because he loved to play billiards. Every evening I counted my money like a niggard, and once I tell to the woman *[where I stayed]* 'Madam, my money is wanting.' She says, 'My child, I didn't touch it surely.' And she added: 'Listen, Sanyika was here in the after-noon. And yesterday after-noon as well.' I wasn't at home then. He came when I was at piano lesson in the after-noon, at the conservatory. As I always had piano-lessons in the after-noon, in the morning I went to school. And that's how it came to my mind that it was likely that he had stolen from my money.

My brother passed the final examination here *[in Marosvasarhely]*, at the catholic gymnasium. After that my brother was sent to study to Vienna. He didn't want to go to university, he adored the wood industry. He said he didn't want to be sent to university, because he wanted to work in the wood industry, he adored woods, he adored timber. But my father kept on repeating: 'High school degree? I have a high school degree, let my son have a superior education!' So he went to Vienna and enrolled to the academy of commerce. He said in vain: 'Daddy, I won't go to university, I want to work in the wood industry!' Daddy used to tell me as well: 'My child, I don't mind if you get married to a shoemaker, but not to someone in the wood industry! Because wood doesn't grow on the asphalt. Thus you have to live your life in a forest or village.' My brother wouldn't listen to it. In his fourth year daddy went to Vienna to visit his son and to take a look at his course record. There was nothing written in it. He says: 'How's that? Aren't you attending the university? Pack up and come home.' So daddy was very strict and very determined. Anyway, he made the profit out of this on the 'ladies', that he learnt English and German perfectly. My father said: 'It was quite an expensive course, you could have learnt German much cheaper in Szeben or even in Brasso.' However he saw the world, more than in Gyergyovarhegy. My unfortunate brother was in Auschwitz and in Ukraine too, and in all that misery this *[the knowledge of languages]* helped him out a little.

Later, after he came home from Vienna, my brother was employed at an enterprise, next to daddy, but daddy never wanted his son to be close to him. That is he never wanted to grant him backing. My brother was everywhere: in Szeben, there was a factory next to Szeben, the same rich man

owned it, the place was called Talmacs [*Talmaciu in Romanian*], where the factory was, it was close to Szeben. So he went to Szeben every weekend. It had the great advantage that it was a completely German town. And my father asked the management – as my brother was persistent in his will to work in the wood industry – to send him to learn all the branches of this profession, starting from felling the trees to the shipping. Thus he was in Galati and Constanta too. He got back step by step, so when my father was in Toplica, he worked in Gyergyovarhegy. And after my father got ill, he couldn't go on, they exchanged them, my father moved back to Gyergyovarhegy, and my brother took his place. He wasn't appointed as a manager, yet he fulfilled my father's duties. My poor father died there in Gyergyovarhegy, in 1938, he got a heart attack. At that time I was married already in Marosvasarhely. Daddy visited us two weeks before. War-related troubles had already begun. In 1938 we were having fun here, we were dancing, but the war had already begun.

As grown-ups my brother and I adored each other. He had problems with women, because he was a lady-killer. 'I'm in trouble, dear Bellus, Emilia is pregnant.' He was a clerk, he didn't have money, and the woman blackmailed him that she was pregnant, but in fact she wasn't. So I gave him money for the abortion.

Mammy was a housekeeper. They observed all the high days according to the Jewish religion. Friday morning mammy cooked the Friday dinner – what she prepared depended if it was summer or winter – and she cooked for Sabbath as well. Friday evening we had fresh dinner – for us [*Jews*] every holiday starts in the evening, and it ends next day, when the star rises. For example we liked fish very much, and Friday evening we had fish in aspic, tee for those who wanted and challah. The challah wasn't milk loaf, but dough kneaded with water. The difference was that the challah was made of whites, and it was twisted to make it elongated. [*Editor's note: The flour was ground in many ways, depending on the distance between the millstones. 'Whites' means the soft grist of the wheat.*] We called this challah in the family. They baked two challah for an ordinary Sabbath. And the custom was that they put the challah one next to the other, it was covered with a tablecloth, my father took it down and cut it into slices, and he gave a small piece for everybody. That's how it started. But we didn't salt it. We dunked it once, at Shavuot. But not into salt, but we had honey in a little pot, daddy gave everybody a bit. It is a symbol, so that the new year would start sweet and well. We were a small family, four maximum, as my brother didn't come home every time.

On Friday evening mammy lighted two candles. There was a specific prayer she recited. I light candles too even today. I light two candles for seventy-two years. I recite that prayer in Hebrew, as it has a prayer. These prayers are called broches. The Jews, the Orthodox, when they eat bread, they say a prayer, they thank God that they can eat a piece of bread. There is a separate broche for the meat, there is a prayer of thanks over every meal. I forgot some things, I observe the basic thing: the lighting of candles on Friday evening. Everywhere, even if I stayed in a hotel in Budapest, I lighted candles even there. I have a small folding candlestick; it can be carried in a handbag. And nobody ever asked, nor the chambermaid, nor the waiter, nobody why I was doing that, because they knew. Certainly I wasn't the only one who did this. I wasn't kosher: I ate here and there, but there were traditions that I observed.

We didn't do [*big*] cleaning on Fridays. We did it when we had to. Our house was clean, we had two servants at home. We did big housecleaning only at Pesach, because then we had to change every pot, otherwise we did just ordinary cleaning. And everything had to be washed, the drawers in the kitchen had to be cleaned from every breadcrumb. And we had to put out every pot we had used



during the year. My mother observed this one strictly. The servants worked with my mother, and she checked if everything was alright. We had a large apartment, there was a great store *[some kind of shed]* above the summer kitchen, where the kneading troughs and the chopping boards were, that was their place *[of the Pesach pots]*. Whoever had a loft, they put it there. We brought down from the loft the Pesach pots. That's how I still have some of my dear mammy's stuff, as we put them up as well at my place, when she moved here in 1942.

We observed Seder eve. There is a prayer book, the Haggadah that has to be recited and explained. And there is everything on the platter: horse-radish, one boiled egg, green parsley, nut *[and apple]* mixed with wine in a small glass. And when he *[my father]* was speaking about it, he showed it, why the matzah was there, that the Pharaoh chased out the Jews so quickly, that they didn't have time to let the bread rise and to bake it, but they were running, and when they arrived on the plain, they rolled it out and dried it on the sun. That's how the myth of the matzah was born. We had already learnt it, the bocher who had taught me, explained me all this, but I saw at home in my childhood. And it has an element of play too, he *[the head of the family]* smashes a piece of matzah and puts it in a napkin. The dinner is over, but in the meantime he has to go out three times to wash his hands. While the father went out to wash hands, the child hid it, always the smallest, because it's a game. So daddy is searching for the matzah, where could he put it, but he doesn't find it. 'Where is the matzah?' 'I don't know.' 'Where is the matzah? Now, give it to me!' 'I won't give you, daddy!' It was always me who hid it. My brother was rarely there for Pesach. And we started to negotiate. 'Daddy, I know where it is. What would you give me for it?' Well, he offered me, let's say five penny. 'No, I won't give you for that money.' 'Well then, I'll give this or that sum.' Finally we came to an agreement, 'You'll get this.' I know that once I was twelve, and I asked for a piano... And dad said: 'Well my child, dad doesn't have so much money.' 'Dad, save up the money, but promise me that you would give me.' In fact I and my mother had agreed that dad had already saved up the money *[for the piano]*. So he promised that in one or two weeks 'I'll go to Marosvasarhely and buy you the piano.' And I was so happy, I gave him the matzah, and everybody was given a bit of it. Children waited this impatiently, you can imagine, where there were three or four children, all of them got a present, because they all said 'I know as well! I know as well!' But it was the most interesting for the youngest, for a twelve years old child it wasn't that interesting. It was a game for him too, because of the negotiation, and they asked something too. Dad asked the four questions, and I always answered them – I knew the answers more or less, but I read it out from a book in Hebrew. Dad asked me in Hebrew, he translated it into Hungarian, and I answered in Hebrew.

We had two eves of Seder. They observe two in Europe, and one in Israel. *[Editor's note: In the Diaspora the Seder eve ritual is conducted on the first two nights of Pesach. In Israel Pesach lasts seven days, while in the Diaspora it lasts eight days. In the ancient Israel the beginning of months, the appearance of the new moon was observed in Jerusalem. Watch-posts were placed on peaks, which transmitted immediately the news to the communities in Babylon and Persia, thus these were informed on the appearance of the new moon in the same night. The watch-posts emitted signs of smoke in the daytime, signs of fire in the night from one mountain to the other. This became impossible under the Roman rule, since then, in order to avoid uncertainty certain holidays last one day longer in the Diaspora than in Israel.]* Both were the same. Especially the children weren't bored by this, because they got presents twice. It happened sometimes that after dinner, after I got my present, I fell asleep. We always had very fine sweet wine, I drank a bit as well, as we

saw it from dad, and I fell asleep. Dad kept on reciting with mammy. Mammy was just sitting, she didn't pray. In fact women don't have to recite any prayers, everything falls to men. Only among very Hassid Jews women go to the synagogue. It's not compulsory for women. For Elijah ha-nevi we had a special glass, it's a silver glass, it was always filled. One didn't drink of that. It had some story related, the door had to be open to let him out, then we closed the door, but nobody touched it [*the glass*]. Then we poured back the wine, because nobody touched it. But it was on the table, together with the Seder plate. We had Pesach cake, but we didn't eat of it, because one can't eat milky food after meat. I don't know, maybe after four hours after meat one can eat milky. My mother always prepared orange cake with orange cream, and it had coconut butter. But sometimes we had nut cake with orange cream. Sometimes she put an orange into the dough, two in the cream: the skin and the juice of the orange. It is very delicious. Next day we had coffee for breakfast, and we chopped the matzah into it. At New Year Ilka [*Editor's note: The woman who takes care of Bella Steinmetz*] 'stole' my recipe, as I have a recipe book, and she surprised me with an orange cake.

At Pesach we didn't have bread or any kind of flour for eight days. We didn't have rice or semolina. My mother put dumpling made of matzah meal in the soup: many eggs, pepper, salt, it had a bit of goose fat too, it thickened, and it was cooked in the soup alike the dumpling. It gives such a good taste. Sometimes when my vegetable soup is flavorless, I make soup with matzah meal dumpling, because it gives a good taste. At Pesach we had guests. There were many employees, many young men in the factory where dad worked. And we had a special meal, the 'hremzli' [*latkes*] or potato pancakes: mashed potatoes, eggs and matzah meal fried in goose fat. Jews didn't use any other kind of fat. My mother never waited the Pesach, because she had to be prepared all the time. The table was covered all the time with white table-cloth, a glass of wine on the table – we always had wine at home. In the mornings guests dropped in – they weren't all Jews – that 'Aunt Helen, could we get some latkes?' They knew that it was Pesach at aunt Bacher's or aunt Helen's, and she had delicious latkes. She had a big baking dish in the summer kitchen – not in the interior kitchen, thus all the apartment would have been full of the smell –, the girls were frying it there, they knew as well how to do it, they brought it in a large plate with sugar on it. Three or four employees ate all in two minutes, and they drank a glass of wine. They adored this latkes. In some cases we didn't put icing sugar on it, but my mother put pepper. They loved it even more with pepper. I like it with pepper as well, my father ate it so too. Only mammy ate it with sugar.

On Sabbath we had a good lunch. Dad didn't go to the synagogue, he had to go to the office. My mother didn't go to the synagogue on Sabbath, only on high holidays: at Pesach and at Yom Kippur. Sometimes I entered the synagogue for one hour or two. For example there was a synagogue in Toplica. But dad rented a large room, where the Banffy baths are today, I think it's transformed into a restaurant now. In the autumn, when we had holidays, dad rented it, I think on his own expenses, and they celebrated there, because there were many Jewish workers at the enterprise. There were at least 30-35 Jewish families there. And all the men went to the synagogue, and women too, but in a separate room. They had a Torah, he sent for a chazzan, they had everything. The room had glass above, like a glass door let's say, and it was open, so the chazzan's prayer was audible. And in the women's room tables and chairs were installed, that was the custom in villages. Before praying we all took breakfast. I don't know what the procedure is in the very observant communities, but we took breakfast. We went there with mammy. Mammy went up at nine o'clock, me at ten, half past ten and at one, at half past one it was over, and we left. We

walked there, anyway this was the single way. And after that we had lunch, then we rested. Dad didn't go to the office at high holidays, at Shavuot and Yom Kippur.

We never celebrated Succoth, since I was always in Marosvasarhely because of my studies. While dad was alive, I went home at Shavuot and Yom Kippur, after his death I didn't go at all. After that we celebrated here in Marosvasarhely. I wasn't at home on other holidays, but they observed them surely. It consisted of a different *[more ceremonial]* meal. I don't know for which holiday they prepare fritter, maybe at Pentecost. *[Editor's note: Fritter is prepared at Chanukkah, because Jews prepare meals fried in oil for Chanukkah.]* The fashion *[custom, tradition]* is that they eat mainly milky, but fine things. Mammy prepared milky lunch, potato soup with sour cream and varga strudel-cake, and cake with sour cream or pudding also with sour cream. Mammy prepared very tasty things.

My parents didn't discuss politics, as far as I know. I know only one thing, dad was a great Kossuth follower. Before the war I didn't know what politics was, I wasn't interested in it, I was such a blockhead. But I was engaged in music, literature, languages, I was living an average *[middle-class]* social life. Usually women didn't discuss politics, but there was a Jewish Women Association in Marosvasarhely. It didn't have branches in smaller settlements, like where my parents lived.

My father had holidays in winter, he visited my grandfather in Maramarossziget for about three or four days, from there he went to Torokszentmiklos, to his younger brother. He was very rich, he had two huge factories in Torokszentmiklos. They adored each other. They went to Pest together, and had fun, they went together to the theatre, but mainly to clubs. Commercial Club was its name. It was a very elegant club – a huge house in downtown, with marble stairs, – where transactions took place too. I was with them once. And people were playing cards, but not the 'here's the red, where is the red' type, but it was funny, and they were playing five or six hours long. In the meantime my uncle established business connections. He didn't have any children, and he was always trying to persuade daddy to give me to him, so that he adopted me, saying that daddy had a son too. 'You're completely nuts! Have you ever heard about a Jew who had two children and gave one for adoption? You're not in your right mind.' They didn't talk to each other for days, but then in today words he sponsored me, he invested a lot of money in me.

I went to Pest for the first time when I was 17 years old, and since then every year. I stayed at one of the sister-in-laws of my uncle from Torokszentmiklos, as I wasn't old enough at the age of 17. I was at my uncle for three or four days, I picked up the money, then I went to Pest, and I was enjoying myself. My uncle had a sister-in-law, the sister of his wife, she had a student son, he was studying law, and I made friends from his society in Budapest. His *[the student's]* parents lived in Pest, his father was a teacher. Thus I got more education too if I needed. But I didn't. I think I learnt home everything, I could eat with knife and fork... He introduced me to a lot of his colleagues, so I had partners to go with to museums, to theatre, to balls. How could I have got otherwise my society? I had so many suitors. I learnt a lot from them, since they all were cultured kids. They took me to performances. I heard there for the first time what a reciting choir was, and I heard the famous reader of Hungary – I don't remember his name. But they took me not only to gaffs, but we went in the after-noon to elegant hotels for a five o'clock tea. A piano and a violin, soft music. We ate a cake or a chocolate, and we set there for two hours. I went out with them, they were suggesting: let's go here or there in the after-noon.

In the theatre I watched operettas with Hanna Honty, Kalman Latabar, I watched all *[the repertoire]* every autumn, I was in the theatre every evening. No matter if the boys came or not – but usually they did. For four weeks performances went on from seven until nine, by the time one came out from the theatre it was half past nine. Sometimes one or two waited for me after the show, and we went together to a café, we drank a simple coffee or a champagne-and-soda. And we were listening to a performer who sang couples, poems set to music with piano accompaniment and bass drum. There were famous performers, for example Vilma Medgyaszai, she was like Edith Piaf. Her performance was magnificent. And there were Gypsy children bands with hundred members. I remember the Emke café, but they didn't play there, there was a café next to it, and the Gypsy children played there. The Emke was more commercial-like, I used to have breakfast there and read the newspaper to find out what they would be playing that night in the theatre.

In the morning I wandered alone. That's how I got in the armchair of Ferenc Deak, alone. I walked and I walked. The Parliament is like this and like that – I heard so much about it. Well, but I want to see the Parliament from the inside! I kept on hanging around until I entered at the back entrance. I saw a small door, a man was standing there, he wore some sort of hat. I tell him: 'I would like so much to see how the Parliament looks like from the inside!' 'Well, my child, it's forbidden to enter here.' And I answer him: 'Please mister, I come from Transylvania... – this was a kind of great password – and I'm so curious. Just for a second...' I begged him so long, that finally he got touched, well, a young girl is so interested, and he came with me, and entered the great hall... He showed me great things: 'Quickly, quickly...' The platform was enclosed, and there was a big armchair and a big table, this was the largest room in the Parliament. And he said: 'You see, my child, that's the chair of Ferenc Deak, he used to sit there, in that armchair.' It was surrounded by a thick cord, as they usually enclose such things. I jumped over it, and got inside, and I sat down...! 'What are you doing?' 'Nothing. Now I can tell that I was sitting in the chair of Ferenc Deak!' I came out quickly, and I apologized. He caressed me. Of course I went home and told this to my relatives, and they waved their hands saying it was a lie. They wouldn't believe it: 'Such a lie, etc...' At the end I related them how it happened: 'Come with me..., I'm not lying!' When I told this to my father, he liked it a lot, and praised me. He said: 'You were interested in such things too!' And I was interested in so many other things!

When I was 19 years old, I stayed in a pension-house, there were two of them, but I stayed mainly in one, on the Nagykorut *[one of the main roads in Budapest]*, I don't remember its name. On the sixth floor. But it had an elevator. And a famous actress lived there too, she had a permanent room there. I wondered at the fact that she was the actress of the National Theatre and so she lived... So I stayed in a pension-house at the age of 18-19. I traveled, got down in Torokszenmiklos, I stayed there for 3-4 days, picked up what I had to: my uncle gave me a lot of money, and I went to Pest. I already knew my way around, better than in Marosvasarhely.

