

Béla Borsi-Kálmán

Memories of the Jewish Community of Szinérváralja¹² (Excerpts)

“In my dreams I often see the hoarfrost glistening on the windowpanes of Szinérváralja”³



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¹ An edited and substantially expanded version of a paper read on 5 February 2018 in Budapest at the conference *Többes kötésben. Magyar zsidó múltak és égtájak* [Multiple Binds. Hungarian Jewish Pasts and Landscapes]. The author would like to express his thanks to his uncle, the late Béla Kálmán Sr., (Szinérváralja, 10 June 1943 – 20 January 2020), his brothers Pál Kálmán (b. Szinérváralja, 5 November 1943) and Sándor Kálmán (b. Szinérváralja, 26 September 1954), József Nagy and Márton Szmuck (b. Szinérváralja, 1950) for their help in the preparation of this essay. (*Translator’s note*: Szinérváralja in Transylvania (Romania) is known in Romanian as *Seini*. Throughout, wherever possible, the Hungarian placename is followed, after a forward slash, by its current Romanian version, but in order to save space only on the first occasion that it is mentioned.)

² <https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seini>

³ Courtsey of one of Majsi Izsák’s daughters, June 2008 (Tel Aviv).

The author of these lines is aware, despite the materials recorded above, that he has undertaken what is virtually a “mission impossible”, since the Jewish community whose fate he is attempting to record thanks to his fading memory has long ceased to exist, the vast majority of their number having emigrated at the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s to what they still called “Palestine” (i.e., Israel). Their numbers had already been severely depleted during the Shoah, as the Jewish population of Szinérváralja and its environs – already mostly well on the way to Magyarisation – “were deported in the spring of 1944 to the Szatmárnémeti ghetto and thence to Auschwitz”.⁴ We know from the work of Géza Komoróczy that in 1944 the Orthodox community’s rabbi was the former wine-merchant Ábrahám Schwarz, the population was 615, and its assets consisted of “the synagogue, the abattoir of the manor, the rabbi’s residence, the homes of the ritual slaughterers, the ritual bath; the state tax-base of its members was 1.5 million pengő, tax revenue from the religious community was 23,000 pengő, of which the gabella [goods tax– *trans.*] was 5,000 pengő, and income from the mikve 2,200 pengő”.⁵

Of the town’s 700 or so Jews in 1930, forming a not inconsiderable 12.92% of the town’s population, only a fraction survived the war: altogether no more than about 150 returned.⁶

The result of hope springing up anew and the sense that they had returned with a new identity and a keenness to make a new start – and not least the irresistible pull of a new homeland on the horizon, a state entity still not yet known by the name of Israel – was that in the survivor families a number of children were born between 1945 and 1948: those of my own generation. But their parents, quite understandably, did not see their future as “building socialism in the ‘people’s democracy’” of Romania: the overwhelming majority of them made Aliyah to Israel between 1953 and 1965. The few families who, for various reasons, had to stay on a little longer, left their homeland a few years later, by the mid-to-late 1970s. Nowadays, all that remains of Szinérváralja’s Jewish population is Márton Szmuck, now aged about 70, the son of cinema

⁴ Ibid. 47.

⁵ I thank Géza Komoróczy for supplying these very valuable supplementary data by e-mail.

⁶ Ibid. According to more detailed figures from Béla Szilágyi in 2001, of the total population of Szinérválja in 1910, i.e. 5,360 souls, no less than 634 (11.8%) belonged to the “Israelite denomination”. According to the Romanian census of 1930, this figure rose to 663 (12.92%), while the total population declined somewhat. Adalbert-Béla Szilágyi (ed.): *Szinérváralja*. Sárvár–Szinérváralja, Az RMDSZ Szinérváraljai Szervezete, 2001. (Statistical data on p. 12.)

technician ‘Uncle’ Szmuck, born in 1950,⁷ and an elderly lady, also from a mixed marriage,⁸ in addition to the imposing synagogue, majestic even in its dilapidated state, and the gloriously laid out Jewish cemetery under the ruins of the castle of Szinérváralja, at the mouth of the Közpaták river, an area even today populated mostly by Hungarian Calvinists.

