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Translated from Hungarian by Peter Sherwood

Memories of the Jewish Community of Szinérváralja¹² (Excerpts)

Part 2

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



The synagogue, built in 1904, as it looks today

¹ An edited and substantially expanded version of a paper read on 5 February 2018 in Budapest at the conference *Többs 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 Courtesy of one of Majsi Izsák's daughters, June 2008 (Tel Aviv).

János Incze recalls the following Jewish families in Szinérváralja (pointing out that Jews were, in fact, thin on the ground): Ickovits, Katz, Lebovits, Rapaport, Zimmel, and he also notes the name of the owner of the famous alcohol manufactory in Szinérváralja, Lébus Klein, as well as painting a sympathetic portrait of the scholarly Jewish teacher of the *cheder*,⁴ “Mr Groszmann”. Of his childhood playmates who were Jewish he lists Hersu Ickovits, Samu Grósz, Majsi Izsák and Icig Lóvi.⁵

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We lived close by the synagogue, only a couple of houses down on the left-hand side, and our next-door-but-one neighbour was the Laufel(d) family, which had ended up there from Bukovina after World War II and therefore did not speak Hungarian: the long-bearded, hard-hatted shochet, his wig-wearing wife, who cut her nails severely every Friday as ritual demanded, had a couple of always-smiling children roughly our age: a girl Ruhi and a son Bertalan (‘Berci’),⁶ my brother Pali’s best friend: they communicated in a mixture of Hungarian and Romanian. As a result neither learnt the other’s mother tongue, though for my part, I spoke only Romanian with them. In retrospect I think I can be proud that the extremely kind-hearted old Laufel, who reminded me of the rulers of ancient Assyria and always wore ritual garb, frequently called me into his study and tried to induct me into the secrets of the Talmud, knowing that, unlike his son, I was a bookworm. In time we became truly “shabbat goyim” to the family: it was my brother and I who would lug their household pots and pans up to the attic before the High Holidays, and it was also my duty from time to time to take the russet-coloured wig of the virtually bald mistress of the house to the hairdresser’s in the main square. Looking back I cannot say for certain who else of their fellow Jews in the town were observant (the parents’ and grandparents’ generation surely were, but fewer of those of our age, but it is certain that, at least on paper, they were all Orthodox.) This is suggested, too, by a scene that my brother Pali has shared with me: he cannot have been more than six or seven years old when, on his way home alone, he was stopped in front of the synagogue by two bearded, sidelock-wearing Jews, who asked him to accompany them into the building and, once inside, lifted him up so he could switch the lights back on at the fusebox. (That reminds me, this often happened at the shochet’s, too: we would be the ones to switch the lights back on *post festa*.)

⁴ *Cheder* (originally meaning ‘room’): a primary school “where the little ones learn the basics of Judaism (reading and writing Hebrew, the Scriptures, and the fundamentals of the Jewish religion)”. See Kiss (2014): op. cit. 79.

⁵ Incze (1982): op. cit.

⁶ The father’s deep bass as he summoned his children: “Ruhele!”, “Boabi”, or “Berciku!” still rings in my ears to this day.

Also in our street, called Árpád Street in “Hungarian times”, later Vasút (Railway) Street and even later re-named Strada Cuza Voda, there lived several more Jewish–Hungarian (Hungarian–Jewish) families: three families called Friedmann, all related, with their children Ervin, “Baburi” and Andor, and old Szender Friedmann, the tanner.

A little farther on, closer to the railway station, lived the Farkases, and opposite them the Judovicses, with (again) sons roughly our age. The older one, stocky, pleasant-faced, glasses-wearing, and with sticky-out ears, was nicknamed Cuni and became a physician in Kolozsvár, while his younger brother, whose name time has erased from my memory, allegedly had his tumultuous life as Jerusalem’s chief of police cut short by a heartattack though he was not yet fifty years old. Sadly I know no more about them, but I have a faint memory connected to them which reveals something about how even in our childhood the complications of Romanian–Hungarian coexistence took their toll, however much we would like to think that – with distance lending enchantment to the view – back in those days they were idyllic. Concretely I seem to recall that once, in 1958 or 1959, the children of Vasút Street and Balta Street⁷ clashed along national/minority lines. Of course, the fracas was far from bloody or even serious, but there was a slap or two here and there and some kicks in the rear, while the verbal abuse that was heard is barely printable.⁸ In retrospect I also see it as symbolic that Magyars and Hungarian Jews ended up in the same “camp”, even if the Jewish kids did indeed have justifiable reservations about us innocent heirs of the discredited Hungarian state that was formerly in charge. The “headquarters” were at the Judovicses. That was the first and last time I visited them. In fact, it was not common for Jews and non-Jews to get together, and apart from them and, of course, the shochet and his family, my brother Pali and I saw only one of the Friedmann families at all regularly, though to them we did go quite often. So much so that the powerful smell of the garlic that they were fond of using in their kitchen has for ever lodged in my nose.⁹ The following story, also shared with me by Pali, is also connected: he was good friends not only with Berci Laufel but also with Baburi Friedmann, which is noteworthy because apart from the regular afternoon football matches played with the rubber ball,¹⁰ there were not many things that brought them together, as Pali did not go to Romanian kindergarten before, while the Jewish