I finished school in 1927-28, I already knew my husband, because his elder brother, Izold Almasi was a bank director for a while in Toplica. He moved then to Kolozsvár, he was transferred there to a bank. He had a family and children. There is a photo too, my husband is on it with his brother's son in front of the Matyas statue *[in Kolozsvár]*. His wife was called Irma, she was from Segesvár *[today Sighisoara]*. My husband, **Andor Almasi** was already enrolled at the university in Kolozsvár, he was a correspondent student. He studied to be a lawyer. He got his doctoral degree in Kolozsvár *[at the University of Law]*. Nagyvarad, Iasi and Kolozsvár had such universities. Back then one

didn't have to get a doctor's degree in all places, Kolozsvár emitted the diploma only if he took his doctorate. Fortunately there wasn't any university in Marosvásárhely yet, that's why it was cheap, it was a small town with 45 thousand inhabitants. In summer he always came to visit his brother, there was the Banffy bath, he liked bathing, so we knew each other. *[Editor's note: Today the Banffy bath is called Fenyo bath (Bradet in Romanian). The local medicinal bath is 685 m high, its surface is 17 hectares. It is famous due to its lukewarm (mezothermal) waters. In 1882 one of the owners of the woods in Toplica, Daniel Banffy builds the multi-storied holiday home, today there is a hotel in its place. In 1900 the small spa was registered as Banffyfurdo. In 1940 a new concrete basin was built. At the beginning of 1970 a smaller basin and a camping were established there. A 65 degrees thermal water was found near the baths, in a 100 m deep bore-hole. <http://www.cchr.ro/jud/turism/hun/6/66/6601marosheviz.html>]* And it came once to my sister-in-law, to Irma's mind to put me in touch with her brother-in-law. She was successful. Thus he came more and more often.

My father-in-law was from Nyaradszereda *[today Miercurea Nirajului]*, and he had six children. Almasi was such a character, he wanted that one *[of his sons]* stayed home in the shop, and managed it further. He had a beer bottle-filler – that was his occupation. He had a large house just in the center of Nyaradszerada, in one side there was their apartment, in front of it, in the same yard there was the workshop. He bought from the Burger brewery in Marosvásárhely a wagon beer, they transported it on the narrow-gauge railway, carried it home, and there were three or four women who poured it into bottles. *[Editor's note: The brewery established by Albert Burger in 1893 in Marosvásárhely functioned until the 1930s. He was the first to introduce in his brewery a generator station used for local lighting. Thanks to the purchase of the most modern machines the brewery he produced 150,000 n hectoliter a year.]* He had cart and horse, and a lad carried the Burger beer to the innkeepers all along the Nyarad river's side until Korond *[today Corund]*, because there was an inn in every village, so he handed over the beer bottles there. The Burger palace was in the Kossuth Lajos street, but he didn't live there. The Voros Kakas was a Burger palace too. *[Editor's note: The two buildings mentioned by Bella Steinmetz are the same: the building of the today Aranykakas (Golden Cock) restaurant. It is in the present Kossuth street no. 106. The family villa was built by Albert Burger in a secessionist style, he lived there with his family until 1937. The building was surrounded by a park. After nationalization the building was used as a deposit for alcohol, and it got deteriorated. Later the poultry-farm called Avicola restored it and opened a restaurant called Aranykakas. (Marosvásárhelyi Utikalauz, ed. By Sandor Fodor, Impress Publishing House, 2000, Targu Mures.)]* The brewery was in the Sorház street. *[Editor's note: The Sorház street leads into the Kossuth street's ending.]* He was transporting to the whole country. He was extremely rich.

My husband didn't want to *[take over the business]* at all, therefore his father didn't give him any assistance. He provided him lodgings and meal, nothing else. Thus the poor fellow could hardly finish the five grades. My husband spoke Romanian perfectly, despite the fact that he was born in Nyaradszereda. His father originated from Beszterce *[today Bistrita]*, his grandparents were glaziers. The grandparents from Beszterce were called Apfelbaum, but my father-in-law Magyarized his name into Bernat Almasi. The fact is that a nice Romanian gymnasium was built, it still exists in Beszterce, that they glazed in for free. He received for this a document saying that all the Almasi children can study there for free. This was very convenient for my father-in-law, he had two sons *[apart from Andor]*. He sent both of them to the grandfather, and they attended there the



Romanian gymnasium. I know nothing about his time in Beszterce. His benefit was that the county-court was placed in Nyaradszereda, and the former lawyers didn't speak well or didn't speak at all Romanian, they all studied at Hungarian universities, and my husband spoke Romanian perfectly. In the morning he was helping my father-in-law, and in the after-noon he went to offices to translate from Romanian to Hungarian, from Hungarian to Romanian. That's how he finished the five grades.

When my father-in-law saw that he finished the five grades, and he was preparing for the doctorate, he said: 'Well, I have no hopes anymore.' Thus everything got open for him, and he gave him money to buy himself a dinner-jacket and patent-leather shoes, since he had to wear already that collar and patent-leather shoes. And he gave him *[money]* to rent an office. But not too much: he bought a typewriter and a cheap sofa with two armchairs. My father-in-law went further, he got up on the cart, next to the coachman, and he told everybody he was delivering the goods: 'If you have any problems, I have a lawyer son in Marosvasarhely, go to him, he will solve it at a low price.' The office was open and then we had the wedding in 1931. He opened the office a few months before. His lawyer office was in the center, he rented two rooms, it was large, *[the surface was]* 5x4 m or 5x5 m. It was on the floor, the windows gave to the street. Actually he dared to tell my parents in the last minute that he wanted to marry me. As a student he didn't dare even to open his mouth, though my parents saw well that we were dating. But they weren't against him, because he was a very nice person. And he earned enough money to live on in the first month already.

My first husband had three sisters, Irma, Mariska, Magda, and two brothers, Izold and Bandi. The girls were all married. They were all housekeepers, in older times just a few worked, they all had a simple life, and their husbands supported them. **Magda** was married in Korond. Her husband had a shop too, they didn't have any children. **Mariska** stayed in Nyaradszereda, she had two daughters and a son. They had a large butchery. Her husband was quite well-off. The third girl, **Irma** lived in Szovata *[today Sovata]*, she had one child. And they all died in Auschwitz with their children. Nobody returned from my husband's family. That's how I was left with nothing, as they would have been my family after my husband. My father-in-law's family moved to Marosvasarhely in 1940, because right after they *[the Hungarians]* came in, they took his house after half a year. *[Editor's note: Presumably later, in 1941; the beer bottle-filler was wound up because of the Anti-Jewish laws, their house was seized, so they moved to Marosvasarhely in order to make their living, and they were deported from there.]*

The grandparents from Beszterce were observant, as observant as my grandfather. But my husband didn't observe anything. After we got married, he only escorted me to the synagogue, and after it was over, he waited me outside at the gate, to go home together. After four or five years he took me once to Beszterce, I think he had some business there. And he showed me, 'Look, this is the school where I took my final exams. And here was the small house where I used to stay at my grandfather's.' I don't know more about his family. I don't know the name of my husband's mother, she was from Makfalva *[today Ghindari]*. She wore a wig. They were very religious. They weren't delighted about his marrying me, because I had a certain reputation, since I was dancing until the end at every ball. I had a bad reputation in the sense that I was demanding; however I was the daughter of a factory director, who would look down at them surely, because they were simple people from Nyaradszereda. Otherwise they knew my father's name, because he was a

mathematical genius. His son told him: 'I'm going to Toplica, there is a girl I'm courting.' Whose daughter is she, so they could make plans, that he would be lucky, if she is the daughter of the OFA director... That was the name of the enterprise where my father was a director.

I visited my uncle in Torokszenmiklos twice every year, in autumn and in spring, even after I got married. I did other things too in Pest, I was already married then. For example when I was a married woman already, the vending machines were introduced. Around there was the glassed-in counter, in one sandwiches, fried sausage, in the other cakes, in an other drinks, and it turned around. You introduced one forint, the glass opened in front, and you took it out. But you could take out the only thing you chose. And once I realized that the size of one forint is similar to the size of lei. I went there at noon, I was very hungry. I say: 'I won't go home to take lunch. I'll go up to the Svabhegy, and I'll take lunch there.' I introduce my lei, it works perfectly. I had enough, I ate about three sandwiches. I was happy, I'm good in manipulating. It succeeded. I did all this because of the spirit of adventure. Once I was with a friend, and I tell him: 'Come, come, we'll have lunch here, we go to the cinema after that.' I take out my lei coins. He says, 'Bellus, what are you doing?' 'Hush! Shut up! - I say - We'll take lunch with this.' I had bad luck, it didn't work, it didn't turn. 'Bellus, what have you done?' I say, 'I put in one lei. I took lunch with the same yesterday.' He grabbed me and started to drag me. 'Come out quickly, they will close the door.' Since the kitchen was at my back, and they were watching if somebody was not cheating. How could I have known that? 'They will lock the door, ask anybody's papers, and they will see a Romanian passport on you. You'll get caught, detained!' Oh, I got very scared then, I never did such thing anymore. So I did things like that, I was a tough. I could enter the theatre too, I didn't cheat there, Transylvania was a password then. I said: 'I'm coming from Transylvania, I couldn't buy the ticket in advance, give me a place somewhere.' And I always got a ticket for the best place. I was resourceful.

Or I got on the tram, and I didn't punch my ticket just for the kicks, and when the inspector came, I kept on bustling until I got down on the other side. But I never had serious problems. I didn't steal, I was just playing pranks. It's not about miserliness, but sparing, I had that in my veins, that money should be spread out, because we always lived on fixed money, fixed salary, I learnt sparing at home. In such a degree, that when I was a bride, my uncle from Torokszenmiklos gave me a big amount to buy my wedding dress: the morning dress, the evening dress, the reception dress - back then we had such things. 'Dress up! You are a bride! Buy yourself a wedding dress and everything you need!' Well then, it was a lawyer's wife who had to impose herself, and this didn't suit to me. Sports suited me better. But I had to because of interests. Perhaps I never had so much superfluous money, I couldn't even spend them on myself. I said 'I need this amount, this is enough.' I bought my husband a wonderful modern golden Doxa watch in Budapest, in the Vaci Street, with the money my uncle had given me. It cost a huge amount. I showed it to my uncle: 'Look what I bought to Bandi!' He was tearing his hair. 'Why didn't you tell me your money wasn't enough, that you wanted to buy this? I would have given you more money.' I told him: 'I didn't need anything else to buy myself.' I could have bought shoes, underwear, dresses, fur-coat, but no: 'It's enough for me, I have everything, and I'm elegant enough!' Last year I sent the watch to my crony in Israel.

Irma, my sister-in-law was a real Pest-lady, she bought all her clothes only in Pest. She was a great fashion lady. It was her who helped me, when I was a bride. She took me everywhere: to a saloon, where the models came *[and presented the dresses]* so that I chose which dress I needed. I said:

‘That’s the last straw!’ I was so bored! However they lived very differently in Pest. She told me: ‘This will be fine for the morning, we need a costume, this will be your wedding dress. This will be suitable for reception dress, when guests will come in the after-noon.’ She ordered me everything. I was happy to get out from there, because models bored me as they were posing in front of me. I was interested in music, I was completely different. I was so elegant when I came home, but it broke my heart to spend so much money on rags. Reception dress...! What for? Who am I to receive? Well, my girlfriends. I was very naive in this respect. I don’t have a photo of my own wedding dress. They didn’t take any picture. As I was so bored by the wedding, so bored, I could hardly wait its end to get in the car and go home. I wouldn’t have stayed there to take photos of me. Now I’m sorry, because I had a very nice wedding for my first marriage.

And I was the most elegant in Marosvasarhely, because it was always others who dressed me, they dressed me even from Kolozsvár. My sister-in-law and I went together to Pest. ‘Do you have this kind of dress? Do you have that kind of dress?’ She stayed a lot at me, she came to visit us. She was the brown Mrs. Almasi, I was the blonde Mrs. Almasi. I always had blonde dyed hair. I dyed my hair until I got married for the second time. In short I was always elegant, and back then it was uncommon – but *[I dressed]* only within the limits of good taste. Otherwise my husband wouldn’t have tolerated me. However people received me everywhere. I frequented the club. When I was a bride, my society was still together. Some were married already, some weren’t. If I went to Pest, we met. I went to Pest until late 1941. My father bought us a house with five-rooms and two bathrooms. It is 500 m far from here, where I live now. If I stretch out my neck well, I can see my house. It was in a small side street, in the continuation of the main square. It was furnished. My uncle furnished it. And he met all the expenses of my wedding. We didn’t invite many guests, because then you had to requite it. Well, we were invited as well from time to time. My husband made acquaintances easier among the colleagues at the court. The region was large: we had district-court, tribunal, even a court of appeal, which is only in Bucharest now. My husband had an advantage, he spoke Romanian perfectly, and sometimes he helped the elder lawyers, he translated as well. We had society due to him, the friends invited us for cordiality. I wanted to go to work at the lawyer’s office, or to give piano lessons – I had a diploma in piano as well –, and I could have had students. My husband wouldn’t even hear about it. ‘What do you think? Any client who would come into my lawyer’s office, would say: Why did this fellow get married, if he can’t support a wife?!’

It was typical for my husband how he adored me and loved me, for example he didn’t even know how much dowry I had. My father told me that the money was deposited in the bank, and we could buy the house, whichever we’d like to. I didn’t ask either: dad, how much did you deposit? After two months my father asks me, ‘How’s that, you still didn’t find a house? You pay, you live in a rented apartment!’ Then he said very modestly *[she laughs]* ‘Dad, in fact, to be honest, I don’t know how many available funds we have for that.’ I didn’t ask it either. So he told us the amount, and we went then *[to buy a house]*. Briefly my husband was a very modest man.

I played tennis since I was 11. My father was the manager of a large Swiss-Romanian enterprise, which ensured everything, not only to the office-holders, but to the workers as well. It was a huge factory. The big boss came from Switzerland, and said: ‘You need sports and entertainment here...’ – since Toplica was a big village – ‘Wouldn’t you like it? We should make a tennis court, don’t you think?’ He issued the order and gave money, everything. One of the engineers was good in it. He

went to Budapest, copied the ground-plan of the tennis court on the Margit Isle, and we had the same type of tennis court. A tennis court for competitions. He kept on sending tennis balls, since balls were very expensive. It used to be a very expensive sport, it is even today in fact. It wasn't fashionable yet, it was rather an elite sport. In those times bowling and football were coming into fashion. I have a photo with my racket in hand and with my partner. It's true that I was only 14-15. My partner was a young woman, the wife of my father's colleague. First I didn't have a racket, but my brother had, or I asked from somebody. While they were sitting, I played with the ball-boys. I was skilful, and when I got 14, the grown-ups played with me as well. I always played tennis, as a wife too.

Here *[in Marosvasarhely]* I was the member of the MSE for 11 years, until they kicked me out. The MSE is the Sports Club of Marosvasarhely. Whoever wanted to play tennis, frequented the sports club. One could find there Romanians, Hungarians, Jews. But Jews were just a few. There were just two of us, Mrs. Reti and me, the poor Mrs. Almasi. I had the possibility, my uncle always gave me money so that I had everything. So I had a racket as well, and he gave me for my birthdays the most expensive Dunlop. The former tennis we were playing back then, as all things 60 years ago compared to present-day things, was a child's play, as I see it now. My father was right when he said: 'Sport is healthy until one doesn't get fagged out.' Now they are ten, fifteen persons injured in tennis permanently. This was unimaginable in our times. We didn't play like this, it is a jugglery what they are doing now. I was playing until the age of 32, when they kicked me out. There wasn't any difference *[between people]* until 1940. Then a law was introduced, that I couldn't be *[a member]*, because I was a Jew. In the meantime three tennis courts were made in the 'Liget' *[the City Park]*, there was a club called Muresul. *[Editor's note: The City Park was called Elba, then Erzsebet Park, later August 23; today it is called City Sports Park. In 1815 Jozsef Houchard, an expert skilled in architecture transformed the marshy territory into an entertainment garden. It had a summer restaurant, summer stage, cold and warm bath and a roundabout. Hundreds of flowers grew among the trees planted according to a design. In 1905 tennis courts were established in the Park, later a smaller football ground, which was enlarged in 1920 to international size. The Park lost gradually its entertainment feature, and became the home of sports events. (Lajos Sipos: Marosvasarhelyi meselo hazak / Story-teller Houses of Marosvasarhely, Difprescar, Targu Mures, 1999).]* It had different sections: bowling, tennis section, I don't know what else. And they told me: 'Come, play here.' Two Christians came with me out of solidarity. They quitted the MSE and came with me. I would have had anyway a partner at the Muresul. I was welcomed, because there weren't many members. I suppose the MSE had more members. It was sponsored by the Hungarian Casino as well.

There was then the Tornakert *[Sports Garden]* uphill, next to the gynecology *[today Sportivilor Street]*. It was such a nice garden, it had five courts. There were about 12 players permanently. For example the first Romanian champion, Reti's son, Tibor Reti came from there. He went to Bucharest very early, because his father's enterprise had a big warehouse there, and he lived there for a long time. Well, I don't know what he was doing, as our destinies separated. Besides he belonged to the 'upper ten-thousand'. The second wife of Reti was an extremely likeable Jewish woman, she was very ugly, but a very charming, intelligent woman. I played tennis with her. You could never feel directly that she belonged to a different class to say so. The first wife died, and she left two boys. Reti had a daughter with this second one, she must be living somewhere in Hamburg.

Generally women wore knee-deep white skirts [*for tennis*], and a nice short-sleeved blouse, always white. I couldn't even imagine a colored suite, because I never saw something similar. Moreover, I never saw it in Pest either, [*I saw*] only white suits. That is why it was called once the white sport. I was always a little bit more modern as [*the other women*] here, because I played tennis yet in a small white shorts. Only me! As I went to Pest, and I could see it there, and I wanted the same. There was a dressing-room there [*in the Tornakert, so I could change*], but sometimes I dressed up at home. I was pretty! My poor mother used to tell me: 'Bella, you aren't beautiful, you aren't beautiful at all, but you are very pretty! And you are also good in presenting your prettiness, but don't exaggerate!' My poor mother... I had a wonderful pink wrap I used to put on, it wasn't buttoned up, and I ran up on the Artei [*on the Artei street*]. Well, sometimes the shorts was showing a little... In short I had some coquetry, to be honest... However I couldn't bring into fashion the shorts in Marosvasarhely. People got used to the fact that I was a bit extravagant. Though I didn't have many clothes, because I wasn't interested in this. I got them by chance.