This voluntarily undertaken task is further complicated by the fact that the person recalling this past – me – has himself no Jewish identity and all his ancestors – apart from one great-grandmother baptised a Catholic⁹– lived out their lives in the Calvinist faith. So much so, that the first person in the Kálmán family to graduate from high school, my father,¹⁰ attended the renowned Bethlen Kollégium at Nagyenyed/Aiud between 1933 and 1940¹¹ and was unable to receive his teaching certificate in June 1941 in the ceremonial hall of his alma mater because history, in the form of the Vienna Award of 30 August 1940, supervened and the graduating class was absorbed by the Catholic teacher training college of Kolozsvár/Cluj. The parent institution, however, along with the vast sea of memories that the graduands cherished all their life,¹² remained stranded in southern Transylvania, along with many tens of thousands of ethnic Hungarians.

A further difficulty for this memorist is that – apart from the already mentioned but little-known memoirs of the well-known Szinérváralja-born painter János Incze, in a booklet published around

⁷ The family of Adolf Szmuck, originally from Máramarosziget (1898–1965), like that of Szender Friedmann, was wiped out in Auschwitz, so he remarried, his second wife also being a Christian. Szmuck senior refused to say anything about the suffering he had endured to his son Márton, who only found out about them after his death – along with the fact that his father had a second, also Christian, family with three children with whom he has no contact of any kind: he does not know whether they remained in Romania or emigrated to Israel. Márton Szmuck’s request to emigrate to Israel in the mid-1960s was not endorsed by Nagybánya’s Jewish community, probably because his mother was not Jewish. Be that as it may, he quarrelled with his denomination and therefore remained in the land of his birth. He too married a Christian Hungarian, this time from nearby Vámfalu/Vama. Of their three boys, one is an army officer currently stationed in the Romanian capital following service with NATO in the USA, the second has a business selling car-parts in Chicago, while the youngest runs a successful small firm in Nagybánya selling refrigerators. The author is grateful to Márton Szmuck for this additional information.

⁸ Szender Friedmann, a tanner, having likewise lost his family in the Holocaust, also remarried and had a daughter, Rózsika, who in turn married another former classmate of mine, József Zeiszperger (Zeisperger), from Szinérváralja’s community of Catholic “Danube Swabians”, which had completely Magyarised by the end of the nineteenth century.

⁹ Otilia Móricz of Nábrád (1858– c. 1910), my great-grandfather, Ferencz Kálmán’s wife and mother of my paternal grandfather, Béla Kálmán, Sr. (Fehérgyarmat, 1887–Szinérváralja, 1963).

¹⁰ Béla György Kálmán (Szinérváralja, 18 February 1920–Verőcemaros, 5 December 2000).

¹¹ Just like János Incze, some years earlier (Anderco et al. [2015]: op. cit. 113.)

¹² My father kept a vast number of photographs of what he called his ‘golden years’, his student years at Nagyenyed, which he frequently showed off to his teenage sons at the end of the 1950s. Indeed, he rarely talked of anything else. This is the basis of my genuinely *secondary* Transylvanian identity, for until the summer of 1970 (discounting a three-week stint in a pioneer camp in Szováta/Sovata in January 1958) I had not set foot in Inner Transylvania.

the turn of this century,¹³ and the short monograph already quoted from several times – to the best of his knowledge no work of literature or history has so far been devoted exclusively to the history of Szinérváralja’s Jews. This is the case despite the Romanian-language biographical account mentioned earlier, which mentions, of the numerous famous Jewish or partly Jewish personalities associated with Szinérváralja, only Pál Szende’s career.¹⁴

Thus, apart from my own, not especially extensive research,¹⁵ I am perforce obliged to rely largely on my own childhood memories.

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My first memories connected with Jews I can barely summon up concretely, for a child growing up treats everything as natural and it never occurs to him that some things are perhaps not. A sliver of memory of this kind concerns the hospital in Nagybánya where, at the age of five, sometime in the spring of 1953, I had my tonsils removed by a Romanian surgeon and I spent about ten days in a ward with grown-up women. Of course, my mother would visit me every day and take me out into the corridor, where there was on one occasion another patient, also with his mother. We sat quite close to them and so willy-nilly overheard their conversation. I do not, of course, remember anything they actually said, but the way the boy – who was about my age – spoke, his turns of phrase and his intonation I recall finding unusual and at the same time very intelligent and attractive. It was his way of thinking and the sing-song pattern of his speech that entranced me. I also definitely recall that it occurred to me: how nice it would be if I, too, were ever so “intelligent”! In retrospect, though I have no evidence of any kind for the notion, I think mother and son must have belonged to those members of the Nagybánya Jewish community who were about to make Aliyah, to emigrate. And also, from roughly this time, the figure of my grandfather, the elderly Béla Kálmán, a retired master barber, looms up, as he converses on the street with the shochet¹⁶ in

¹³Szilágyi (2001): op. cit. 3–54. (Statistical data on p. 12.)