⁷ Now Str. Crișan (Anderco et al. [2015]: op. cit. 155.)

⁸ *Ungur-pungur țap-în cur – Ie paharul de la cur – Și apoi zi: ce tare bun!* [I am a Jew – I don't deny it – To you I'll give everything I sh*t!]etc. (My brother Pali and Márton Szmuck also recall such street fights and, unfortunately, I too can remember one in the school playground in the spring of 1960, when I had to rescue a Romanian lad from the clutches of my classmate Sanyi Nagy.)

⁹ This is somewhat significant because in September of 1968 it proved to be a decisive olfactory link in the chain of the extended process whereby – in a kind of ‘aha moment’ – I was ultimately able to identify where some of the new friends I made in Budapest hailed from. Often they could not have been aware of this, and it was unseemly to raise the matter.

¹⁰ I still remember how much this cost: 3 lei, 75 bani, for which we saved up with my brother in dribs and drabs.

children, as I have mentioned, all completed their studies in Romanian schools. There was, however, a very strong natural affinity between them, because as youngsters they spent so much of their free time together and it was not only with their Romanian coevals that they fell out: they often fought among themselves, too. In the course of one of these afternoon clashes Pali slapped the sidelock-sporting Baburi, who always had his head covered, and even managed to knock his cap off. He must have sensed that he had made a big mistake and had no little remorse because he slunk after Baburi under cover of darkness to overhear the mortally offended boy report the incident to his mother. Pali was shocked by the response of the mother, who wore the prescribed wig: “May whoever who does such a thing burn in the flames!” Fortunately, the matter had no serious consequences and their relationship was unaffected, but Pali remembered all his life that it is not advisable to offend against either Jewish customs or the Jews’ thousand-year-old sensitivities. Particularly if the arm of the one “passing judgement” (and her husband) is adorned with the bluish “Auschwitz numbers”. I have not, unlike my brother, retained this memory, probably as a kind of “self-defensive” gesture, yet it is scarcely credible that I did not also see these tattoos.

I well remember the Steinbergers, too, who lived on the corner of Vasút and Balta Streets and whose blond, blue-eyed son Jóska, a year or eighteen months my senior, became an internationally renowned professor of ecology at Tel Aviv’s Bar Ilan University.¹¹ I seem to recall that he owned a “proper” football, sewn of black patches of leather, thus ensuring for himself a regular place on any *ad hoc* team playing a match on the other “pitch”, in the dried-up bed of the stream in tiny Balta Street.

In the opposite direction, towards the main square, lived another Friedmann family, whose son Andor, roughly my age, has remained lodged deep in my memory because of his big brown, melancholy eyes, as mentioned above.

In the next house along, on the same side, lived “Majsi” Izsák, the baker, with his wife and two daughters. The head of the family must have been very fond of my father, because when in January 1958, he was sacked from his post as head of the Hungarian school for “chauvinist-nationalistic tendencies” and we had literally nothing to eat, Majsi would surprise us, unbidden, every two or three days with a “brown loaf”. (He would discreetly raid his allocation of dough and have the loaf sent over with one of his daughters after dark. When, almost half a century

¹¹ Prof. Yosef Steinberger. <https://life-sciences.biu.ac.il/en/node/609>

later, in the summer of 2008, we met in Tel Aviv, one of the girls, by then an elderly lady, told me of the recurring dream she had, which has provided the motto for this piece.)