I went to competitions sometimes, but my husband wouldn't let me. I participated in competitions in Gyergyoszentmiklos, in Csikszereda, the farthest place I reached was Kolozsvár, my husband agreed to it at last. However I could see he wasn't pleased with it at all, and I quitted. Bad times came as well, and I didn't feel like competing. I was happy to be willing [*to play tennis*], because from 1942 I was no longer in the mood for it, because they took my husband. My past ended in all means.

When I think back, my life was quite vivid before 1940. I was living as a young is supposed to live. I had a decent marriage, I was dancing, because I liked it, I went in for sports, because I enjoyed it. I was a housewife, I didn't like it, but I did what I had to. With a servant. There was a girl who cooked at my mother's house for three years, she was called Viki, Viktoria, and my mother sent her to me. She always used to say: 'You'll see, your husband will send you home, he will divorce you, because you're not able to cook a caraway-seeds soup.' Viki stayed at me for more than two years. However in summer I was at the market every morning at six. I liked to pick out the fresh ones, I always bought the best. Bottling, eating them... I took care to buy the cheaper ones, because I couldn't spend much. Mammy used to say: 'It should always be the best what you bottle. So that it keeps.' It [*bottling*] was fashionable then, we had a hundred of bottles. Oh, ten years ago I still had a hundred of bottles in my larder: compotes and jam. Now I have a freezer, I preserved green beans, aubergine, mushrooms, sorrel. Back then I preserved the same in bottles.

I had some lard in my house, because I liked bread with lard, but I took care not to mix it [*with goose fat*], because my parents ate at me and my parents-in-law ate at me – so I took a great care to this. They were kosher, but even my father wouldn't have eaten at me, if he knew. He arranged in a way to eat it [*treyf meals*] out, so that we didn't find out. He worked on Sundays, but we accepted that we had to have something to live of. We brought home many times a little piece of ham, but we had a tin plate, and we ate it half from the paper, half from that plate, in the kitchen, where we would never have eaten otherwise. My husband didn't know for a long time that I was eating bread with lard. I never picked up breadcrumbs before Passover, I never organized Pesach [*separately*]. At Pesach we always went to mammy, until my parents, more precisely my father was alive. After my father died, we had nobody to lead that ceremony. Here [*in Marosvasarhely*] was a Jewish Club in the main square, it organized Passover for 8 days, and we took lunch there for those 8 days. They laid the table up on the first floor, there was somebody who told the tale [*Editor's*



*note: That is he read out the Haggadah], as a symbol. The stealing of the afikoman was ignored, it can be hid only within the family.*

I never belonged to any organization. I did only sports, I had only that membership [*at the Sports Club*]. I got involved in charity activities as a woman, of course. I was a WIZO member. The WIZO's activity consisted in gathering money for the establishment of Israel; there was a little money-box in every Jewish house. I don't know if they had a name. [*Editor's note: These were the Keren Kayemeth Leyisrael boxes.*] It was a nice little box made of tin, and it was placed in every house in a visible place, and everyone who wanted dropped into it. Someone always came to empty it, and they collected it in a specific place, but I have no idea where. The centre was in Bucharest. The initiator of all this was Tivadar Hertzl, not on a religious basis, but on national basis. We had such a box in our apartment too. My mother-in-law didn't have one. There was no need for a special occasion or whatever, I just came home, I had a lot of coins, and I just put them in the box. Or somebody came to visit me, they saw it, had some change, so they dropped them in it. That's how it piled up, and people say those were quite big amounts, that they brought finally to Vienna. They collected the money from the country first in Bucharest, then sent it to Vienna. I don't know anymore how often they emptied the boxes.

The boys had an organization, the girls didn't. I wasn't member of the WIZO when I was a girl, only as a married woman. We gathered so that we organized game of cards in the after-noon. It seems we didn't like to chat a lot. We chattered half an hour, that was it, it was enough. Playing cards seemed to engage our interest more, and it attracted people. I was a great card-player before the war already. Of course not with millions, but according to my pocket. There were WIZO evenings, the gains went for the WIZO, so I gave to the WIZO what I gained. Whoever had a proper apartment and money, organized such parties four times in one year. I had five rooms, and my dining-room was large, so I could organize it. If I opened the hall, the dining-room and the hall were so big together as a chamber. I organized about four parties, and my girlfriend organized as well. It meant that four times four, sixteen people [*were invited*]. I provided them with teacakes, coffee – I don't know whether it was coffee or tea –, so with something modest, not gateau and things like that, just something to serve the purpose, so that sixteen persons would gather. The gain after sixteen persons went for the WIZO.

There was a Jewish Club here, some people went out there. There was a separate Hungarian Casino as well. Jewish Club and Hungarian Casino – these were their official names. I think it [*the casino*] too had Jewish members. As far as I know the Retis also frequented the Hungarian Casino. But whoever frequented the Hungarian Casino, wasn't member of the Jewish Club. One could play cards in the Club, there was a lecture room with periodicals and music. It had a separate small room, a small kosher restaurant, so one could have there for dinner something simple. The small restaurant didn't have a name. However the main emphasis was on cards. Men, my husband too played 'Chemin de fer' – this is a French expression –, it's like the roulette, but it isn't roulette, it's also a game of chance. Then there was the poker, it was the main game. There were private rooms, small ones, people played there for high stakes. Well, who had money. We never went there. My husband played poker as well, but only within our purse. I played rummy three times in a week. We had fixed days when to go to the club. On Tuesday, on Thursday and on Saturday evening. From early spring to late autumn they used to tell me: 'You're not serious, we don't like you...' – since I rather went in for sports in that period, so I didn't go regularly. On Saturday

evening yes. But on Tuesday for example, at eight o'clock it was still daylight, and I was still playing tennis. However they didn't let me out from the games, they got me back. When autumn arrived, I got back my place. This was a middle-class lifestyle. We were together in the hall, but men set apart, and there was more than one room. Simple room with the adequate square tables, suitable for a rummy game. There were five or six tables with four chairs each. You couldn't sit there in fauteuils just like that. If you wanted to sit down, there was other large room, there were fauteuils, reading matter, periodicals. In some cases the wife liked to play cards, the husband didn't. He didn't stay at home, he had fun too, he went there, found a partner who wasn't alone as well, and he drank for example a beer in the summer. There were several such men. All women played. If it was the wife who didn't play, she stayed at home. A woman wouldn't have stayed there to watch his husband playing rummy or cards until one o'clock.

As we come from the Kossuth Lajos street towards the center, after the Labashaz there is a big multi-storied house, the Hungarian Casino used to be there, it has a vaulted gate. The Jewish Club was in the Main Square, now there is a hairdresser under it, a grocery, and I don't know how many shops. A big house. The balls weren't organized there. In the Tipografiei street, where the cinema is today, there was a large hall, which belonged to the Jews. The Jewish balls were organized there. *[Editor's note: In fact the interviewee talks about the Jewish Cultural Center, which was the building of the former Progres cinema (next to it used to be the Pitik cinema for children) in the present Tipografiei street. It was built in 1928 with the support of the Jewish community for cultural purposes. Many festivities, literary and religious gatherings were organized there. The companies of the Iasi and Vilna Jewish Theatres performed there. Since the 1930s it was used as a cinema until 1994, when it was transformed into a snooker saloon. (Marosvasarhelyi Utikalauz / Tourist Guide to Marosvasarhely. Impress Publishing House, 2000)]* In Marosvasarhely it *[the ball season]* started in autumn, and we had a ball almost every week. Every association organized a ball once in a year: we had Bethlen Kata ball, the MSE *[organized]* the sports ball, then the Lorantffy Zsuzsanna *[Women's Association]* ball, that was the Hungarian women's society, four or five balls were kept each year. The Jewish Women's Society *[the WIZO]* organized a ball once in a year in the Palace of Culture. One could go to a ball with invitation, and the snack-bar was always supported by the respective association: drinks, meals, meat. The snack-bar was very well provided, and this produced quite a lot of money. One wanted to surpass the other, well, all of them wanted a more and more beautiful ball. So that I had my specialty as well *[at the ball of the Jewish Women's Society]*, cake a la Almasi. For me it was the simplest thing to prepare. It was a simple cake, but of course I put whipped cream on it, and all kinds of colored, green, red, violet little jelly on the top. I chopped up almond and hazel-nut, and the top was sprinkled. It looked so nice, like a flower garden. And that was all with the cake. People always looked for it, for Mrs. Almasi's cake. We had discussed that five of us would bring cakes, three, four, five would bring meat dishes, men drinks. We also prepared fine punches.

We received invitation for everywhere, and participated at every ball, because my husband was a young lawyer, and he had to show himself, so that people would learn about this young lawyer. We never went just the two of us, there was always a little company, two or three families besides us. We always went everywhere together. We had our own society. My evening dresses were extraordinary. I had my dresses from Pest, the material came from Pest, and the dressmaker made it here for me. This was created by her, this is made of velvet. *[Editor's note: Bella Steinmetz refers here to the dress she wears on photo ROBST007.jpg and ROBST 008.jpg]* She used to say: 'Listen

to me! I will make you an evening dress, I won't endure any remarks that I shouldn't do it like this... I will do it. If you like it, you take it, if not, I won't work for you anymore!' I always had my dresses made by her. However I didn't order many, because I bought ready-made dresses in Pest or I had dresses made there. My sister-in-law took me to an elegant saloon, so I saw these dresses there. That's how I brought myself this kind of velvet. This is a special, very expensive velvet, as velvet can be coarse and soft as well. The dress was black, and it had a backline. The whole town was saying that what a 'thrifty' person this Mrs. Almasi was, that she had saved half a meter of material just to show her back. But I had a cape for that dress. I put it on only when we set down to the table. If we set down, I took up the cape. Whenever I danced, I took it down. In the evening we were going to the ball, and I put on the dress. My husband said: 'Oh well, but my dear...' I say: 'Why, what should I be hiding? What is it I should be ashamed of?' 'Well, after all...' I say: 'Don't worry now, look, I have a cape, I will put it on if someone finds it too flagrant.' We addressed each other formally with my first husband as 'maga', I don't know why. Not with the second one, but first-name informality didn't work at all with the first one. We always addressed each other with 'maga'. Although it was such a great love, my God...

For example in Pest a bulky gossip journal, the 'Szinhazi elet' [*Theater Life*] was published. One could read about theatres, plays, one could find crosswords, and this kind of who-with-who, who-to-who... What is interesting, that after the war books were sold here at the flea-market, and 'Szinhazi elet' as well. We had an acquaintance who always bought it, that was his 'literary' lecture, and who told me: 'Hey Bella, do you know that you appear in the Szinhazi elet?' It was written there that 'There was in Marosvasarhely a very pretty young woman whose fame is due to that she was saving dress materials...' It was then that I found out what they had written on me. It wasn't interesting anymore. This was after the war.

Before the war all kind of music was played one after the other at balls. In the evening, at the beginning there was a short performance, let's say until eleven, then the ball started, the dance started. The czardas dances were towards the morning, after five o'clock. People used to joke: 'Well, Mrs. Almasi has swept again the hall.' Since I was always the last one to leave the hall. Oh, I danced so much... I got used to, as I frequented clubs that people would gaze at me. Sometimes I liked it as well that people stared at me.

My husband was quite reticent, but he felt good in society. In fact he was living his life. Because I didn't want... [*children yet*]. 'Let's wait one more year, so that you get into your job, and you let me go to balls a little more, and you have fun as well.' We had a good life. However he didn't let himself be terrorized, so that I was given a hard lesson in the third or forth month [*after marriage*]. I told him that I was 20 years old, that I wanted to keep playing tennis, going in for sports, going to concerts. Once it was almost dark, not completely, but it was twilight. He was sitting at home. As I was coming, he told me through the window: 'I wasn't aware of the fact that they had changed the tennis balls for phosphorous ones!' Meaning that I arrived home so late... So he had such remarks once or twice, so I told him: 'Now pay attention, while you know where I am, and you can control me in every minute, I won't tolerate such remarks. Because if you forbid me things or something similar, then I will do it in secret. You can choose.' That's how I set him a lesson. After that I got it back. One year passed. We went out to the café. He got accustomed by then [*to the society life*], and he's taking on a nice pink shirt. I tell him: 'Put on other shirt, I don't like this pink shirt. Choose, you have here light blue, white shirts.' We were going to the café after dinner to listen to music.

'Why? I like it, it's very suitable. What objections do you have to it?' I answer: 'That I don't like the pink shirt. You have a light blue.' He says: 'I like this one.' I reply: 'In this case I won't go out.' 'Well, if we don't go out, we'll stay home.' I say: 'So that's where we got in a few months, in one year, that you can't adapt yourself to me in such a minor thing?' 'I can tell you the same', he says. I was fuming with rage. I told the girl to bring down my suitcase from the loft, I'm going home next morning. Like a dumb, he didn't hear it. He wasn't dumb, he just wouldn't react to it. I told him: 'I'm going home, that's it, I'm leaving you.' He didn't react. I was crying all night of course. He let me cry. So that's how I got back, that one couldn't turn such thing into a problem. As I didn't leave at that the phosphorous balls either... That's how he gave me back that I shouldn't get involved in what shirt *[he should be putting on]*, if it's a clean one...

My husband didn't quite like water. He could swim, but didn't enjoy it. However sometimes I went to row, I prepared lunch, and I called him to come to the Vikend, we would take lunch there, and the sun would shine on him a little, and he would bath. *[Editor's note: It is the most attended holiday camp of the town. Inhabitants started to go out on the area between the Mures river and Sangeorgiu streamlet from the 1930s, where boathouses and weekend cottages were built. Since 1962 weekend cottages of enterprises, swimming-pools, sports grounds, restaurants were established as well on the Weekend Holiday Resort called 'Vikendtelep'.]* So he came out, and finally he felt very good. That's how we evened ourselves up.

When those from the motherland came *[in 1940, according to the Second Vienna Dictate]* [5](#), the mayor was kicked out instantly. They kicked out even the Hungarians. I had a friend here at the town hall, a chief town clerk, he was Hungarian, and he was transferred to a lower position. They behaved very badly, with their own nation as well, not only with Jews. Well, the new clerks needed apartments, and for example they turned out my girlfriend from her apartment, though she was Hungarian, and she had to move to her parents. Let's not talk about this, as the world already knows about their behavior. When Hungarians came in, I became exasperated at once.

In 1940 my husband didn't get paid from the Bar. Only the Jewish lawyers *[didn't get paid]*. Then they obliged him to accept a Christian lawyer partner. But he had no means. He couldn't deal anymore, they weren't allowed to. That would be bread and butter for a lawyer. They behaved badly, because there were a lot of lawyers here, 90 percent of them were Hungarians of course. And none of them offered him to solve at least the current cases. None of them. No. And a Romanian lawyer turned up, who didn't care much of his office, he was a landowner. It was written: dr. Micu. He paid my husband well. Otherwise we wouldn't have had a little reserve. He had a more normal way of thinking, respectively he was considerate. And he didn't support much the Hungarians because of their behavior. Maybe three or four of the lawyers were Romanians. Maybe... But the Romanian wasn't kicked out from the association. My husband had to pay a certain percentage after his work. He says: 'I know, I know the situation, I don't even want to take it.'

This was a small street *[where we lived]*, where petit bourgeois lived, and elder persons than me. I was everyone's Belluska. Because everyone had some sort of 'stomach-ache'. For example 'Oh Belluska, we inherited a piece of land, ask your husband where we should submit this document.' Belluska asked it. The other: 'We bought some land...' or 'We would like to build here. Would you mind compiling a request?' My husband did it. And in 1940, from one moment to the other, when they saw us – though we didn't wear the yellow star yet – they looked at the sky, as if I didn't exist.

I had this bad luck, but not everybody did, so I couldn't conclude something general.

### During the war

In 1942 I didn't dare to go to Pest anymore. Then miseries came. My mother lived in Toplica with my brother. He was taken as well in 1942 to Ukraine, for work service. My husband was taken too in '42. Unfortunately *[we were together]* only from 1931 until 1942... I said then: 'Mammy, come here definitively, because I don't know what will come. It makes no sense that you stay there alone, and I stay here alone.' She, in her large apartment, me with my five rooms. And she said that she would come only if she brought something from hers *[from her vessels]* too. Well I said: 'What you want, what you are very attached to.' Poor mother, she carried here her Passover vessels, and I put them up on the loft, that's how I still have them. I placed over them my husband's files, because he was a lawyer, and the clerks nagged me that I should empty his office, that they needed the place, and my husband wasn't there anyway. And I thought, 'Oh my God...', I carried them tied up, I was so afraid. We put them up on the loft, in a big, clean, tidy chest, but below there were my mother's vessels. And of course they went up, and started to check if there was gold, or what we had hidden there. One file, two files, three files... everything thrown all over the place, they knew he was a lawyer, or at least they realized it seeing the files. They kept on throwing for a while, finally a package was left there *[in the chest]*, and a few vessels of mammy were below. I still keep them, it was a beautiful porcelain. I don't have them all yet, as I broke some of them, but I still have a few pieces in the kitchen. Otherwise the nice vessel was a mania of mammy.

In 1942 they put in requisition two of my rooms, and gave them to a Hungarian royal captain. The captain was the son of an extremely rich landowner, it was war, so they called him up. He had an estate of five thousand Hungarian acres. That is he wasn't a professional soldier, but he had to do the army service, and they called him up on the basis of his age. He could certify that he had bronchial asthma, he was delegated here in a separate car, so they got in requisition, he had two rooms at my house. He behaved very correctly, he introduced himself gentlemanly, he sent in his visiting card, and asked if I could receive him, he would like to pay a visit to me. I answered I would be glad to receive him. He entered like a gentleman, I offered him a glass of liqueur, cakes, he thanked me, we talked a little. He tells me: 'Don't worry, as far as possible, I will be able to protect you from everything. You won't be bothered ever.' He was a mole, but by communism, he didn't spy for Hungarians. That was the point. He wasn't communist, but he rather sympathized with Russians. What did he do, what was his work... *[I don't know that]*. He behaved very properly, it was just that I didn't trust him. He announced me the news all the time, 'Don't be afraid, because Russians are pushing back the Germans...'