¹⁴ Porumbăcean (2013): op. cit. 67–69. Of the Jews of Szinérváralja and their synagogue only these sentences occur in the volume: “In those days [*sc.* the 1950s] several Jewish families lived in the town centre and in Vasút Street. In the latter stood the imposing synagogue which on Saturdays filled with worshippers of the Mosaic faith”. (p. VI). In line with my own memories, Márton Szmuck told me that in the 1950s the synagogue was always full on Shabbat and on the high holidays. (For this reason for a long time I mistakenly thought that the community suffered little during the Shoah. Alas, the opposite was the case.)

¹⁵See notes 18 and 19.

¹⁶ In Hebrew שוחט *shochet* “slaughterer” is thus not simply the Jewish butcher or, in older Hungarian “kaszab”. I only recently realised that it has a somewhat pejorative overtone, so that “slaughterer” is more acceptable as a translation.

his traditional hard black hat, around 1952–1953, obviously about political events that have filtered down to the farthest corners of the province of Máramaros/Țara Marmatei. Another fragmentary memory: on one of the major Jewish holidays, one of the schohet's superiors (probably from Szatmár) visited the Szinérváralja Jewish community and the two highly respectable gentlemen, on their way to the synagogue, stood before this 6- or 7-year-old, who stared at them wide-eyed as, while they brushed down their hard hats with a clothes brush, they improvised coverings for their bald pates with handkerchieves knotted at the corners, to ensure that not even for this brief moment should they offend against the precepts of their religion. This memory was no doubt easier to summon up because we lived only two doors down from the shochet.¹⁷

Another, associated reminiscence is of the shochet hanging up on a wire tied to a big tree in the yard the poultry – usually a goose – that had had its neck cut with a razor-sharp knife, so that it could bleed out in order to ensure it was not “treif” but ritually “kosher”.

These expressions I picked up from my grandmother, Ilona Kandó, who having been born in 1895, naturally attended the Hungarian-language primary school in Szinérváralja, along with many Jewish girls of her generation and became lifelong friends with the majority of them. Her best friend married the Roman Catholic clockmaker of Szinérváralja, Feri Merli, which shows that the natural commingling of the two religions and ethnicities was already underway in the first decade of the twentieth century, and continued even through the ominous 1930s and 1940s: of our acquaintances István Balogh, from a root-and-branch Catholic gentry family, also married a Jewish woman, the elegant “Auntie Mira”, mother of the rather pretty Zsuzsi Balogh, a classmate of mine

Generally, as in the case of the Szinérváralja community downgraded as a result of the Shoah, he as a God-fearing believer also fulfilled other community functions, such as religious “supervisor”, the person who knows and adheres to the rules and regulations (and ensures others do so, too), for no rabbi was appointed here after 1944! Additionally, he knows all about the various parts of the animals, has to pass a rigorous examination and possesses an appropriate rabbinical certificate. In other words, he carries out serious and confidential tasks. This was in every respect a post suited to the elderly Laufer! (The author would like to thank József Nagy for this valuable supplementary information.)

¹⁷ The people next door were, on both sides, Romanians: the Săsărans on the right and the Mădăians on the left. Old Mr Săsăran was a notable personage because it was he who generally sat on St Michael's horse on the hearse that was kept in the back of the courtyard. By the way, every member of the Săsăran family, notably the three children who were my father's contemporaries, spoke perfect Hungarian (old Cornel, who later moved to Zsombolya/Jimbolia, was one of my father's closest Romanian friends), while the Mădăians spoke only broken Hungarian, the language of the former ruling power, just as did the more distant neighbours, the Marinescu and the Dan families. In both families there were boys about two years my senior, and if I think about it, ‘Bebi’ Dan must have been my first ‘teacher’ of Romanian, as he spoke not a word of Hungarian, just as the blond and blue-eyed son, ‘Dumi’ (Dumitru), of the Lenghels (Lengyels?), who lived in a rather dilapidated little house behind the Săsărans. They were non-Hungarian-speaking Jews and unfortunately I donot recall how they came to live in Szinérváralja. I believe they moved to Nagybánya around 1954 and I havenot seen them since.

born on the same day as me. If we looked hard enough, we would doubtless find many more cases of this kind.