Another noble act from those difficult times has also been preserved by my brother Pali: between January 1958 and the end of 1960, my father could not find a job as no one was willing to take him on, and he would occasionally lay down railway sleepers at the station to make some money. Thus my mother became the principal support of our family of seven, as she was not thrown out of her job in the Romanian school system. From her modest teacher's salary she once bought a scrawny chicken at the market so my grandmother could make some thin chicken soup, and she was carrying it home triumphantly in her bag. On the way she ran into the wife of one of my father's childhood Jewish friends trudging with a sad face back to the shochet in the direction of the main square. They started talking and it turned out that the fat capon she was carrying from the shochet was, after all, "treif". The kind-hearted woman said: "I tell you what, let's swap!" And that is how, just once, we managed to have a filling meal, with Ilona Kandó improvising a splendid lunch (or maybe dinner) out of the generous gift.

By the by, it was from Majsi Izsák that my father discovered that the much-touted emigration to Palestine was not all it was cracked up to be: Majsi's testicles were beaten¹² by the Securitate in Nagybánya until he revealed where in his garden he had buried the iron casket containing what little he had managed to salvage of his assets through the Shoah. So he began his new life in the Promised Land around 1960 without a penny to his name, aged over 50.¹³

In the main square stood the lodging house of the former clothes dealers, the Neumanns, with its spacious courtyard: this served as Szinérváralja's main football pitch and was the scene every summer of matches "to the death" from early afternoon late into the night, with a mix of Hungarians, Magyarised Swabians (ethnic Germans) from Szatmár, Jews and Romanians.

¹² My brother remembers it as him having had weights hung on him, but it makes little difference: he was tortured. Sándor, who must have been four or five years old at the time, and therefore still slept in my parents' bedroom, overheard what my father whispered to my mother about this. After reading the first draft of this piece he wrote in an e-mail to me on 7 July 2019, inter alia: "Jews would be tortured by having a typewriter hung from their penis and being forced to walk around carrying it. Father whispered this to Mother. That's how I remember it".

¹³ Fortunately, there were many cases when traditional Jewish resourcefulness and astuteness triumphed over the Romanian Securitate system: one of his Jewish friends told my father, laughing, that many of those on Aliyah managed to spirit their family silver and gold out of the country by placing them in small packets sewn into the back passages of exported cattle by veterinary surgeons they had bribed in the Temesvár and Arad areas. The animals were then herded out west, or onto boats headed straight for Israel, where local members of the network were ready and waiting to pick out the specially-tagged creatures.

Here only one thing mattered: skill with the ball. Among those who used to participate were the two sidelock-wearing Neumann boys. Jaszi, the older of the two, who had Péter Esterházy's looks,¹⁴ was really good: I heard he later became a banker or wholesaler in New York, but that may be just a rumour and he too may be living in Israel. I do not know how they were related to "Öcsi" Neumann, five or six years my senior, who was one of the most talented football-players in Szinérváralja,¹⁵ and after he emigrated – or so I heard – he even played a few times for the Israeli national team, though this may of course be just a fairytale. And if I add to this that in the academic year 1954–1955 my parents enrolled me in the Romanian kindergarten, where several Hungarian–Jewish (Jewish–Hungarian) families fortunate enough to survive the Holocaust also enrolled their offspring, then I can record without the slightest exaggeration that meeting and playing and, in general, spending time with Jews was a wholly natural, habitual thing to do, an organic part of our everyday life. My fellows included, in addition to Józsi Steinberger and Jaszi Neumann, Ervin Izsák, whom I met again some forty years later when I was a diplomat in Bucharest, where he headed the local office of the Jewish Agency, as well as Szuri, the child of the Schwarzes, who were related to Pál Szende¹⁶ (Szuri, with her shoulder-length, raven-black hair, was one of the most beautiful Jewish girls I have ever seen), as well as, among others, the charming, slightly built daughter of the Holländers, who were sent to the institution by their parents for the same reason as I, namely to learn the state language as well as possible. But it was not just on the football-pitch that I would meet on a daily basis the children as well as the parents of Jewish families other than those listed earlier, among them Steinmetz, the other Jewish baker in the main square, Hersku and the Markovitses, as well as the Kellers. Mrs Keller, née Judit Bogáti, originally from Budapest, taught mathematics in my father's school until the 1959 "(forced) merger" of the Hungarian and Romanian schools. The Kellers' son, Ferenc, some five or six years younger than us, subsequently also completed his medical studies in Kolozsvár, becoming a well-regarded urologist with an andrological practice in the land of his birth, too. Other names include Weiner (a mechanic at the power station opposite the yeast factory: it was in the Weiners' yard that I saw the dream of every boy in Szinérváralja, a big toy car you could climb into, a present from America), Berger¹⁷ (the dentist), Dr Bíró¹⁸ (the internist),

¹⁴ See further Borsi-Kálmán (2018): op. cit. 165–226 (especially 215–216).