At first I was distrustful, because he invited me in many times in the evenings to listen to the radio, because I was forbidden to have a radio. A Jew couldn't have one. Either you handed it over, either you sold it, or threw it away, or you gave it to somebody. We weren't allowed to own radios. Well, we must not have learnt the news! We couldn't have a bicycle or typewriter, I won't mention radios. *[Editor's note: Starting from April 1944 Jews weren't allowed to own radio sets. (This was preceded by the mandatory surrendering of telephones.) From April 7th they set limits to traveling for Jews, they couldn't use cars, motorcycles, they couldn't travel by train, taxi, ship or passenger cars.]* I was listening to it by chance, because the captain took in my radio, otherwise he had his own. And soon after his arrival he put a slip on the door: 'No admittance in official matters.' I didn't



know if I should be happy for this or not. So I was rather happy. I thought, *[this would be like]* Hansel and Gretel, he behaves nice with me, then once he just throws me to the wolf. Mammy always used to say: 'Don't go in, I'm scared, don't go in! Don't go in, so that he won't do this and that... He's a young man, and you're a young woman...' But I was interested in news... And I could see from his activity, from his remarks, that something was wrong. In short he was an infiltrator against Horthy, that is against the Germans, but I wouldn't believe that in those times.

He was curious where they *[the frontlines]* were. Since he was against the war. He considered it an idiocy that the war was still going on, and destruction, murder continued. As he could see that there was no escape, that the Russians would sweep over... as it occurred finally. We listened to it in Hungarian, for example the Voice of America or the Radio Free Europe in Hungarian, together with him. *[Editor's note: Presumably they listened to the Hungarian program of the BBC. They had Hungarian broadcasts in London and in Moscow too: Hitler's propaganda was counterbalanced by the multilingual World Service of the BBC, usually prohibited in the aimed areas. The Hungarian broadcast was transmitted for the first time 4 days after the outbreak of World War II. The Radio Kossuth, the secret, clandestine radio station organized by the Foreign Committee of the Hungarian Communist Party with the support of the soviet government started its broadcast on September 29th 1941 in Moscow. The anti-fascist station opposing to the war was transmitted for a while from Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan (the Hungarian program of the Radio of Moscow was operated next to it). From 1942 the broadcast was transmitted again from Moscow, until its ceasing in April 4th 1945.]* Though I was frightened, I thought he surely wanted someone to come and catch me in the act. Because the neighbor wanted to report that I was emitting signals – we had to make dark in the evening – for the Datas. Data corresponds to the present MiG aircrafts. But those are small fast aircrafts, they run here and there. And that I'm emitting signals for Data aircrafts. He sent word. He threatened me. But then he got a message, he didn't know from where, he only knew that he got a report from the Securitate, that he ought to shut his mouth, because he might be hanged. Otherwise they would have finished me, or until I would have got to the captain, they would have hanged me already. But when I told him, he said: 'You shouldn't mind about it!' He always said: 'Stay calm!' But anyway, he left off speaking after a while, since a note was put out: 'No entrance here without permission!' So he protected me somehow. Then the poor fellow asked me: 'Don't you trust me, Bella, after all this, that all I'm doing, I'm doing because I'm on your side?'

He had bronchial asthma, he was indisposed many times, and mammy always went in, and gave him honeyed tea or milk with honey, everything. The poor fellow was so grateful to mammy. He brought me home everything, food – bread, meat –, so that I wouldn't need to go out frequently. So I could see that he behaved very correctly. And well, I wasn't allowed to have this and that, so finally I gave him jewels, mainly mammy's, not mine, and money, everything. By the end, when he knew already that they would take us away, he implored me. He already knew where they would take us. He asked me to let him take us to Romania by his own car, the border was fifteen kilometers far. 'There – he said – you have to walk with your mother only one kilometer. You will be taken...' I said: 'It doesn't matter, Frici, they take us to the Hortobagy to work on the fields. Mammy is healthy, I am too, we will work.' In 1944 the Russian canons were already roaring here, at the Romanian frontier. Imagine that, they took us in May, and on August 23rd [6](#) the region here was liberated, Russians were already here. *[Editor's note: Bella Steinmetz confuses a little the events in Northern Transylvania and those in Romania; though on August 23rd 1944 Romania changed sides to the Allied Powers, Northern Transylvania remained under Hungarian rule, and all*

*of its regulations remained valid for it.]* This was the greatest crime of Hungarians: they were the last ones who effectuated deportation. Couldn't they have handled somehow three months more that miserable people?! That Frici begged me. But I answer: 'All right, you take me over the border, but where should I lay down mammy?' 'Go – he says – you'll get help in the first house.' I said myself, he wants to own the whole house – as I had a nice, five-roomed, furnished apartment, he had my money, jewels, everything –, now he wants this too. I was unable to believe that a Hungarian royal captain would want to do such a good deed.

People came from Poland, brave and young people, who succeeded to escape not to get to concentration camps. Hungary wasn't involved in the war yet. And they went to the Jewish communities, and asked the addresses of Jews. They came to me as well, that 'This and this is happening to us, they want to kill us, they are killing the Jews. They take them to Auschwitz.' I gathered some food rapidly and I told them: 'Leave me alone, go now, so many lies...! This isn't true, this is a bullshit!' Everybody was angry on them for what nonsense they were telling. We said that it wasn't true, that they were lying, they were Jews of naught.

There were some here too, who were smart – not in Marosvasarhely. The Jews from Maramaros were more in their right mind. I lived in Maramarossziget for almost two years with my second husband, and I met a man from there who knew many things. Among others he introduced me to a boy who went up in the mountains, load up with money, food, whatever he could carry. He went to a shepherd and told him: 'Look, save me. I will stay here, and if you shield me, I will give you this and that.' The shepherd had a wife, who sometimes went up to bring food to her husband, so she brought to the young man too. Thus the young man escaped the 'oven'. When the wife told him that Russians were in Viso, he came down, went in his house, he found there all his things. He had his life too, but not his family unfortunately... The family couldn't go with him, it would have been too striking. However, the parents were old, they were approximately sixty years old. They wouldn't have gone up to the mountains! For the mountain is so close in Maramarossziget, as if we would be climbing up to the Cenk in Brasso. Whoever knows the mountain and undertakes such thing, can go up.

*[In Marosvasarhely]* They announced that everybody should bring food enough for three days. Rumors were circulating a week before *[putting people into ghettos]*, but officially I think they announced a few days before. I haven't seen any posters. The town was small, with about 40-45 thousand inhabitants, it was enough for one to learn it, and that person started *[to spread the news]*. We called the Arany Janos street the Jewish street, because many poor Jewish families lived there. One was delivering bread from the bakery. Some were shoemakers or cobblers, or did woodwork at home. The other, let's say was a tailor apprentice, and was an outworker. But lately Jews weren't employed usually, because it wasn't allowed. The Jewish merchants were forced to accept Christian partners, so that the business would be at least 60 percent Christian without them contributing even with a penny. They wouldn't waste laws on us, only a decree was needed for this, there was no need for a law. *[Editor's note: The anti-Jewish laws introduced in Northern Transylvania were brought in by the Hungarian parliament starting from 1938. When following the Second Vienna Dictate the northern part of Transylvania was re-annexed to Hungary, the anti-Jewish laws and measures approved by the parliament were brought into force immediately.]*

The march was approaching our street. They knocked on every Jewish house's door, so that we go to the brick factory. And they didn't come into my house. Me and my mother too, we packed in

what we could in a rucksack. When they passed by, I shouted after one of the guards: 'A Jewish family lives here too, and you didn't ring here!' He comes back very angrily: 'What's your name?' I tell him 'Mrs. Andor Almasi'. He takes a look on the list: 'Don't play jokes with me, you're not on the list.' And the march goes away, and we stay there with mammy in despair, as, well, there were quite a lot of Jewish families around us, they are all gone, and we were left there... Well, I thought: 'So they want to hang us up here, or what the hell?' I could hardly wait that the captain arrived home, and I told him what happened. 'It's alright, it's alright! You stay home. I told you I would take you over the frontier. The border to Romania is just a few kilometers far, and you and mammy have the chance to escape.' But I didn't want to hear a word on this. I said: 'I have nobody over there. Where would mammy lay down in the evening?' Because I was concerned all the time with mammy... But he kept on repeating: 'I would like if, I really would like that...' I implored him on bended knees to call for a soldier or policeman, and take me in, because I couldn't leave for the brick factory by myself, with mammy, wearing that big *[yellow]* star [Z](#). He says: 'If you insist so much, I can't resist it.' So he sent his orderly, then two soldiers came, two rotters, seventeen-eighteen years old kids – these were the most dangerous – and 'Now go...!' That's how we got to the brick factory.

When we were taken to the brick factory *[at the beginning of May]*, they kept us there under inhuman conditions, in the open air. Frici's Romanian orderly came in every second day. The high-ranking officers usually have a servant, a soldier, who served him, stayed *[with him]* all day, he entered the caserne only for the night. Frici came into the brick factory with his lad, and he always brought us something, for example two blankets for mammy. He brought in a bread, a piece of roasted meat, food, since we didn't get any food at all. They said: 'Take with you package, food for three days.' Finally it was much more than three days. Everybody ran out of food. He came in dressed in uniform, he pretended to look for somebody. He could come in, well he reported that 'I'm looking for So-and-so.' Otherwise he didn't have to identify himself, because he had his rank there *[on the uniform]*. And he helped us, but it was too late, I didn't dare to get out from there anymore. However, if we had had courage, then I could have got out even from there with my mother, and I could have gone home, so now take me by car to the border, and let me there. But this was our fate. Where should I escape with my mother?! I didn't believe, and when I realized it, it was too late.

The brick factory was in use once, but it was ruined by then. The first ones, who were in front, could find some place to be inside *[under the roof]* and protected against rain. At the end of May it rained already. We were left outside. In the open air. We took some blankets with us. Well, who could. Then one or two families who knew each other, we got together. It was a disorderly, filthy yard, and we found some slats. Men knocked them into the ground, put a blanket above it, or a cardboard, whatever they could find. So we set down outdoors, on the ground. And that was that. There was to it. That's how inhumanity begun.

I recall from the days at the brick factory that there was a deep hole dug at the end, and one had to sit on a bar, and that was the toilet: for young people, children, elders, men, women... There was a tap with running water somewhere, but sometimes they gave us water, sometimes they didn't. There was no other place to wash. In fact we didn't take our clothes off, because nights were cold. And we had rainy days, and we were happy if the sun was shining. We were squatting inside all the time.

I had to hand over the jewels, because they knew that Mrs. dr. Almasi must have had a ring, a bracelet, or at least a watch. I didn't dare not to surrender it at the bank. In those times the Commercial Bank was in the centre. However, I didn't surrender everything either, but I gave the other part, which I wore more, to this captain. It is a custom for us to give a ring as a sign of the engagement, together with the wedding-ring. And we had had to surrender everything, except the wedding-ring. But when they took us from the brick factory and put us into wagons, there was a box, and everybody had to take off even their wedding-ring, and drop it into the box... They transported to the motherland or shared out among themselves what I handed over in the bank. That wasn't taken by the Germans, but by those who were clerks here. That vanished without a trace.

We were here at the brick factory for about ten or twelve days. And they put us into wagons after that. Everything was a mere lie. They said they would take us to the motherland, and we would do some sort of agricultural work. And we believed that, because it seemed reasonable. We thought that if Germans, the frontlines were pushed back this far – shootings could be heard in Bucharest –, the Hungarian Jews wouldn't be deported, because where should they deport them? We thought it was just a matter of days or weeks, and the war would end, as it ended indeed. We were put into rail freight cars on May 1st, 2nd, we arrived to Auschwitz on May 4th. *[Editor's note: Deportations from Marosvasarhely were effectuated on May 27th and 30th, respectively on June 8th; 7549 Jewish persons were put into carriages. (Carmilly-Weinberger Moshe, Út a szabadság felé! / Road to Freedom, Cluj, 1999)]* And on August 23rd Romania was already liberated. This was the greatest sin of Hungary, that it was the last to deport in Europe, when he knew as well where the front was. Wasn't Pest informed on where the front was?

We had to get on the wagons, then destination Auschwitz. We didn't know that of course, just as we traveled, traveled and traveled, and one day passed, and we were still traveling in the wagon. We traveled for three days. Eighty people in one wagon..., so it didn't mean that everybody could sit down. We were happy if we could let somehow the elder people sit down. I was shocked for the first time in the wagon, when a mother was holding her child in her lap, he was crying badly, and she didn't manage to calm him down, and in her despair she caught the urine in the nappy, and that's how she wiped the child's chapped lips. Nobody had water anymore. Everybody brought a little water, a bottle – there weren't plastic bottles yet –, but that was off for a long time. And that little baby... he didn't even suck anymore..., and one couldn't put bread into his mouth yet. This was the first shock I got, so 'Good Lord, what's this?!' There weren't any problems after, they went straight into the gas...

We had no idea in the wagon where they would be taking us. The train stopped at the Hungarian border, they opened the doors, the gendarmes with cock-feather on their hat came up: 'Whoever has any gold or any kind of value, hand it over, because if not, we shoot you in the head right here!' Some of us had. Me either. I was wearing, and mammy too hand-made sweaters, and we sewed into them thin chains. In 1942 my husband had been taken to the front, and we had heard that they could have got bread for gold. So who had had the possibility, had bought very thin golden chains, and had sent these for them. There had been two men who had guarded the work service group. Their families had been at home. We had stuffed them with everything, with money, food, so that we could have sent them something. Well, I could hardly wait for the night to come to undo it somehow, and I searched for a small hole on the wagon to let them out. Not so much time

after that Germans took us over, direction Auschwitz. We knew already [*that it wasn't true what they had said*], because as we were advancing, we saw the name of the stations. And who knew a little bit of geography, could see immediately, that 'Hoops, this is close to Austria, we are even going in Poland's direction!' – since we saw Polish labels too. In fact Auschwitz was in Silesia [*Editor's note: in East-Silesia*], that used to be Poland, but Germany annexed it by then. However, we did not know what **Auschwitz** was...

We arrived in **Auschwitz** on May 4th [*Editor's note: It is much more probable that Bella Steinmetz arrived in Auschwitz at the end of the month, either on June 4th.*] I know this because for us, Jews from Marosvasarhely that is the day of mourning. When we arrived, they pulled us off [*the wagons*] : 'Los, los, aber schnell, fast, fast!' Only the cattle are driven like this. This was carried out by the men from there, the haftlings, the prisoners. Everything had to be left in the wagons. We got off without any packages, only with the things we had on us. We walked straight about 50 meters, maybe even less, and the slaughterer was already in front of us, in black clothing: Mengele, in patent-leather boots coming up until this, elegantly. He had a stick. We found out very soon that it was Mengele, because there were Polish girls already. Many were deported already from Austria, Poland, Estonia, what the Germans had invaded, they deported from all those countries. Then he looked at me, and he just made a sign with the stick... I didn't know yet what would happen to my mother. Only after that the Polish girls from there told us, 'Can you see, there, how the chimneys are smoking? The previous transport...' From Szatmarnemeti, from Maramarossziget, I don't know from where. However, the furnace was smoking at full steam. There was such a smell permanently, and it was so terribly hot, that at the beginning we almost suffocated. Especially when it was gloomy, and it pressed down [*the smoke*]... That was it.

After we were selected, they took us straight to the bath, undressed stark naked, removed all our hair. They cut our hair as well. They treated us roughly. The old hatflings who were in the camp already were in the bath. With supervision of course, women in German army clothes... After bath and depilation we entered a hall, for example I was looking for my girlfriend I used to walk with hand by hand: 'Bozsi, where are you, Bozsi?' And she says then: 'Bella, Bella, can't you recognize me?' Well if someone cuts their hair, she becomes unrecognizable when baldhead.

My girlfriend is called Boske Darvas. She is still living, in Israel. She had luck to escape. Her husband too. They came home, had a child very soon, and left for Israel immediately. Her husband died, she was left alone, she raised her child, she has grand-children. She had an elder brother who had studied in Paris, he didn't return, he stayed there, so he wasn't deported. And he was extremely rich. He died, his sister inherited everything. When she wasn't needed anymore, she entered to a retirement home. But it's such a place, they have to pay 4 thousand dollars a month. They have everything there. Separate rooms with bathroom, television set, three or four menus, they have swimming-pool, a doctor of their own. Briefly, just a very few can afford this. She had money, so she pays it from that.

For example in Auschwitz we had to change clothes, and we threw down the old ones, there was a big-big heap of clothes. We had to pass one by one, but 'Quickly! Quickly! Quickly! Schnell! Schnell! Schnell!' – this was the slogan all the time. We had to pick up the clothes fast, so we tried to choose from afar. Well, but we couldn't see from that far. I picked up one, but I could see that it was for a corpulent person, and I threw it back, and I took other one. I got two big slaps in the face from a soldier, but tough ones. He looks into my eyes and says: 'Didn't it hurt?' I say: 'No! Not from



you.' He looks at me: 'From me?' 'No. Why should it hurt?' Having heard this he went on. If he asks me one more question, he shoots me in the head for sure, because I would have told him: 'You're not a human being, but an animal...' After this I thought over: 'You fool! It costs you one word, and with a ball *[they shoot you]!*' Maybe it would have been better, because after that I had such a hard life.

In the first month they tattooed us already. We were very happy, because we thought if someone has to be given a number, it meant that we existed. But it was for no use at all. The tattooing didn't hurt, because they were very skilful, German girls did it. I had luck, she was skilful, because she made me a small one. But for example my sister-in-law had such a big one, and all in a mess. I have it in all the documents I got. My number was 13317. I have heard only of one person from Marosvasarhely, who removed it *[the tattoo from their hand]*. I haven't heard the same about anyone else. This is a shame *[that they removed the tattoo from their hand]*.

In fact there *[in Auschwitz]*, that was a torture. They drove us out from the block at four, half past four in the morning – we didn't know what time was, we just suspected it looking at the sun. A hundred thousand people were in the C concentration camp, where I was. *[Editor's note: This is supposed to be the Birkenau, Auschwitz II concentration camp, where more than 90,000 prisoners were gathered.]* There were one thousand persons in every block. So there, 'in fünfte Reihen', lined up nicely by five, we waited between the blocks, and we waited, and we waited. And they came, I don't know, after five hours, six hours. There was an intense sunlight, it scorched. They counted us to see if we were all there, and they let us stand further. We weren't allowed to enter the barracks. Then they started to shout for somebody to go for the food. They carried it in a big stainless aluminum slop-pail *[cauldron-like vessel]*. They prepared us soup from marrow, it's a kind of turnip, maybe they produce it Germany, however it wasn't vegetable marrow. It had grass, it had cattle-turnip, many times sand was creaking between my teeth. Of course a very few could drink it. Sometimes eight of us got one pot. So we took it one by one: a sip for me, a sip for you, and we watched so that no one would have two sips, because every sip was a matter of life. In the morning we were given, I think, twenty decagrams of bread, one slice. For the whole day. Also in the morning they brought us in a slop-pail too some black wish-wash, without anything. On Yom Kippur 90 percent didn't eat that little food we got in Auschwitz, when people's life depended on one sip. We got so minimum food, that 15 decagrams of bread and that little thin soup made of cattle-turnip and grass counted as well. I didn't eat either of course. Not only me, but those who never observed any festivals, on that day they didn't eat the food either. That's a saint day.