And it was also my grandmother who enlightened me about why so many of the Jewish children that I knew, especially Andor Friedmann, looked so sad: Ilona Kandó, who inherited a fairly large library¹⁸ from her father, the master barber Sándor Kandó (who had once even visited Bosnia), and who as a “lady of Szinérváralja” read a great deal, once pressed into my hands a fairly thick book bound in black and entitled *Death Factory*, whose author I do not recall¹⁹ but the contents of which have remained etched in my memory. All the more so because it was from this volume that she would read nightly to our grandfather, who as the result of a botched eye-operation could only make out block capitals. So, with my younger brother Pali, we listened horror-struck – our shared “chaise-longue” being in the same bedroom – to the systematic accounts of the horrific events. (Now, reading over what I have written, I suddenly recall that my grandmother once told of a highly intelligent Jewish intellectual who, probably in the early 1920s, but perhaps a few years later, gave a lecture to a small circle on “Communism” and “Zionism”. Unfortunately, I cannot recall whether she had been in the audience or had merely heard about it, and of course I no longer know whether she actually mentioned a name at all.)

There are, of course, a few other fragments of memory as well: in the early and mid-1950s it would sometimes happen that in a tenement mainly inhabited by Jews, families and friends would gather and, on such occasions, music could be heard late into the night, and there would be talk of the various deals that were being made, there was perhaps dancing, too, – at all events, there was a lot of noise. My grandfather would comment: “There they go, *deydeying* again!” This was an expression I had not heard before, nor have I since, and perhaps the reason I remember it is that

¹⁸ This included, apart from the collected poems of Sándor Petőfi, Endre Ady and Attila József, and many of the works of the novelists Mór Jókai and Kálmán Mikszáth, and also Ferenc Herczeg’s novel *Pogányok* [Pagans], as well as a beautifully illustrated “Rákóczi Album”, the geographical and historical atlases of Manó and Károly Kogutowicz, and the first edition (1908–1912) of Tolnai’s ten-volume *History of the World*, and also Benedek Barátosi Balogh’s ethnographic work *Séta a világ körül* [A Stroll Around the World], illustrated with striking photographs and drawings. (As this came out from the same publisher and had a similar cover, until very recently I wrongly thought it was a sort of supplementary volume, not an independent work. This may well have happened because in the stressful rush of our move to Hungary on 10 July 1962, we stuffed our modest belongings into two hurriedly knocked together wooden crates and had no room for even a single one of the books Sándor and Ilona Kandó had amassed. These were carried off by those of our relatives who remained in Romania.) I would mention, in passing, that without my voracious reading in that library between 1956 and 1962 I could hardly have become a historian.

¹⁹ Tamás Gusztáv Filep has suggested the volume was the third edition of Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka’s *Halálgyár* [Death Factory], translated by László Balassa, Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó, 1958, a bestseller in its time. My thanks to him for this highly plausible suggestion.

(perhaps wrongly) it conjures up for me the atmosphere of the Polish small-town shtetls,²⁰ the ghettos whence the ancestors of Szinérváralja's Jews, too, had come some two centuries before, perhaps even earlier in the case of some families.²¹ On the whole, derogatory remarks were rarely made in front of us children:²² though "seftelés" (wheeling and dealing) had a certain negative connotation, it also implied, at least as much, appreciation of the dynamism of "the Jews", in the same way as Father regularly referred to some of his childhood friends as "big *machers*".²³ The only somewhat contemptuous remark I heard when I was small was that *after 1920* almost every Jewish family made its children go to a Romanian school. The local Hungarians wrongly interpreted this as an intention to distance themselves and cut themselves off from the community.²⁴ But this was less damning than in the case of those families which, as happened with several of my classmates in 1959, had their children transferred to Romanian schools from grade 5.