¹⁵ A favourite of my father's, who as a player and trainer picked him around 1957–1958 as a youngster several times to play for the juniors of the Romanian thirdleague team, Unirea Seini (Szinérváralja United).

¹⁶ [Pál Szende](#) (né Schwarz) (*Nyírbátor*, 7 February 1879 – *Szinérváralja*, 15 July 1934), writer on economics, radical politician, Minister of Finance in MihályKárolyi's government 1918–1919 as well as in the Berinkei Administration that followed it.

¹⁷ Móric Berger (Nagysomkút/Șomcuta Mare, 9 April 1914 – Ashdod, Israel, 18 February 1972). Anderco et al. (2015): op. cit. 47.

¹⁸ Dr Mátyás Bíró (Bethlen/Beclean, 11 April 1979 – Ashkelon, Israel, 17 July 2004).Ibid. 48.

whose daughter Zsuzsi was his spitting image and also attended the Romanian kindergarten. I found out only later that Zoltán Zelkovics, who hailed from Szatmár and is known in the Hungarian literary world as Zoltán Zelk (1906–1981), spent a lot of time with his Szinérváralja relatives in his youth,¹⁹ and wrote several poems mentioning Szinérváralja. And also here was born Miklós Nagy-Talavera,²⁰ the noted historian, later of San Francisco, whose father had earlier acquired a patent of nobility, as well as – lastly – one of the grandfathers of London-based historian and cartographer András Bereznay.²¹

I met Miklós Nagy-Talavera numerous times, both in Bucharest and Paris. He was especially proud that his family was not of Ashkenazi but of Sephardic origin. He had quite a spectacular career: not only did he survive Auschwitz as an adolescent, but he was “fortunate” enough to work, between 1949 and 1955, on the Trans-Siberian railway, in the company of Ukrainian smugglers and Russian political prisoners. Thus, in addition to Hungarian, his mother tongue, he learnt (in primary school in Nagyvárad) Romanian, at university in Vienna he picked up German, and he also spoke excellent Ukrainian and Russian. His English-language publications on Nicolae Iorga, the Iron Guard, and a comparison of Hungarian and Romanian fascism²² are acknowledged as standard works worldwide, just as are the historical atlases of András Bereznay.²³

And last but not least, an uplifting memory: one of my father’s best friends was old Ernő Rosenberg, who after learning the profession of tailoring and cutting in Budapest at the beginning of the 1930s returned to Szinérváralja. He was both a gentleman’s tailor and a financial patron of football. He had plenty of business *nous*, as he worked not only for the “gentlemen” of the old world but also for the Romanian day-labourers of the local Avas region (the “vasánys” as we used to call them), who would come in droves to the traditional weekly Thursday market. He was able to make the traditional Hungarian *szűrs* and *subas*, the full-length shepherd’s cloaks of felt and sheepskin, supplying them with useful pockets in

¹⁹ His mother was born Mária Herskovits. (NB There were several families called Herskovits in Szinérváralja.)

²⁰ Miklós Nagy-Talavera (Budapest, 1 February 1929 – Chico, California, 23 January 2000).

²¹ András Bereznay’s maternal grandfather was called Imre Ignác Szemere. He had a tailor’s shop in Budapest, Ullmann and Szemere. His wife – András Bereznay’s grandmother – was called Lujza Ullmann. (I am grateful to András Bereznay for these details.)

²² *Nicholas Nagy-Talavera: The Green Shirts and the Others. A History of Fascism in Hungary and Romania*. Las Vegas, Center for Romanian Studies, 2001; *Nicholas Nagy-Talavera: Nicolae Iorga: A Biography*. Las Vegas, Center for Romanian Studies, 2008.