Nobody had any special thing to do. There was a small enclosed hole in the front, where somebody watched over the internal order. That was a kind of position. They chose somebody from us. You needed a great luck for that. However, that person was the first to draw from that food, hoping to get something more consistent. It's a little tiring for me to speak, because it upsets me... I haven't had any kind of assignment in the concentration camp. On the other hand I was very brave. What I did was that I skipped off in the night. The kitchen was quite far, about a hundred meters, maybe even more. In the night I sneaked in, though it was illuminated. Every five meters there was a lamp, the German stood there, with his gun on standby. I sneaked to the kitchen, where there was a rubbish heap, and the girls who worked at the kitchen threw out sometimes a cabbage or a rotten tomato. So I rummaged there something, and I ran back. That's what I did. Just a few dared to do this, because it was dangerous, if they saw you, they shot you. They hit an acquaintance from

Marosvasarhely, and shot her in the eye. She lost one eye. However I didn't do this every evening, just occasionally.

Four or five of us from Marosvasarhely, we always tried to stay together. During selections, when they saw that someone could hardly stand [*on her feet*], then the person behind her held her, so that the slaughterer wouldn't notice [*Editor's note: Bella Steinmetz refers to Mengele*] that she was collapsing, because in this case he called her out immediately and sent her into the gas. He had a good eyesight, he noticed everything. It also happened that the slaughterer asked: 'Who is your sister?' If someone was attached [*to somebody*], he asked right away: 'Is she your sister? Or cousin?' so one realized that they shouldn't tell this, because they would be separated. So we said no. 'Yet why do you care for her?' We exchanged glances: aunt, acquaintance. In short we told all kind of lies in order to keep together those four or five persons. It wasn't much use to us, but we managed somehow to stick together when we started to work. The wife of the poor Marton Izsak [*Editor's note: Centropa made an interview with him as well*], who died recently, so his wife was with us too. When we started working, we were laughing on our misery, that 'Tell me, what sort of relative are you for me? The grand-mother of the wife of my aunt's nephew?' Thus we were given to lying, so that she would be neither relative, but to still keep us together.

A committee arrived, but we didn't know who was who. However we were happy, because this meant that they would take us somewhere. But we had to undress stark naked, clothes on the arm, and we had to walk before the committee's eyes. We noticed that they've been watching mainly everyone's legs, if they weren't sinking, so how capable she was. We realized after that, that they were taking us for a stationary work. From May, June, July, August, they took us in September. First they took us in **Bergen-Belsen**, that was a concentration camp too. But we had a much better time of it. They kept us there for two weeks at least, to strengthen us a bit. Big tops were set up there. We were on the ground, but we got a lot of blankets. The food was somewhat better; we didn't have to get up in the morning. We had water, we could wash ourselves and go to the toilet. There was a piece of carrot or potato left on the ground sometimes, or things like that, and we could get these. So let's say we were well off there. We didn't have to line up for appel. If it rained, they came in the tents and counted us there. And they took us to the factory by train. We were one thousand five hundred in total who were taken to work in the [*aircraft*] factory. This was close to Leipzig, as close as Maroszentgyorgy from here. [*Editor's note: That is less than 5 km far.*] A silk-factory used to be there, but they transformed it into a war factory during the war. And there was a small bathing room as well.

When they took us there, it was more humane in that sense that we lived in barracks, and everybody had two blankets. Where we lived, it was a large building, a corridor in the middle, rooms to the left and to the right, but settled differently. Ten persons lived in one room, six in the other. Once it must have been a caserne, and I suppose they transformed it, but I don't know it for sure. They let us in, like a herd, and everybody started to clutch. The eight of us from Marosvasarhely ran in a room. Boske Darvas, Mandel after her husband, the wife of Marci [Marton] Izsak, Lulu, a girl called Emma, three sisters: Klari Izsak, Gizi Kelemen, Nusi Kelemen. They kept secret that they were sisters. We, from Marosvasarhely knew it, but they always stood in different lines, and they didn't even resemble each other. What a bed we had there! It had some kind of straw, but it was so cold like hell. So we put a blanket above, and three others on us. We were laying two on one plank-bed to warm up each other. Some bricks were broken, we could peek out

so see if the Fuhrer, the boss of the concentration camp was walking in the yard, or if anyone else was out. There was a washing room, it was like a fountain: the ice-cold water was flowing out in the middle. We watched each other. We kept discipline. A young girl, the poor child, she was always cold, and she didn't want to wash herself. We told her: 'Whoever doesn't obey our rules, can go out from this room!' She didn't want to be with the women from Maramaros, but we turned her out, she went in other room. The poor girl cried, knelt down so that we take her back, because from now on she will join us in the morning or in the evening to wash. We were afraid of louses, because louses ravaged people. However people had hardly louses in our block. For dinner we got margarine, honey in packets. Sometimes we got some sort of salami. For example I always changed the meat for margarine or honey. Others would give even bread to get some meat in change. But I never gave bread.

We worked twelve hours, and we had that luck that it was warm in the factory. We made aircraft parts for Messerschmidt aircrafts. It is a world-famous brand. They brought smaller or bigger automatic machines from Czechoslovakia, they were already installed in the factory. I could say I had luck here, that I had quite an easy work. For example my friend had bad luck, she had to make big bolts. This meant that she had to install iron of two kilos on the machine. Mine was a small bolt, I had to fix the machine with that. They didn't really control us. But the German supervisor said, 'Pay attention to work accurately, otherwise I will transfer you to the heavy machine, to the «schwere Maschine»!' I had a Polish *Vorarbeiter*, a foreman who taught me how to handle the machine, and who was responsible for me. He was a Christian Pole, they were taken from Poland, France, Italy, because they were against Hitlerism. They were gathered and transported to Germany for free work. However, we heard that they lived in better conditions, it was warm in their block. They lived somewhere else, not among Jews. They got little money, so they could buy a shaver, they could buy a piece of soap, they had water. So they looked more civilized, because they could get shaved.

At five o'clock they rang the bell, because we had to be in the factory by six. The factory was at a distance, like the Palace of Culture from here [*a few minutes walk*]. We walked there in lines, under military supervision. We had luck that the frontline was close. There were extremely many air-raid alarms. Often it lasted twenty-twenty five minutes. We had to run down to the shelter then. It was obligatory for everybody to go down. The factory still had an air-raid shelter. There was a tight, long-long bank. We were sitting there, it was warm, and we fell asleep. Once we saw a bombing, when Hamburg was demolished. We found out this later from the Poles, because they had a hand-made radio – they worked in some workshops, and there was a technician. Thousand aircrafts flew above our heads, so many went at once that one couldn't see the sky.

There weren't Jewish men with us, only women. Men were all Polish or French Christians, but there was also a mole. For example my master said: 'Don't mix with that French Häftling, because he's a mole.' As he wore prisoner clothes. They knew everything. They were caught once listening to the radio, and one of them was hanged up. He was hanging for days in the factory's yard, so that everybody saw him. However this event didn't frighten the Poles. Not even after one week they had a radio again. I respect deeply the Polish heroism. They told us for example every morning: 'The frontline is here, the frontline is there.' They explained how to disconnect the electric current from the wire fence, in which the electricity was introduced, so that we could come out, 'if they want to empty the concentration camp'. My supervisor showed me that I should throw a small

piece of iron so that it touched two wires, because the electricity would be off. He had ten machines he was responsible for in front of the German boss, reporting if everything was alright. After a while he said: 'Listen to me! You make twenty or twenty-five bolts, very accurately. You put them aside, but then you make it like this, to produce rejects. You put them at the bottom. I will verify, if you don't do this, I will transfer you to the heavy machine.' So he taught me sabotage. The Germans came to verify, they checked the bolts at the top. They had an instrument they used to measure the bolts, it was ok, that was it. But only rejects were underneath. Well I wouldn't have liked to get up on the plane I did. They taught the others how to sabotage.

It happened at the workplace, one night my machine was kaput, so it was broke down. My master wasn't there. I set down on the boxes, and due to the fatigue, exhaustion I fell asleep. Right then the executioner, the commander-in-chief came to verify us, his eyes were full-blooded. I could see he was out of his mind. He said: 'You present yourself to me in the morning.' I knew what it meant. When the *sichta* was over, so at six in the morning, when the other turn arrived, we were going in the concentration camp, the office was there, and one had to stand in front of it. It meant that he would put me at one meter distance from the wires. I could stand hunger, but I suffer terribly of being cold. I said to my colleagues: 'Guys, I won't stand there. I won't bear that.' They implored me. 'Dear Bella, we will all bring you hot bricks.' When we went to the factory, we got a boiler suit, a work clothes. They said: 'We bring you a warm overall.' I told them: 'No, because I won't bear it anyway.' 'Bella dear, he will put you in the bunker.' There the water was high like this. I said: 'It is all the same if I die this or the other way! I won't go. Don't be upset, we will all suffer, I'm one with you, but I don't want to die like this. Believe me, I saw he had no idea, he forgot it a long time ago, you didn't see how he looked like.' Well, and that's what happened. I didn't go. We were watching all day if he was coming, but he didn't. That's how I escaped. I can't imagine how anyone could bear it. I felt I couldn't. I would have lost my balance because of tiredness and cold, I would have fallen on it [*on the wire-fence*]... I didn't suffer at all from hunger during one year. Others suffered a lot. I never had a good appetite, and I ate every shit they gave us. I said: 'You want to survive this, so you must eat everything.' I wanted to live to see what would happen after that. This was my slogan. Especially when it was coming to the end.

Nobody hurt people in the factory. Everybody was working there. When we were already in the factory, whoever was thinking, they could see that it was a lost case. So they weren't course, but they were revenging. When the executioner found me asleep, my girlfriend wanted to protect me, and she begun to speak in a foolish way, in a perfect German: 'The poor woman, she's not used to such hard work, she's the wife of a lawyer.' The German boss who was responsible for work heard this. When the executioner was left, he says: 'Du bist Frau Doktorin? [*In German: 'So, you're a doctor's wife?'*] Hold on, Frau Doktorin!' Each day, during break, from one to two o'clock, when we had one hour lunchtime, he took me into his office: 'Clean the window, scrub the floor, Frau Doktorin. That's not well done, Frau Doktorin!' Well, this was his revenge. Though I was a simple human being, a lawyer's wife, that's also a simple citizen, not a somebody.

When the gunshots could be really heard, he [*the supervisor Pole foreman from the factory*] taught us: 'Don't go anywhere! They will command you in the yard, but don't move! Don't obey!' And he showed us how to evade. A few of us really went there, eight or ten to the fence, and he knocked the iron to it skillfully, and we saw it worked. However we didn't dare to touch it, but he did. We said: 'We went through this terrible year, should we die like this now?' But he grabbed it, drew it

apart – nothing happened –, and he slipped through it. Then the second slipped through. I didn't dare. About four slipped out, but I wasn't among them. They weren't searched for. The Germans themselves, the supervisor soldiers escaped too. We started to notice that they are less each day. On the third day even less. That's how we became courageous. We didn't go anymore to the factory, but they wanted to empty the concentration camp. One night, when they took us out from the concentration camp, we lay down in quiet on the roadside. The procession passed, and we stayed there. This must have been by the end of March or middle April [1945]. Only the chief of the concentration camp kept on walking, he thought that if he took them *[the prisoners]* to a certain place, and the Russians caught him up, he would be saved, because he would have said: 'Here's the writing, the order to execute the prisoners, and I didn't.' So he would have escaped as a reward. But nobody protected him. They asked how he behaved. Everybody told them that he was an alcoholic crook, so they arrested him at once and took him away. He didn't survive for sure, he didn't deserve it at all. The war ended officially on May 9th [1945], we felt safe only then, that we weren't prisoners anymore.

### After the war

Everybody went home from deportation. Only the Poles didn't. They answered with astonishment, when I asked them, 'Are you going home?' 'Home? Where? Which one is our country? That one, where they sent us to Auschwitz, where they sent my mother to Auschwitz?' So all the Poles emigrated, and they pursued studies. Though Palestine wasn't Israel yet. They supported themselves somehow, and they graduated. They all speak three or four languages at a native speaker's level.

It took a long time to come home, because the rails were bombed, so trains didn't run. We didn't even know where we were, in which direction to go. We departed on foot. We asked Germans in vain how to get to Prague – we thought they knew better where Czechoslovakia was. One showed in this direction, the other in a different one. We got on a small vicinal train, then they dropped us down, because 'We are going this way, that's not good for you, try to go that way...' We got on a truck full with Romanians – we told them we were Romanians, if we met Hungarians, then we were Hungarians – and they took us for a while. Finally we arrived to Prague, and there we found a freight train, which took us to Pest. We arrived in Buda, but we couldn't cross to Pest, because all the bridges were bombed. I know Pest like the centre of Marosvasarhely. I had been in Budapest for many times until I got married, and after that too I was there a lot. Every year twice. They took us from one bank to the other by huge rafts, boats, because the Danube is large at Pest. As the Hungarians were retreating, they blew up the bridges so that the Russians couldn't pass. *[Editor's note: The bridges were blown up by the retreating German troops at the end of the World War II.]* Idiots, did they want to win the war here...?!

When we came back from the concentration camp through Pest, they set up a kind of hostelry, perhaps they vacated a school. We arrived there to be registered. I saw there Ilonka Kohn, the wife of Marton Kohn. This family had had an automobile in Marosvasarhely. Marton didn't learn how to drive, he didn't even want too, because he was swanking. He had a storied house on the corner, where the McDonald's is, and upper there was a separate tennis ground too, where the poor Marci Izsak's atelier was. That happened in Ceausescu's time *[under Ceausescu's 8 rule]*. *[Editor's note: The atelier was built after the World War II, but before Ceausescu's coming to power.]* I had been there once *[before the war]*, I didn't go again, because it was a bad ground, and they couldn't play



well. They acted so sensibly, they scented what was going to happen, and they went to Budapest in time, together with the two children and with a few bags – they didn't mind leaving here their fortune, everything. They hid there for a while. When the Szalasi <sup>9</sup> government started to stink strongly and to be dangerous, and when the Arrow Cross started to gain ground, they could bribe a German SS officer, so they went by a German train to Bucharest, because Bucharest was partly liberated, it was liberated very soon after that. So they all survived, the two of them and the two children. After Pest was liberated, she came back, so we met. All the four of us knew her. She fell on our neck, and she took us to her place. That's how I found out the story. She kept us there for one week, and she provided us with food and everything. She gave us money saying: 'Go to the hairdresser, because you look like savages.' Since our hair was cut too, and well it grew in one year a little. But I dyed it. That's how I came home, I was the blonde Mrs. Almasi, and I remained the blonde Mrs. Almasi to the end. But dye was unavailable after the war, so once my hair was straw-yellow, then violet. I got very angry. Once we went to Nagyvarad, and I dyed my hair to its own color. So I stopped dyeing it, I remained with the original color. So she was very nice, and she also gave us so much money, that we could have lived on it, let's say for one month. They never came back to Marosvasarhely, they stayed in Pest, and after a very short time they left for Germany.

In Pest we went to the railway station – we were five – and they let us climb up to the top of a freight train. 'Travel laid down, because we don't know where the tunnels are, we go to Bucharest' – said the main engine driver. So we traveled laid down and we arrived to Nagyvarad. There one of my girlfriends could inform her younger brother, Jozsef Helmes, because her brother lived in Bucharest. He came by a large microbus, and took us home to Marosvasarhely, all the five of us went directly to her. Four scattered, because all of them got back their apartment somehow, or she took a look, closed it and left. One of them went to Temesvar, the other to Maramarossziget. Everybody who found there a family [*who found a family installed in her apartment*], turned it out [*the occupants*]. When Transylvania was liberated, he [*the brother*] came home quickly, on a cart, by foot, on a donkey, how he could, entered his apartment, and found almost everything untouched. Not like me, I didn't find even a glass. I helped her a lot in Auschwitz, because if I stole a cabbage, I gave half of it to my girlfriend, because she was starving terribly. She found everything when we arrived home. She didn't let me go home, she took me to her place. 'You stay at me until you find a job or you recover a little.' That's how she repaid me. However we were friends before as well. I stayed at her place for almost two months.

As far back as 1943 I got sad news that my husband had been shot. So I went to Auschwitz as a widow. He was taken in 1942 [*to do work service*]. I didn't know anything about my brother. He was taken in 1942, from Gyergyovarhegy to Ukraine. He was married already. I didn't even hope that he would survive, but he came home. I couldn't have imagined meeting him again, that he would resist, because he spent twelve months in Ukraine, in hell. And he barely was home for five months, and in 1944 they took him to Auschwitz. He was a thin, meager man. So I came home very sad. I came home in summer. I knew nothing about him. He was in Auschwitz, then in several concentration camps [*forced labor camps*] to work.