For me it was especially poignant when in the early 1920s the Inczes, too, moved into the Jewish quarter's Vasút (formerly Árpád) Street, close by the synagogue but facing it, nearer to the main square.²⁵

²⁰ I discovered recently that one of the most beautiful and most popular songs of the Pesach seder-night is "Dayenu", which means something like "even this much would suffice us". This is a song that is sung by young and old together. The refrain is "dayenu" which is repeated in approximately the form "day-day-enu, day-day-enu, dayenu, dayenu". Since the seder supper takes place strictly after sunset, this song is sung by the whole family late in the evening/early in the night. In the night-time silence, the text could naturally be heard from the Jewish houses. See the first song at www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtLKOcFwct4 (The whole album can be accessed at www.youtube.com/playlist?list) Once again my thanks to József Nagy for these details.

²¹ Anderco et al. (2015): op. cit. 45.

²² I recall only one: my grandmother, when she wanted to say something nasty about one of her Jewish (female) friends sometimes the word "rüfke" (prostitute, slut, "easy" woman) would slip out, but I am not aware of her ever being at odds with any of them. The other piece of folk wisdom that was in wide circulation among the Hungarians of Szinérváralja was that the Jews are generally intelligent and quick-witted but when – very rarely – they are stupid, they are *very* stupid indeed.

²³ I think that the above-mentioned Kepes anecdote, which I heard in a variety of forms from family and friends, should be considered in the same light, especially as my grandfather Kálmán's barber shop could not have been located far from the famous clothier's destroyed by fire. On the other hand, another sliver of memory, also about my father, is somewhat at odds with this: one of my father's childhood Jewish pals, with whom he remained on intimate terms even in adulthood, and whose name I have unfortunately forgotten, was the *sole* survivor of the death camp at Auschwitz, as every member of his family and virtually all his relatives went "up in the smoke [i.e. of the gas chambers – *trans.*]". My father, a little naively but honestly asked him: "Why did you come back?" His reply: "I will move to Israel for ever, but first I will have my revenge on the Fascists!" (He was probably the same person who, according to another anecdote, already as a member of the Romanian Communist Party sitting beside a Soviet officer at an identity check, signalled the "problem" cases by stepping on the officer's toes under the table.) The father of Imre Tóth (Szatmárnémeti, 1921– Paris, 2010), who spent his childhood in Szatmár, went to university in Kolozsvár, had a teaching career that began in Bucharest and ended in Regensburg and called himself, modestly, "a historian of mathematics", was – still under his original name Róth – one of the K.u.K. army's most outstanding horse-cavalrymen and the reward for his services was the same as the other 600,000 or so Hungarian Jews': "[...] It was my father who had the most profound and lasting influence on me. My father was a Cabalist. He went up in the smoke of the gas chambers. He lies here, buried in me. An open wound, eternally aflame. Nor do I want it to ever heal." See Gyula Staar's interview with Imre Tóth in: Imre Tóth: *Isten és geometria* [God and Geometry]. Budapest, Osiris Kiadó, 2000. 452.

²⁴ Unfortunately, this did in fact happen, but only *after* the Shoah. That is, this was a(nother) case of the post-1920, faltering and increasingly insecure, Hungarian (national) identity confusing cause and effect. See on this the views of Mihály Vajda: *Mentalitások* [Mentalities]. *Élet és Irodalom*, 2 February 2018. 5.

²⁵ In my memory, however, it was *not* this house that was the Inczes' home. That was the nursery, on the banks of the Szinyér river, of Sándor Incze, who was about the same age as my father and one of the three children of his father János Incze's second marriage.

To be continued in our next issue.

This was probably located on an older property of one of the branches of the family. My parents were also on good terms with the two other siblings, Feri and Mancsi, and had obviously heard of János, who as Ioan Incze-Dej became a distinguished historian of Romanian art, though I came across him only during my time as Cultural Counsellor in Bucharest (25 October 1990 – 15 June 1995). His above-mentioned autobiography I found only as I was sorting out the library of my father, who died in December 2000, so the first time I was first able to make use of the valuable information about him was in the notes to my Christmas 1993 interview with Béla Bíró (see above).