²³ András Bereznay: *The Times Atlas of European History*. London, Times Books, 1994; András Bereznay: *Kings and Queens of the British Isles*. London, Times Books, 2002. (He made the maps for both books.) See also András Bereznay: *Erdély történetének atlasza* [Atlas of Transylvanian History]. Budapest, Méry Ratio Kiadó, 2011; András Bereznay: *A cigányság történetének atlasza – Térképezett roma-történelem* [A Historical Atlas of the Roma – Roma History in Maps]. Budapest, Méry Ratio Kiadó, 2018.

which he craftily hid 10-lei banknotes: these the client would find in the changing rooms and would therefore immediately buy the item without bothering to haggle. No wonder customers flocked to Rosenberg Outfitters! Stocky and podgy Uncle Ernő resembled more the Hungarian gentry than a Jewish burgher and enjoyed the good life, having a fine old time with gipsy bands in the legendary local restaurant, the Korona. And, of course, he was there at every football match and even accompanied the team on their away matches. The friendship was doubtless reinforced by the fact that, as I have already mentioned, my father was one of the best football players in the area, in 1943 even being recruited for the Transylvanian army team and by no less a person than his occasional sparring partner and a stalwart of the Budapest team Honvéd, Sándor Balogh II, who was later (just before the Puskás period) to captain the Hungarian national team. Fortunately, uncle Ernő, unlike many of his fellows, managed to avoid labour service and emigrated to Beer Sheva in Israel at the end of the 1950s, though he frequently came back to visit. On one of these trips, having discovered that his best friend's son was a diplomat in Bucharest, he looked me up in the Romanian capital.

It was summer, so he invited me to have dinner with him in an elegant outdoor restaurant somewhere near the Piața Aviatorilor in one of Bucharest's villa quarters, and asked point blank:

“Do you know who your father was?”

I looked at him in some surprise, whereupon he said:

“Let me tell you that he served for a time under Colonel Imre Reviczky in Nagybánya and helped countless Jews to survive and to retain their assets!”²⁴

I was stunned but, of course, proud, for my father had never said a single word about what he had done in the war nor about the circumstances of our much later resettlement,²⁵ though if

²⁴ He may not in fact have mentioned the name of his boss and the truth is that – perhaps out of modesty – I did not chase up myself how much truth there was in Ernő Rosenberg's claim. Perhaps one day I will look up István Deák's article, *Tisztesség és becsület a II. világháborúban* [Honour and decency in World War II]. *História*, 32. (2010), 8. 12–18, and [Ádám Reviczky's Vesztesháborúk – megnyert csaták – Emlékezés Reviczky Imre ezredesre](#) [Wars Lost – Battles Won – Colonel Imre Reviczky in Memoriam]. Budapest, Magvető, 1985, but there is probably no written record of this, as it could have been a private endeavour which it is indeed best to keep quiet about. But it is a fact that after he returned from being a prisoner of war he was not summoned before the political screening committee, I suspect because his Jewish friends intervened.

²⁵ Quizzing them about this much later I know only that after being rejected twice, at the third attempt we received permission to leave in late May or early June of 1962, the trail for obtaining this permission leading back to Lajos Cseterki (1921–1983), secretary to the Presidential Council, who was my father's classmate in the Bethlen Kollégium – as were István Ercse, head of the Sashegy János Arany school for children in state care, and József Méhes (1920–2009), formerly head of the Institute for the Blind.

Ernő Rosenberg is to be believed, he had nothing to be ashamed of. All I knew from my grandmother was that until he was taken prisoner by the English, he served first in Kolozsvár and then, indeed, in Nagybánya as a commissioned officer, and another of his friends once suggested that it was perhaps in some defensive role.

But that is all. My mother had said nothing more, perhaps even she knew little, as they had only met in Szatmár at the end of 1946. In other words, *omertà* reigned supreme not only among the Jewish families that survived ²⁶ but everyone else living in that dangerous world turned upside-down.

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²⁶ On this topic my contemporary Péter Gárdos (b. Budapest, 8 June 1948) had this to say in an interview: “For fifty years my parents said nothing about what happened before 1945 – in fact, for a long time I didn’t even know I was Jewish. I faced up to this properly only in adulthood. To this day I find it difficult to explain why my father, Miklós Gárdos, a gifted journalist, didn’t set down on paper his experiences while he could. As he didn’t, the reckoning was left to us, the next generation. It was a heavy burden we carried on our backs for years, even decades”. See Péter Kövesdi’s interview with Péter Gárdos: Secrets poison the soul. *Vasárnapi Hírek*, 3 November 2018. 19.