I was home for several months, I mourned already my poor brother, I buried him in my heart. Once, it was around the middle of summer, I was going to work, when a stranger comes to my place from somewhere the countryside. He was a Jew from the surroundings, he knew the town. I didn't know him, he didn't know me either, but my brother explained him: 'Go there, look for this person.' He

explained him where our house was, he told him my maiden name and my name after my husband. He found me at once. 'I bring you news about your brother, he is in Germany, he works in a factory, and he doesn't want to come home.' My brother knew that my mother wasn't alive, and because he thought too about me – well, I was a young, protected child, though he knew I was a sportswoman – that I wouldn't survive Auschwitz or working in a factory. He was in a place, where a group of women worked in the wood, at logging. Imagine women, like we are, chopping wood, in such a weather, with 'druzba'... *[Editor's note: the Druzba is a Russian chain-saw; this was the only type available in Romania during the communist regime.]* So women didn't have the slightest chance to survive. My brother didn't want to come home at all. I was very desperate. He found employment in Germany, in a factory, and stayed there. A friend of him too stayed there. 'Let's not go home, it's useless. Let's start a new life!' Especially that he spoke German perfectly, it wasn't a problem for him to do every kind of work. His wife was a young woman from Nagyvarad, they took her to Riga, the capital of Latvia. People still hoped there that the Germans would win. So the Fuhrer from there received the command to shoot all the concentration camp. My brother knew this. He felt he had nothing to come home for: 'I have no wife, Bella – that's me – won't resist, I have no mammy, Bella's husband died.' 'And one night – he says – I felt I had to come home.' So I arrived home around June, and he stayed there until the end of October, one morning he got up and said: 'I'm going home though, perhaps Bellus is alive.' In November he just stepped in one day. The poor man, how bad he looked like... in an awful clothe, shabby, famished. The trains didn't run then *[as they do now]*. So he related me that one night he dreamt that maybe – as he knew me as a fit girl, who has such strength of will –, maybe I'm alive after all. And he came home.

At home I found out that the Russians arrested the captain who had lived in my house, they took him to the Regat in transit camp to transport him in the Soviet Union as a prisoner of war. *[Editor's note: Between August 23rd 1944 and May 15th 1945 the Romanian army caught 117,798 German and Hungarian soldiers. The armistice concluded on September 12th 1944 didn't dispose separately over the German prisoners of war; under the terms of the international agreements and regulations in force they should have been placed at the disposal of the Romanian military staff. Its contrary happened, most of the prisoners of war were taken over by the Soviet army, in most cases without any certificates; by October 1944 a total number of 36,433 German prisoners of war were taken over and deported immediately to the Soviet concentration camp in Focsani. Further concentration camps were established in the following locations: Romula, Budesti, Calafat, Bucharest, Turnu Magurele, Maia, Ramnicu Valcea (for German prisoners), Corbeni (for Hungarian prisoners), Barbatesti (for Szekler prisoners), Lugoj and Feldioara. (Al. Dutu, F. Dobre, A. Siperco - P.O.W. in Romania and the International Red Cross) No. 3, March 1997*

<http://www.itcnet.ro/history/archive/mi1997/mi3.htm> ] He had a mistress in Marosvasarhely, so I asked her: 'Didn't leave Frici here something for me? Not even jewelry?' 'Nothing, nothing.' And she says: 'I don't even know where he is. Lately I got a notification that he was in a prison camp.' So I went there. Without thinking, only dressed up, without money or anything, I got on the train, and I went there, I searched for the camp. I got on the train, they asked for my ticket, I say: 'What do you want? I'm coming from the concentration camp.' I showed them the tattoo. When I arrived there I asked people where a Jewish community was. I went there, I told them my business, and I asked where that camp was. I told them at the gate I was looking for somebody. Why? I say he stayed at me, I want to talk to him by all means. They let me in, the gate shot after I entered, and I fainted. I felt again I was in the concentration camp, I remembered everything, and I collapsed. They brought me round, took me to the guard-room and looked for the captain. I asked him: 'Frici,

where are my belongings?' He answers: 'Look at me, I'm without food or drink, without anything.' 'Tell me where are they? You were the last to leave my apartment. I visited Duci [*the mistress*] too, and Duci said she didn't receive anything at all.' 'It's not true, Duci doesn't tell the truth. She came with me by car for a long distance. But our car was caught, I was taken, and they continued their way.' At the end it turned out that they [*Duci and her family*] traveled separately, her with her mother, father and two brothers until the Russian frontier. They were fleeing away from Russians, from war. But none of them could drive. They left together [*with Frici*], perhaps because Frici wanted to escape. But he was stupid, because he wore his uniform. I don't know the circumstances. It's not interesting where they went, but he got arrested and became a prisoner of war. The woman came home. And when I had returned [*from deportation, thus before the visit in the concentration camp in Regat*], I had gone to her family – her father was a lawyer by the way –, I had asked: 'Didn't he leave here something?' 'No, no.' They interrogated me about Frici, they registered what I said, how this captain behaved. I gave him such a [*positive*] reference, so I returned his goodness, I have a clear conscience. On the basis of my statement he was released after four months. He didn't stay then in Hungary. He was [*the descendant of*] a rich landowner, but communism came for him too, they took surely from his property, and he didn't stay there. He left for Holland, and got married there. He never wanted to marry this woman from Marosvasarhely. The poor man, he died three years ago.

I don't know, maybe after one year, there was a Jewish boy who first courted me, he wanted to marry me, he implored me each day, he filled my head with this. Once he finds me crying, and I say: 'Leave me alone! I don't want to get married, you see, I have nothing to eat tomorrow. This captain told me he had given my jewels to these people, I could do something if I had those.' 'Well then – he says –, come with me.' It was dark already, it was about eight o'clock. I tell him: 'What do you intend to do, dressed in civil clothes?' We visited that girl's father, and he said: 'Mister, I'm here officially. Either you give me the jewels, silver objects of Mrs. Almasi, either you come with me to the police.' And he shows his badge, as every 'szekus' [*Editor's note: member of the Securitate, that is the Romanian secret police*] had a certificate. It [*the badge*] was a brooch of course, he was a cunning fellow. The lawyer was in a blue funk when the boy did this. He went at once to his big cash desk, took out a small box, like mine, which I had given [*to the captain*], mainly my mother's small jewels were in it. 'I was here a few months ago, and you told me you had nothing.' His daughter was there too: 'How should I have known which one belongs to Mrs. Almasi?' 'You gave me straightaway, as you opened it – I say –, you found it at once. How could that be possible?' I slapped that man in the face, and I spat him on face. In such a case one loses his good sense and self-command. I say: 'Let's go, because I will faint in a minute. It's worthless, I lost my mother, I lost my husband, and now should I fight for jewels?' Then he [*Duci's father*] gave me back some things and said: 'Believe me or not, that was it, because we took some when we were escaping [*with Frici*], but when we came home, we couldn't carry them, and we threw them on the street.' I had big silver platters, silver cutlery. He gave me back a set for fish and a set for ice-cream, with eighteen teaspoons. This young man left for Israel later, at quite a young age.

Then life begun... I restarted life very hardly. Two tenants lived in my house... Part of my furniture was lost: the furniture of the drawing room, of my husband's office, of the living-room, the piano, everything that could be taken easily. The big, heavy pieces were left, they didn't take those. I found my furniture from the dining-room in the stable of a person, it was very beautiful. Back then it was a very modern dining-room, with antique chairs, it seems someone needed only the chairs.

The furniture didn't have any value like this, because they couldn't make such chairs in those times. Furthermore I didn't get back any glass. The neighbors didn't rejoice much at the returned people. This doesn't mean that there weren't many straight people, because I slept on the pillow of a Christian until I got married, from 1945 until 1947. I had a neighbor, Nora Scitea, a Romanian woman, she gave me a pillow. The wife spoke Hungarian perfectly, the husband just a little. He wasn't in a too high position. In the Hungarian era <sup>2</sup> they moved, but only to the frontier, it was 15 km far from here. It turned out only after the war that they were so close. The captain who was lodged at my place had implored me that 'I will pass you through the frontier.' If I knew Scita was so close, she would have given me accommodation or a piece of bread. They moved back. The husband treated mainly thieves at the police. But then he fell sick and died.

I didn't come to see my house for two weeks. I couldn't come, I had no energy. And when I arrived in the street, it was then that I realized, what did I come home for in fact?! Who is waiting for me, and why did I come home!? I burst out sobbing... I was walking on the right side, and I was looking at my house, which was on the left side. I stopped in front of my house, on the other side – I was looking at it, an unknown curtain at the window – and I was sobbing aloud. The window was open, because it was summer. The owner looked out *[on the side where I was staying]*, and tells me: 'Oh dear, it's not true after all what people say about you? It's not true, is it?' I looked at him, I said: 'No. Why don't you ask me where is my mother? Why don't you ask me where is my husband?' Hearing this he closed the window! I fell down, so that he would come out, that he would stand by me, that he would take me inside. He didn't even bring me a glass of water, though he could see how I looked like! This was the neighbor who lived opposite, and whom my husband gave so many good advices. It was a couple, they didn't have children. They were drudging, they did sewing, they were rich. He was such a neighbor! Oh, I didn't care anymore. They behaved badly. I didn't come in my house's vicinity for two weeks.

I came only after two weeks to see my house. I regretted it however, because I got so upset. Two families were staying in my apartment, because I had five rooms: a family, husband and wife, in the other family there were three children, the eldest was seventeen years old, then a fifteen and a twelve years old. I was shouting on them, like a jackal, when I entered the house: 'Who are you? What are you doing in my house?' Imagine that you go home now, and you find strangers in your room, and everything is unfamiliar. And I could see there was nothing. I didn't even have a glass. One of them was very impertinent. He had broken through the wall between two rooms, so he made a kitchen-and-room apartment. I gave him three days to remake it as it used to be. He will whitewash it and disappear in three days, upon this he will show a clean pair of heels. I left there the other. He had three children. He apologized. He says: 'Well, we came in...' I don't know from where he was, Csik *[region]* maybe, a Hungarian teacher. They had come here to Marosvasarhely. I don't know in fact how they had got precisely in my apartment. They had wanted to move to the town, and there had been many *[empty]* Jewish apartments. Everybody was happy, because a lot of apartments became available. The merchant was happy, because competition ceased. There were nice apartments, and one could 'zabral' *[scrounge]*. We learnt this from the Russians, it means to steal, to filch, to loot. Who looted my apartment? There weren't German or Russian soldiers in Marosvasarhely. The German and the Russian didn't even pass through. The Russian army marched next to Szaszregen *[today Reghin]*. The bridges were blown up, but Hungarians blew them up, so that if they came this way, they couldn't have passed the Poklos brook. I don't know what the inhabitants were doing, anyway, a lot of people moved in from the villages, because

they knew there were empty flats. A lot of strangers settled down. And one could see a lot of foreign characters in the shops. As the owners didn't really come home... The local residents were replaced. Some *[of those who came back from deportation]* got away, because the behavior *[of the inhabitants]* wasn't convenient for them. After all they had done to us, there were some among the Hungarians who didn't feel ashamed to reveal that they were happy. Everybody gained from it *[from the deportation]*, that's the truth. For example a few Romanian families were left here, they didn't go away *[Editor's note: in 1940, after Northern-Transylvania became an area under the jurisdiction of Hungary]*. People treated them so badly. The hospital was on Szent Gyorgy square. When the Hungarian army was retreating, they wanted to take with them the radiographs, they wanted to bring to the motherland all the movable values. And a Romanian doctor tells them in a perfect Hungarian (as he took his diploma in Pest): 'I won't let you take it, we have patients here!' He put up resistance, and he didn't let them take out even a chair. They kicked him out. In 1940, we were still home, so we saw this. When the war ended, he was kicked out from his flat too, because he had a nice, marvelous apartment, he built it next to the hospital. *[Editor's note: This could have happened due to the nationalization [10](#) in the communist regime.]* He had a good salary, so he could have a house built of it. Not mentioning that he came from a wealthy family. They put him out in a room, somewhere near the Russian market.

The husband and wife got lost from my apartment in three days, because they were insolent. The others stayed a few weeks more. But the children were noisy, and I couldn't stand it. So I asked them nicely: 'I hope you don't mind mentioning, but please look after an apartment, because you are too noisy, there is too much traffic, I can't stand this noise.' So they left normally, then I rented it out to an unfortunate couple. I didn't have anything to eat. I got back things of no value for me due to house search, figurines, crystals, I don't know what else. These were worthless for me, when I didn't have a cooking pot, I had nothing to prepare a tea in... Well, that was misery. *[Editor's note: The survivors expected the new Northern-Transylvanian, respectively Romanian authorities to repeal the previous anti-Jewish laws as soon as possible, to return their seized movable and immovable properties, to compensate them for those properties which couldn't be returned, and to assist efficiently the reorganization of the communal life. On September 1st and December 19th 1944 the racial laws were repealed, the Jewish communities and the Zionist organizations were gradually reorganized and started to function, but a lot of obstacles impeded the return of possessions, thus it was carried out extremely slowly.]*

<http://adatbank.transindex.ro/inchtm.php?kod=231> ]

I wasn't a working woman, or a self-supporting *[woman]*. I was dependant. When the child got married, her husband supported her. Only a very few women worked from the middle-class. I got a job. A good old acquaintance came home, his merchandise was walled up, and he found it, so he opened a store in the yard, he became a merchant. I became the cashier, he trusted me. I was so desperate, and I was so rootless. I got back part of my jewels, but I wasn't interested in this. I had an employment, but I couldn't get accustomed to loneliness. There were many young widower, and hundreds of widows. I had company, we fooled each other, we were together every evening, but that didn't offer any solution for me. These were all young Jewish people, who came back. Everybody had a place to stay. One had a better, the other had a worse one. I lived under difficult circumstances, because I let out instantly three rooms, I kept two, hoping that the good Lord would bring home my brother, so he would have a room of his own. I had nothing. Thus I lived under the hardest conditions, but a young person endures it more easily, and this was a common tragedy. In



the meantime I became 33-34 years old. I was still a young, athletic-looking woman, I came home healthy, despite all the misery, so I endured it more easily. I was working, I could buy a pair of stockings, then I got a package from abroad, from aunt Sari, the sister of my dad. It arrived to the militia, because she didn't know the name Almasi, and she sent it to the name Bella Bacher! The militia, I don't know how, but found out that Bella Bacher was searched. Many Jews worked there. So everything is a matter of chance. I still have a terry towel. I used it as a bath sheet for a long time. I was very happy with the package. It had second-hand things too. She didn't know if I was fat *[or not]*, perhaps she didn't even know how old I was, only approximately. She left before the war, I was about 4-5 years old.

After my brother came home, he lived in one room, me in the other. He got married in 1946, that was his second marriage. He married a Jewish woman. I got married for the second time in '47, he a few months earlier. He got married quite stealthily, I don't know why. Bozsi wasn't deported, because she was in Gyulafehervar *[today Alba Iulia]*. So all I got, a few valuable things, I inherited from them. They met each other as she came here. She was a dental technician, and she worked here, a common acquaintance introduced her to my brother. He got married in 1946, and he was placed in Brasso. So he lived in Brasso. When I got married in 1947, he came with his wife already, they stayed in a hotel for one night, then went back. He moved back when the wood association was established. His name was known, he got employed immediately. This happened one or two years after. This association was established very soon, his name was well-known, he was in too, and a few other former producers came too, Christians, Hungarians, so they established together the wood association. They restored the factory as they could, so they formed a wood trust here, and it was due to my brother too that this could have been established. That was in the Hangya building. The Hangya didn't exist anymore, because this was Romania again. But he wasn't a party member, nor later, nor him or my husband. He got married, and was a clerk here. They made him a chief clerk, because they knew he was an expert, they asked him his opinion. There were Christian producers too of course, this is normal, but most of the people in this industry were Jews. Experts. It doesn't mean that hundreds of office-holders were Christians, but they had other possibilities. He was good in it, well, they couldn't make him a director, but he was the charginman of the commercial department. Of course, in the beginning there were people here, who knew the name Bacher, because they knew my father's name, since he was a good expert. There was a good-for-nothing drinker chap here, a doorman, who was shouting every morning in the market for example: 'It's over with the masters, it's over with the Bachers!' Then the state seized everything.

My brother and I had different societies. He played bridge, and adored the cinema. I played rummy, and I preferred the theatre company to a good movie. Well, it's true that I watched an exceptionally good movie, but he had a subscription ticket, and he frequented... *[the cinema]*. My poor sister-in-law never could dispose of her time well. She couldn't keep her job as a dental technician, as she was working there too, and to prepare a lunch... the poor, may she rest in peace, she was unable for that. She was such a trifler: she went in the bathroom, and she stayed there for one hour, and the laundress waited her outside. Besides, the poor woman, I don't know why she got obsessed with the idea, that my brother loved me more than her. That's when our relationship started to get worse. She didn't know what was to love a brother or sister. I always felt she was envious of me, if my brother came to me and embraced me. I always told her: 'But Bozsi, it's totally different to love a sister than to love a wife. Why are you doing this?' But she went on about the same idea. She was alone, the poor woman lost her parents at a very young age, in fact she didn't

even know her father, he had died during the [First World] war, and her mother too, at a young age. So two old people, an uncle and an aunt raised her. She finished the gymnasium, and they sent her at 14 to learn a profession. My brother worked here too, because the wood association was here [*nearby*]. Finally my poor brother, to avoid all this – he always had a coffee break during the morning – just a few steps, so he came over, that’s how we met. At the end, when my brother fell sick, I visited them regularly, but I couldn’t endure to see my brother’s suffering. My brother died in 1984. Then my brother’s wife had a physiotherapeutic treatment: her back, her back... she couldn’t bend down, she suffered terribly. Finally she had to go into a hospital, she was operated, and they took out a malignant tumor in her back, big as a mandarin. I couldn’t take her out from the hospital. I paid in the hospital to keep her there, because she had only weeks to live. She died in two months, may the poor woman rest in peace. She is buried here, at least they rest next to each other. They are both buried in the Jewish cemetery, this is normal.

How did I meet my second husband, Albert? There was a girl from Maramarossziget, Flora, and she was a very good friend of mine. Flora Steinmetz was the younger sister of my [*second*] husband. She got married here, to a merchant. He was called Jenő Baruch, his nickname was Onyi. He was her fiancée before the war already. But they didn’t get married because of the situation, she didn’t want to get so far from her family, since Marosvasarhely was the ends of the earth for those in Maramarossziget, there weren’t buses or planes. Both [*Steinmetz*] siblings came home from misery, and my husband’s sister got married here in Marosvasarhely. My husband visited her every weekend, because only the two of them survived from the eight siblings. In those times he worked in Szatmar, and there was a flight from Szatmar to Kolozsvár, so he visited his sister every week. So my girlfriend had this idea, that he wasn’t married, I was a widow, and she introduced us to each other. However, as she knew well, that I would refuse people to arrange for me, she visited me Sunday morning, and said: ‘Come out, stop that cooking! Come, let’s take a walk!’ The promenade in the morning was fashionable. It wasn’t for us though, because we weren’t elegant... But she agreed with her brother that ‘You too, come out, and we will meet on the esplanade.’ And my husband escorted me until the door already. He took his leave from me so hardly... And he asks me if I would let him to visit me. ‘Well – I answered – you are welcome.’ I got married [*again*] in 1947. I came home in 1945, and I took more than two years getting persuaded, I was afraid to marry him. I told myself, he was 41-42 years old, and he wasn’t married before, either he wants a cook, either he is impotent. So I started to wonder, what the hell... I was a married woman for 14 years. The poor man courted me, he came from Szatmar to Kolozsvár every week by plane, from there he came here. Finally I told him: ‘You know what, we have nothing to loose, we get married, if the marriage is working, fine, if not, one of us steps out.’ I didn’t have any children, nor did he. That’s how we got married.

Albert had eight siblings, three of them were girls, and five were boys. I didn’t know any of them besides my husband, only this sister of him who lived in Marosvasarhely. I only know their nicknames. There was Abi, then Magda, the eldest, who got married in Maramarossziget. Albert’s family was fleeing before World War I, I don’t know who went crazy this time, the Poles or the Russians. The whole family fled to Pest. They were afraid that Russians would come in. They had relatives there, they went there. They were badly off there. They still had seven children, as the eighth was gone, and they got two rooms and a kitchen. The children were all at school except two. They all waited the summer to come, to go out in the city park or to the zoo to learn, because it was impossible in that small flat. His mother was very ill, she was diabetic, so it was extremely

hard for them. The two elder brothers tried to sit for an entrance examination, but the numerus clausus was already introduced. His father was a merchant, they had a textile shop, but he died early. One day at noon, it was the first day of Pesach, he just dropped from his chair... and the funeral had to be organized quickly. *[Editor's note: Due to the kevod ha-met (honor to the dead) the dead should be buried as soon as possible, but within three days the latest. High days are not exceptions from this obligation, though in such cases the funeral service is modified to some extent (i.e. there is no funeral oration).]* However all this happened long before the war *[World War II]*. The eldest brother took it over. So the boys supported the whole big family. The whole family lived together with their mother, they had *[later]* a large house. They lived in Pest for eight years, Albert attended the conservatory for six years in Budapest, he played the violin. His younger sister had a diploma too, while they lived in Budapest *[they finished school]*. My sister-in-law learned to play the piano. Comparing to my sister-in-law and the boys my husband was the youngest. He didn't play the violin at home. Where was my piano after the war, where was his violin, where was his furniture at all?

The boys didn't get married, they all had everything, one of them had a girlfriend. One of the boys was the black sheep of the family, that's how they used to call him. He was a careless, unreliable man, he didn't want to learn or to work. The family could see it was useless, they took out a passport, and sent him to America: 'Make your living yourself!' Only the eldest sister was married. I don't know when they came back in the country. They never found out where their mother was buried, because Jews were in ghettos for about two weeks, and his mother didn't get insulin. Ill people died in the meantime, and I suppose they were put in common graves. Two returned from deportation from the whole family. Only Albert did a work service, that's how he survived. The other three boys were in concentration camps, it is sad, because two of them died two weeks before liberation in a concentration camp. One of the sisters had a four years old child in her arms, she went to the left. The other didn't resist. One endured it, Flora. These were so absurd things. After the war Albert didn't have any relatives, only a cousin in Szatmar, but he left for Belgium in a very short time. His daughter is still alive.

Albert survived, because he was taken to Kassa for work service. He had luck, because there was a stupid guy at the office, who had no idea about accounting, about management. Once he announced: 'Is there anyone among you who knows a little office work, accounting?' My husband presented himself. He says: 'Yes, I do.' He took him in and asked him: 'Well, can you fix this?' When my husband saw it, he realized that was a child's play, and he said: 'Well, I will try. I might be able to arrange this.' Of course, he says, he could have fixed it in one hour, because it was so simple. 'But I kept on prolonging it, and after two days I said: 'Well - I have no idea about his rank - it's done, take a look, it's fixed now.' 'You were really skilful. You stay here, you will get separate meals, and you will get a decent bed.' That's how my husband survived, otherwise he was a thin little man. Briefly, he wouldn't have survived even a transportation to a concentration camp, not mentioning that there... So he was in Kassa until the end, he was set free there. He was provided with bacon. The sergeant was very grateful to him for having saved him, because they came to check what he had done at the work service, how much food he took over, and it was extremely hard for him to calculate these. That's how my husband escaped.

Flora lived in Marosvasarhely. My sister-in-law and her husband were industrious people. They were both quite aged, 50 years old, when they left for Israel, and they died there. I met accidentally a

cousin of my husband, Sarolta Steinmetz, after we got married. She got married in Nagyvarad, and we went on our honeymoon to Nagyvarad. She was the little one among his siblings, and she was called Pirinko, Piri. She wasn't deported, because she was in Temesvar. The state of Israel wasn't established yet, it means they left before 1948. She went there right before 'closing-time' by ship, because there weren't flights yet. With seventy kilos, a baby in her body, and she already had one. Her husband was a very wealthy man, I know he was engaged in trade there. I keep the contact with Piri, she was the one who always helped me financially, under the communism and after that, after my husband died. I was left with 500 thousand lei revenue, and she supported me. She lives now in Tel Aviv, she is 87. I'm in contact with her even today. I spoke to her last week.

I got married to my second husband in 1947. First we got married at the local council, that was the civil marriage, then we had a religious one too. It was a typical Jewish wedding, under a wedding canopy. It started at noon, at half past twelve. It lasted maximum half an hour, and it was quite close, in that large synagogue, which wasn't finished, in the Brailei street. They started to build it before the war, and gave up in 1942, what would that be good for?! *[Editor's note: Bella Steinmetz speaks about the former synagogue of the Orthodox Jewish Community. The building was built up in 1927, in the time of secretary Ferenc Friedmann, and it could hold thousand persons. Next to the main building two smaller prayer houses and several other premises were built. Due to deportation and mass emigration after WWII the synagogue was left without members, and it wasn't finished. Its façade was rebuilt completely, this resulting in the ruination of its style. At present the walls are even unplastered, this showing as well its unfinished feature. Presently only the synagogue in the Scoala street is in use.]* In 1947 two rooms were finally plastered, to have an office. Later there was an office, the office of Jews, so to have a centre for the Jewish community, because Jews were coming home. You see, there were even weddings! Quite a lot in fact, because there were a lot of young people, widows.

The ceremony was held in the yard. We still had a rabbi, even a shochet, but I don't recall the rabbi's name. I was so angry that I was hopping mad. I had agreed with them previously to set up the wedding canopy not outside, but in the office, because I had been married before. I knew anyway that I didn't have any relatives, nor did my husband, so I didn't need at all a public or a fuss. They said 'Alright, no problem.' My brother lived in Brasso, but they came, they stayed in a hotel, because I had one room in that big house. I said: 'Don't come to pick me up, I will walk to the synagogue by myself.' I was ambling alone very sadly, I walked all the way crying. You have never seen such a sad bride in your life like I was. I remembered my first marriage, and this one was so miserable, without a family... The fact that my mother didn't escort me, nobody escorted me... I was very sad... Not even Hitler could take away the memories. Until this present day. I was walking, and then I saw that the canopy was set up in the yard, and the crowd – there was a lattice fence – was standing there and waiting for me. I got so angry! The person I talked to knew that I had been married. But he didn't ask me if my husband had been married before. So I fell angrily upon this fellow, that 'We agreed to set it up inside, so why did you do this? Do you think I need all this circus?' My tears started to fall. He said: 'Excuse me, dear Madam – he spoke a bad Hungarian, he was from Regat –, but you didn't tell me that the bridegroom was still a boy!' That's how he expressed it. My husband was a single, he was 44, me 36. I got angry. I said: 'So what?' So he informed me that a person who wasn't under the chupa, the canopy, must be in the open air. *[Editor's note: According to the tradition the wedding ceremony is held outdoors, in the open air. In case of a second marriage the wedding usually is much more modest – that is why it could become*

*a custom to celebrate such events within the building.]*

I didn't wear a wedding dress, first of all because I was a married woman. Well, if I had had money, I would have bought a more elegant dress. I was wearing a suit, and a hat of course, and they put a veil on my head. My groomsman was my brother, my husband's best man was Flora's, his sister's husband, Onyi. The canopy has legs. They recite a prayer, pour wine in a small glass, first the man drinks, then the woman, after that the man puts it on the ground and treads well on it. I walked round my husband too. The groomsman took me by my arm, nicely, and we walked round twice the bridegroom under the canopy. That was all. After that – my sister-in-law's place was very close – we went to her, and she offered us a good wedding lunch. A good and delicious meat-soup, we had roast, we had gateau, we had fruits. That was it. It was in May, we had what one could find in May, vegetables. Then my husband ordered a taxi, and took me to Kolozsvár, we stayed there for one day.

After that we went to Maramarossziget, because we had to sort out things, because I had this condition that I wouldn't stay in Maramarossziget, I wanted to come back to Marosvásárhely. He had a serious employment, it couldn't be passed just from one day to the other, he was the manager of a large company. He worked in the wood industry in the valley of the Maros river and in the surroundings of Maramarossziget, there half percent of the wholesalers were engaged in wood industry. My husband worked in the central accounting office, the company had even a notarial. People were paid in dollars. He came home from Budapest to Maramarossziget because of the family. They left together, and they returned together. They decided to come back, so he quitted his job *[in Budapest]*. He got employed at once, by this boss *[of the wood producing company]*. After the war the boss came back, he got back for the moment his property, the factory, and he took back my husband. His boss was a Jew. One shouldn't think there aren't any crooks among Jews. There are precisely as many as among other people. We have our one killers, rascals. Four chaps gathered, young men, they weren't relatives, but four dealers. There is much salt there, like in Szovata *[Editor's note: 54 km far from Marosvásárhely]*. The difference is that they took advantage of it and they were sending the salt to Hungary, and they got paid in dollars. They *[the members of this association]* entrusted my husband with the financial matters, because they trusted him, and they paid my husband in dollars. This was a separate revenue for him, he did this outside the company, so when I got married, he had more than 15,000 dollars. I haven't seen a cent from it, of course. I found this out later. The owner *[of the wood factory]* left for Israel. Since Piri, my husband's cousin decided that all her siblings and us too would go there, my husband gave the money to the boss saying that 'Start some business, so it would develop by the time I emigrate too.' My husband saw again one dollar from that money as you did. Because in the meantime they stopped emigration from Romania [11](#), they didn't let out anybody, but the boss could make it. We didn't emigrate because they stopped emigration. We kept on postponing it, besides my husband was afraid. He was exposed anyway to being kicked out, because communism became more and more severe. He was an inadequate cadre, the fact that he finished high-school in Budapest, was also a trouble. 'You must be the son of a grand seigneur – said the personnel manager – if you finished school in Pest.' When he repeated the same for several times, my husband told him: 'Sir, can't you understand that we lived in Pest for eight years, I became eighteen years old there. I couldn't come here to Marosvecs or to Regen to have my final exam. I had to have it there.'



We agreed to go there for three months, so I went with him. Unfortunately the arranging dragged on for almost two years, because it got complicated. While we were there, nationalization [10](#) begun. And especially due to nationalization, it became much more difficult. So this required half a year. I did nothing there. He introduced me to a lot of people, to acquaintances. He had an office, he worked there, and came after me. In the morning I was housekeeping, in the afternoon I was playing cards. I played with those who came back *[from deportation]* and got together: widow, widower, people of the same age. In the meantime my husband was liquidating his part. He had a profession, he did the bookkeeping, and he was the chief of the department, so he was liquidating what he had to pass to somebody. This couldn't be done in two days. He came here *[to Marosvasarhely]* to inquire, because people engaged in wood industry started to establish a co-operative, in order to have a centre. The factories were already there, they just had to be put into operation. The co-operative was established, and he got employed at first. I stayed there for a while, until he found an apartment, to have a place where to move. Well, but in the meantime I heard that the militia was looking for him, because bookkeepers were needed, he was registered, because he was an excellent bookkeeper indeed. This was proved by the fact that they employed him for 17 years with a ministerial authorization, because one needed a college degree for this position. He was really a good accountant, but his training was good as well. After he passed his final exams, he had a relative in Budapest at the Hungarian National Bank, who recommended my husband to the accounting department. He was born in 1903, he must have finished school at the age of 18. Right after that he got in there, and they taught him well. Being a chief accountant is a profession. Today chief accountants earn a lot. They were needed in the Ceausescu [8](#) era too, because one had to juggle with numbers, because accounts had to be made about what they produced, spent for this and that, he took from here and put there. And he was always the first. He even got a red flag, a fee from the ministry. This was an award. This must have happened in the 1960s. He took care of it of course, he guarded it well. When the liberation came in 1989 [12](#), one afternoon he was resting here *[in the room]*, the door was always open *[between the two rooms]*, I was staying between the rooms, and I took the scissors and I started to cut it into pieces. The poor creature looked at me: 'What are you doing?' I say: 'Well, what am I doing? This is a rag, what am I supposed to do with it? Should I keep this? This one - I say - because you've been a skilful juggle? You got it because you were a smart juggle, and because you didn't record the real numbers...' He says: 'Well, you are right in a way.' He tore it to shreds, and threw them out.

I had luck with my husbands, that they dressed me, and my sister-in-law. My second husband too. Though we didn't have money anymore, however, he bought me all the beautiful things I have. He went to Bucharest many times, he was in Bucharest for two or three days in almost every second month. He had quite a good job, yet his salary was low, because he wasn't a party member, but he had to work at breakneck speed. For example he arrived home, I still have the winter suit he brought me. He saw some elegant textile on the Victoriei Avenue, and he entered *[the shop]*: Well, I have to buy this to Bella! And I told him: 'We live in such a misery, in these two rooms - from the five rooms -, so why do you buy me so expensive things?' I still have it, and I still wear it in wintertime.

I didn't work after I got married. 'I come from a large family - he said -, I miss the family. If you go to work - we used first-name informality from the beginning -, if I go to work too, when I return home, maybe you will go to an assembly, and I will always find an empty apartment, or I would have to heat up alone the soup, well this wouldn't be a problem. I want to have a relaxed woman

next to me.' But that's what I fell victim to, with my neurosis. I fell ill because I stayed idly in that two rooms and a kitchen flat – my apartment was small. I finished housekeeping in two hours, two and a half, and I had nothing to do, and I was together with a mean crook tenant, whom I let out a room, because my house wasn't nationalized. It seems it was accidental that the house wasn't nationalized, a house with five rooms and two bathrooms. This was our luck. At least I could keep this from my father's work. After the war I kept only two rooms, I let out to the tenant three rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. He had a family, he had a 1 or 2 years old little child. Unfortunately somebody recommended this person. I gave it to him for a rent, he paid to me. That's how I could keep these two rooms for 26 years. And I had to listen each day, 'stinking Jew, stinking Jew. Why don't you go to Palestine?' There wasn't any witness to this ever, but I don't think he would have got punished for this. Living under the same roof with such an enemy, walking the same stairs with him... This disease started in 1956-57, when I fell ill with my nerves. That was precisely the problem, that I didn't do anything, I was just listening to the disparagement and the anti-Semite... *[speech of the tenant]*. And one couldn't just simply kick out somebody, without ensuring him a similar flat, that was the communist law. I had my living space, I had no right for other apartment, that's how they decided. I asked for a change hoping to have at least one of the bathrooms.

I had an awful life. For 26 years I had no bathroom, I wouldn't even mention a vestibule. In the first time, when we had no money, I used a washbowl for bathing, while I had two bathrooms. When I let out the rooms, my condition was that I would use the bathroom once in a week, because luckily it was next to my room. I bathed once or twice. When I wanted to take a bath for the third time, I went in, and I saw the potty left dirty in the bathtub – he had a little child. I never set foot there once again. I got so ill, I couldn't go out, I had to bath in a washbowl. But let's not talk about this, it unsettles me a lot. It is thanks to my mother, it was her wish to make a washbasin alcove with a toilet. Otherwise I would have gone out to the yard, to that toilet no matter if it was summer or winter, I should have bathed in that washbowl. Sometimes my husband took a bath at my brother, because he had a separate nice apartment, and me at his sister, at my sister-in-law.

Then a law was introduced saying that if part of a flat, which wasn't nationalized, becomes available, the state has no right to dispose over it. So after 26 years *[approximately in 1971]* I got back a room, a bathroom and the vestibule. That's how I had three rooms, a bathroom and a vestibule. This family lived there for 26 years, when I could finally sell the house *[that part of the house]*. I couldn't even sell it until then. Well, I could, but I had no buyer, because I couldn't offer it for sale, as there was a tenant. Whoever buys it, does this because they want to move in it. I exchanged this apartment 22 years ago, it was under the communism. A veterinarian lived here. You have no idea how stupid laws we had. For example a family with three members couldn't buy my house, it couldn't own a *[whole]* house, because it still had available living space. The apartment was too large for a family with three members, it was defined how many square meters may I own and how many may the buyer. So an other family had 2 children of different sexes, so the children could have separate rooms, the parents could have a third one, they all could have a common room, so using some influence they could buy it. After 26 years one more room became available, I could offer the three rooms, vestibule, bathroom with kitchen.

There were nonsense things at my husband's workplace in the communist era. In the morning, before starting to work, they had newspaper reading. My husband told them, 'I got used since I was a student to read the newspapers, I took the paper, I read it at home.' He had this habit of reading

the newspaper from home. We subscribed from the beginning to the local newspaper, the Nepujsag. I was a housekeeper. Then I fell sick with my nerves, and we had to renounce emigrating. It was a misery at that time. We had a very hard life in the 1960s. None of us was a party member, neither me, nor my husband. I didn't take part in anything. It didn't mean a disadvantage that my husband wasn't a party member, they acknowledged it. He wanted to quit it. They offered him a chief accountant position at the August 23 [*the local furniture factory*], at the sugar works, and he wanted to quit, but they didn't let him go. And if they don't issue the paper, he loses his years [*so they wouldn't take them into account when calculating his pension*].

At the beginning, when this association was established, they organized so-called social evenings [*for the colleagues*], so we brought some cakes, biscuits, everybody at their choice. Once somebody was talking there about baking, from what and how one could bake, and I let it slip that: 'Oh my God, the yellow gateau is so simple, one puts a little cacao on it, it has to be stirred, and one prepares a marbled pie.' At this moment a saucy comrade started to laugh: 'Well, her ladyship got used to cacao...' When I really would have worked on it, I was organizing, so that as many people came as possible, and that buffet would look [*nice*], and a chief bigmouth hurls this into my face. Well then, I thought, to hell with you all, I will never come here again.

I never cooked on Saturdays before the war. After the war there was nothing special, my husband worked on Saturdays too, because it was a workday. But he always organized in such way to have some free days left when holidays came, to have free days at Shavuot, at Yom Kippur and at Pesach. So I always prepared lunch. I wouldn't say that gateau too, since I cooked enough the whole year, because my husband adored it. This one too liked very much sweets. And I had the opportunity to learn. Before the war one of my neighbors attended a cooking school in Bucharest, and I learnt everything from her. Then, when we came back from the war, me and my girlfriends gathered, one remembered this, the other that, and that's how I collected my recipes. I have a thick recipe copy-book, where I wrote all the recipes. I have recipes that require tens of eggs and twenty of [*decagrams*] almond... But I have simple ones too, which aren't expensive, but are still good.

I light candles on Friday evening even today. Since I got married, from the first Friday evening. I light two candles. Our religion says that it has to be lighted when the first star rises, and it has to burn at least half an hour after the star rose. [*Editor's note: The Sabbath candles have to be lighted before Sabbath begins, that is before sunset, and not before the star rises; it is the end of Sabbath which is related to the rise of stars.*] And I put a shawl on my head, and there is a prayer [*the candle lighting blessing*] that we recite in Hebrew, I know it by heart. I light the two candles, I recite that short blessing, then I say to myself what I want. I ask God that my dear dead rest in peace. On Friday evenings, since my husband liked fish, I prepared some fish dish. I can prepare it in many ways. If I didn't feel well, he liked to have coffee with challah, so we had that. I can't knead the challah. At my mother always the servants kneaded it. At holidays, at Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur [*the evening before the fast*] we prepared challah, we always had challah on those days.

At Pesach my husband never ate bread during all his life. Me, when I couldn't chew well, and I couldn't eat matzah, because it pricked me, I started to eat bread. But I didn't eat bread I think until the age of 80-85. We had other meals, we had so many good dishes at Pesach. While my second husband lived, I followed through this circus [*the Seder*] for the two of us. It was just the two of us, because we had nobody, nor me, nor him. My husband went through the Seder ritual, he

read me from the Haggadah. I was the child, I said the Mah Nishtanah, we played the whole ritual. He said its own part, and me – when he hides that specific matzah, after that one has to wash hands –, while he was washing his hands, I took it, and hid it somewhere else. Then dinner followed. We had dinner, then we took out the afikoman. And I didn't give it until I didn't ask something. I asked what I needed at that time, and what he was able to buy. To buy me a new toothbrush, a little eau de cologne, so trifles. And it was so good, it was a nice evening. And everything was delicious. I did my best to prepare fine things, good gateau, for example one can prepare Pesach gateau as well, without flour. I have a recipe, gateau with nuts and orange cream, it doesn't require flour, only one tablespoon nut and one tablespoon mashed matzah or matzo meal. It is a delicious and expensive thing. I needed two oranges: one in its dough, and one in its cream. And 30 decagrams of butter. I got orange, sometimes people brought me. I always got things somehow. Then I washed the dishes, because there were a lot, since I laid the table properly.

We didn't observe Purim and Chanukkah. When we had to go to the synagogue, we went together. He had very nice colleagues. It happened sometimes that a delegation or a superior came from Bucharest, from the ministry right when it was holiday. My husband says: 'Woe, the delegation is announced for tomorrow...' His colleague, Abi says: 'Never mind, just go to the synagogue, we will settle this in your place. Go tranquilly, don't you think at all about coming to the office!' He had such colleagues, and such a director too, he overlooked it. In those times they started to look after to have results, they came to their senses. The personnel managers didn't have so much influence anymore. The 'csebres' [*bucket maker*], that's how my husband called the cadre class. You know, those who make the 'cseber' [*buckets*] are called 'kadar' [*means cooper, but refer to the cadres*]. [*Editor's note: Mrs. Steinmetz's husband made a pun from the similarity of the words 'kadar' which means cooper and 'kader' which is cadre.*] So the management didn't care so much, they were interested in how people worked. During the communist era we were members of the Jewish community, we always paid the membership fee. We paid it under our own name. There were people who paid, but not under their own name. However my husband never thought of proceeding otherwise, especially that they knew he was going to the synagogue. They accepted him as he was. This was an elite class, there weren't so many good-for-nothing people, one had to be good in his profession, so a milkman from the street couldn't have been employed there. Perhaps in the cadre class. There were times when the financial management of the wood industry from Maramarossziget to Csikszereda was in his hands. I don't know how many thousands of workers got their salary in right time, that's why he got his award, as it never ever occurred that the salary would be late.

At processions my husband had to present himself. I never thought of going with him. I never agreed with the communist ideas of those times. Whatever is established through violence, I can't agree with that. It can't be right what is ruled. I don't want that someone tells me what to do.

There were times when we were very poor, respectively we had to spread out well the money. There was one salary and an illness... My husband had a salary of 1,000-1,500 lei. During communism I had to keep servants next to me for seven years. It didn't matter that I paid 100 lei to a 14 years old villager girl, the point was to have somebody with me in the house. I didn't need the help itself, but to have somebody next to me. They were Hungarian girls, and also a Romanian one. By the end, when I felt I could stay alone in the mornings, the sewing school was launched. I

went there on the first day of school, when they came out to the yard in the break, I was asking: 'Who needs accommodation?' Everybody needed, because many girls came to this school from the villages. And a small lean Romanian girl ran with her plait and told me in Romanian: 'I don't have, Missis, I don't! I have an elder sister, but her host won't let the both of us stay there.' I gave her the address. She left. I thought she had just came a few days before from a village next to Szaszregen, she wouldn't come, she wouldn't find this small street anyway. At two o'clock she steps in: 'Here I am, Madam!' She stayed at me for three years. I told her I couldn't give her meal or anything else, only accommodation. And she was sleeping in the kitchen. I told her she had to get up early, because the Mister went to work at 7, and he was taking breakfast in the kitchen. She passed her exams with excellent marks, she was very clever. Everything was alright for 3 years, but we were in touch after that too. 7-8 years ago, maybe less, we lost contact. She lives in the third village from here, she was successful, she became a manager, she was very skilful, but she fell sick or something, and our relationship interrupted. She was the last one I kept for money.

During communism we visited Pest and Israel two times. It wasn't difficult to get our passports, because I had an acquaintance at the Securitate who obtained it for me, and brought it home. When we wanted to travel [13](#) for the first time, I was so ill, that I couldn't go there to pick up my passport, so he brought it home. I had a girlfriend – a widow, a young and good-looking woman –, and he was her friend. The man wasn't married. And he did it for me, but he came off well. I brought him as much Kent cigarettes that it meant currency then. I brought him special things. I didn't bring as many things even for myself. I got things too, I came with many packages. We were in Pest in 1975. I spent there two weeks and a half, but I know Pest like the back of my hand. However it looked differently after the war. In 1976 we were in Israel, and we were there in 1983 for the last time. We visited my husband's cousin. We stayed only two weeks at aunt Piri in Netanya. We never stayed in hotels [*but in cheaper lodgings*]. Once I was there for three months, and once for six months uninterruptedly, so I had the chance to get to know it. I saw not only nice things, I saw other things too. It is a very hard-working nation, but one can find human weaknesses and defects, which all nations have. There are enough crooks, there are enough infamous people, but there are also industrious and capable people as well, and they do work. And they built up such a modern state, one couldn't even dream of a better one. I visited the Garden of Gethsemane, the Hill of Calvary, I never saw such a Christian church, though I visited the Capuchin Church in Vienna, the St Stephen's Basilica in Budapest. In Israel there are agencies where they run buses daily, they show this and that, for one day, for two days, you can choose. I was interested in the water of Jordan. I brought water from there in three small bottles for my Christian girlfriends. I had the courage to go down, because one had to descend to get water. I filled the bottles, I entered the church, and I asked the priest to sanctify them. So I did all kind of things. At some other time I spent two weeks in Jerusalem and its surroundings. I saw there the Dome of the Rock and the other [*the Church of the Holy Sepulchre*]. They are quite close to each other.

In 1994 my husband died. He was buried in the Jewish cemetery of Marosvasarhely. They recited the Kaddish as well, Grunstein was the chazzan then, and he led the ceremony. But let's not talk about this, because it's something that hurts a lot. After so many years, eleven years passed since I lost him, and I still receive respect due to him. Where my husband worked, there were a lot of young people, activists, party members. They still greet me. Because of him. He was such a person, that even after 60 years: 'How are you doing, Missis Steinmetz?' For example a few weeks ago they offered me to bring me fish from the lake. Considering his personality, he was an



absolutely fair man.

I don't get any support from the community. Gifts sometimes, when Rosh Hashanah comes, and they have superfluous food, they send me a package. The truth is that the pension I'm getting from Germany is enough for the moment. And for example I got something recently, but just a little, from Hungary, after the parent. I got support every week from a Scottish organization. *[Editor's note: The Targu Mures Trust was established in 1999 by Ethne Woldman, the manager of the Jewish Care Scotland. The organization pays three persons to visit and help elder people. [http://www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/holocaust/testimonies/holocaust\\_remembrance\\_2004\\_-\\_targu\\_mures.htm](http://www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/holocaust/testimonies/holocaust_remembrance_2004_-_targu_mures.htm)]* They come every Tuesday.

I feel good, I have nothing to be ashamed of. I was born here, I live here, and I will die here. Unfortunately there is nothing to tell about everyday life at this age. Days pass slowly, because all kind of health problems appear each day. I had problems even with my ear, I need this one *[the hearing aid]* too. I can't listen to music anymore, though music was everything for me. I solve crosswords, I read the daily paper, I watch television, I choose for myself 2 or 3 stupid soap operas, which I can understand even if I don't read *[the subtitles]*. Unfortunately they don't broadcast enough music, though I have 30-40 channels with this television set. People like me very much, a lot of people come to visit me *[the members of the Targu Mures Trust among others]*. But the nicest thing is that *[the person who lives]* there, opposite – I don't know their name and they don't know either my name, but we communicate, we talk. They showed me that two flowers *[were put in my window]*, and they say *[show]* that no one has flowers, but you do. Well, we have such amusements. They keep me in mind as a very old person. Maybe they know my age as well, because they can see me.

## Glossary

### 1 Transylvania

Geographical and historic area (103 000 sq. kilometre) in Romania. It is located between the Carpathian Mountain range and the Serbian, Hungarian and Ukrainian border. Today's Transylvania is made up of four main regions: Banat, Crisana, Maramures and the historic Transylvanian territory. In 1526 at the Mohacs battle medieval Hungary fell apart; the central part of the country was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, while in the Eastern part the autonomous Transylvanian Principality was founded. Nominally Transylvanian belonged to the Ottoman Porte; the Sultan had a veto on electing the Prince, however in reality Transylvania maintained independent foreign as well as internal policy. The Transylvanian princes maintained the policy of religious freedom (first time in Europe) and recognized three nationalities: Hungarian, Szekler and Saxon (Transylvanian German). After the treaty of Karlowitz (1699) Transylvania and Hungary fell under the Habsburgs and the province was re-annexed to Hungary in 1867 as part of the Austrian-Hungarian compromise (Ausgleich). Transylvania was characterized by specific ethno-religious diversity. The Transylvanian princes were in favor of the Reformation in the 16th and 17th century and as a result Transylvania became a stronghold of the different protestant churches (Calvinist, Lutheran, Unitarian, etc.). During the Counter-Reformation and the long Habsburg supremacy the Catholic Church also gained significant power. Transylvania's Romanian population was also divided between the Eastern Orthodox and the Uniate Church (Greek Catholic). After the reception of the Jewish Religion by the Hungarian Parliament (1895) Jewish became a recognized religions in

the country, which accelerated the ongoing Jewish assimilation in Transylvania as well as elsewhere in Hungary. After World War I Transylvania was given to Romania by the Trianon Treaty (1920). In 1920 Transylvania's population was 5,2 million, of which 3 million were Romanian, 1,4 million Hungarian, 510,000 Germans and 180,000 Jews. According to the Second Vienna Dictate its northern part was annexed to Hungary in 1940. After World War II the entire region was enclosed to Romania by the Paris Peace Treaty. According to the last Romanian census (2002) Hungarians make 19% of the total population, and there are only several thousand Jews and Germans left. Despite the decrease of the Hungarian, German and Jewish element, Transylvania still preserves some of its multiethnic and multi-confessional tradition.

## **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, Crisana, 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.

## **3 Romanian educational policy between the two World Wars**

One of the main directions of the Romanian educational policy in the period between the two World Wars was the dissimilation of Transylvanian Jews. Romanian was declared the only language of state education (1928/Monitorul Oficial nr. 105). In special cases (in cities where national minorities made up the majority of the inhabitants) the establishment of sections in the language of minorities was allowed. The ecclesiastical schools had no right anymore to accept the enrollment of students belonging to other religions. Hebrew and Romanian became the only permissible languages of Jewish high school education starting in 1925 (1925/Monitorul Oficial 283,36). The university system allowed the access of Jews until 1938, but the violent actions of the Iron Guard made their attendance technically impossible.

## **4 Iron Guard**

Extreme right wing political organization in Romania between 1930 and 1941, led by C. Z. Codreanu. The Iron Guard propagated nationalist, Christian-mystical and anti-Semitic views. It was banned for its terrorist activities (e.g. the murder of Romanian Prime Minister I. Gh. Duca) in 1933. In 1935 it was re-established as a party named Totul pentru Tara, 'Everything for the Fatherland', but it was banned again in 1938. It was part of the government in the first period of the Antonescu regime, but it was then banned and dissolved as a result of the unsuccessful coup d'état of January 1941. Its leaders escaped abroad to the Third Reich.

## **5 Second Vienna Dictate**

The Romanian and Hungarian governments carried on negotiations about the territorial partition of Transylvania in August 1940. Due to their conflict of interests, the negotiations turned out to be fruitless. In order to avoid violent conflict a German-Italian court of arbitration was set up, following Hitler's directives, which was also accepted by the parties. The verdict was pronounced on 30th August 1940 in Vienna: Hungary got back a territory of 43,000 km<sup>2</sup> with 2,5 million inhabitants. This territory (Northern Transylvania, Seklerland) was populated mainly by Hungarians (52% according to the Hungarian census and 38% according to the Romanian one) but at the same time more than 1 million Romanians got under the authority of Hungary. Although Romania had 19 days for capitulation, the Hungarian troops entered Transylvania on 5th September. The verdict was disapproved by several Western European countries and the US; the UK considered it a forced dictate and refused to recognize its validity.

## **6 . 23 August 1944**

On that day the Romanian Army switched sides and changed its World War II alliances, which resulted in the state of war against the German Third Reich. The Royal head of the Romanian state, King Michael I, arrested the head of government, Marshal Ion Antonescu, who was unwilling to accept an unconditional surrender to the Allies.

## **7 . Yellow star in Hungary**

In a decree introduced on 31st March 1944 the Sztojay government obliged all persons older than 6 years qualified as Jews, according to the relevant laws, to wear, starting from 5th April, "outside the house" a 10x10 cm, canary yellow colored star made of textile, silk or velvet, sewed onto the left side of their clothes. The government of Dome Sztojay, appointed due to the German invasion, emitted dozens of decrees aiming at the separation, isolation and despoilment of the Jewish population, all this preparing and facilitating deportation. These decrees prohibited persons qualified as Jews from owning and using telephones, radios, cars, and from changing domicile. They prohibited the employment of non-Jewish persons in households qualified as Jewish, ordered the dismissal of public employees qualified as Jews, and introduced many other restrictions and prohibitions. The obligation to wear a yellow star aimed at the visible distinction of persons qualified as Jews, and made possible from the beginning abuses by the police and gendarmes. A few categories were exempted from this obligation: WWI invalids and awarded veterans, respectively following the pressure of the Christian Church priests, the widows and orphans of awarded WWI heroes, WWII orphans and widows, converted Jews married to a Christian and foreigners. (Randolph L. Braham: A nepirtas politikaja, A holokauszt Magyarországon / The Politics of Genocide, The Holocaust in Hungary, Budapest, Új Mandatum, 2003, p. 89-90.)

## **8 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.

## **9 Szalasi, Ferenc (1897-1946)**

The leader of the extreme right Arrow-Cross movement, the movement of the Hungarian fascists. The various fascist parties united in the Arrow-Cross Party under his leadership in 1940. Helped by the Germans who had occupied Hungary on 19th March 1944, he launched a coup d'état on 15th October 1944 and introduced a fascist terror in the country. After World War II, he was sentenced to death by the Hungarian People's Court and executed.

## **10 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.

## **11 Mass emigration from Romania after World War II**

After World War II the number of Jewish people emigrating from Romania to Israel was much higher than in earlier periods. This was urged not only by the establishment in 1948 of Israel, and thus by the embodiment of an own state, but also by the general disillusionment caused by the attitude of the receiving country and nation during World War II. Between 1919 and 1948 a number of 41,000 Jews from Romania left for Israel, while between May 1948 (the establishment of Israel) and 1995 this number increased to 272,300. The emigration flow was significantly influenced after 1948 by the current attitude of the communist regime towards the aliyah issue, and by its diplomatic relations with Israel. The main emigration flows were between 1948-1951 (116,500 persons), 1958-1966 (106,200 persons) and 1969-1974 (17,800 persons).

## **12 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.

## **13 Travel into and out of Romania (Romanian citizens abroad, and foreigners into Romania)**

The regulations made it extremely difficult for Romanian citizens to travel into non-socialist countries. One could apply for a passport every second year; however, the police could refuse its issue without offering any explanation. One had to attach to the application for a passport a certificate from work, school or university proving the proper behavior of the applicant, and an

invitation letter from a relative or an acquaintance had to be enclosed too. If a whole family solicited for passports, the authorities usually refused to issue a passport for one member of the family, thus forcing the traveler to return. The law controlled very severely the travel of foreigners into Romania. No matter if they were tourists or visited their family, foreign citizens had to report when entering the country the number of days they intended to stay, and had to exchange a certain amount of money defined by the law for every day they intended to spend in Romania. Furthermore a foreign citizen could stay only in a hotel. Any individual Romanian citizen could get a significant fine if it turned out that they secured accommodation for a foreigner. The only exception were first degree relatives, but they also had to be reported to the police, indicating the number of days they would spend at the person accommodating them.