

Béla Borsi-Kálmán

Translated from Hungarian by Peter Sherwood

## Memories of the Jewish Community of Szinérváralja<sup>12</sup> (Excerpts)

Part 1 [http://www.bjt2006.org/BB\\_Memories\\_part1\\_2523.pdf](http://www.bjt2006.org/BB_Memories_part1_2523.pdf)

Part 2 [http://www.bjt2006.org/BB\\_Memories\\_part2\\_3623.pdf](http://www.bjt2006.org/BB_Memories_part2_3623.pdf)

*“In my dreams I often see the hoarfrost glistening on the windowpanes of Szinérváralja”<sup>3</sup>*



The synagogue, built in 1904, as it looks today

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<sup>1</sup> 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.)

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

<sup>3</sup> Courtesy of one of Majsi Izsák's daughters, June 2008 (Tel Aviv).

## Postscript

I began by saying that I had bitten off more than I could chew and that my chances of success were minimal. Nevertheless, I have tried to get to the bottom of a few things because a couple of factors did, after all, make the undertaking easier, or at least partly possible:

I did spend all of the first, and most impressionable, twelve years of my life, those between 1948 and 1960, in the Jewish quarter of Szinérváralja.

The study of history (i.e., researching the past) has become my chief occupation, which is to say that it was my professional duty to put my memories into some kind of order. In addition, en route as it were, I had gradually to realise that these, at first sight unconnected, facts were in my case inextricably intertwined: not only the Romanian majority but, equally, the Hungarian Jewish minority of Szinérváralja have impressed themselves ineradicably on my consciousness and have, indeed, become embedded in my personality. This basic situation was further nuanced by the fact that the (for the most part) root-and-branch Calvinists of Szinérváralja, were only relatively in a majority over the Magyarised Catholics of Armenian,<sup>4</sup> Zipser (ethnic Germans from the Slovak area), “Danube Swabian” (ethnic German),<sup>5</sup> Polish,<sup>6</sup> Slovene or Croat<sup>7</sup> and Czech<sup>8</sup> origin, especially in the Jewish quarter, where of course those of Jewish faith continued to live in relatively greatest numbers and which, if only because of its synagogue and the ritual baths in Gyár Street, retained its Jewish character. This was thus a way of life, a multiple minority situation, that accompanies the individual socialised in this milieu all through his life, wherever fate should later happen to cast him<sup>9</sup>

This is indeed what happened to me, because although for a long time I did not ascribe any particular importance to my early experiences with the Jews of Szinérváralja, or indeed with Jews in general, after our move to Hungary in 1962, first as a student at Sárospatak (1962–

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<sup>4</sup> Csergezán, Kamenszki, Patován. (There was also a family called Ciprisz, presumably neo-Greek or perhaps Macedo-Romanian in origin, like the family by the name of Țințaș.)

<sup>5</sup> Jakner, Kretzinger, Simf, Tefenhardt, Stauder, Zeispergel. (cf. Incze [1982]: op. cit. 38). Between 1955 and 1960 I had classmates and teachers called Groszhardt (Józsi and Matyi), Hölzli (Erzsi and Jani), Ulmann (István), Schönpflug (Zoli), Schmutzer, Printzinger (Ferenc), Ébersz (Pál) and Wendlinger (Mária), and one neighbour was Uncle Jóska Stempel. But I also well remember the Nágels and the Starmüllers.

<sup>6</sup> Brezovszky, Kmiatek, Netoleczky, Radvánszky and so forth.

<sup>7</sup> Habarics, Morecz (?).

<sup>8</sup> Konyicska, Smillár, Tomanek, Vavrek.

<sup>9</sup> “The Transylvanian [Partium] Hungarians have one relationship to the Romanian majority in Romania and another to Hungary proper, where Hungarians are in the (overwhelming) majority. And they want to remain different, that is to say Hungarian, not only *vis-à-vis* the majority Romanians but also insist that the Hungarians of Transylvania [Partium] differ from the Hungarians of Hungary proper: in other words, it wants to remain a minority *vis-à-vis* its own majority nation, as well. *Thus, nothing can be said that is not formulated in terms of minority–majority*[...]. Every comparison points towards the minority because it is only and always particles that resemble each other.” Géza Páskándi: A kiválasztott és az alkalmas [The Chosen and the Suitable]. In Judit Havas– Gabriella Lengyel (eds.): *Párbeszélgetés. Írók, költők a Károlyi-palotában* [Conversations à Deux. Writers and Poets in the Károlyi Palace]. Budapest, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum–Kortárs–Dinasztia, 2000. 73. (My emphasis.)

1965) and then as an undergraduate in the Arts Faculty of Budapest University and a member of the Eötvös Collegium (1968–1973), I had countless experiences that I was able to “interpret” solely and exclusively thanks to the “imprinting” I had in my Szinérváralja childhood. By this I do not, of course, mean to suggest that I carried some kind of holy grail in my knapsack, but rather that after much reflection on the topic I gradually came to realise that, subconsciously or unconsciously, I had acquired extraordinarily valuable life experiences in my boyhood, the systematic processing of which could help me understand a number of interconnections, of whose existence the overwhelming majority of my Hungarian coevals (including many of those of Jewish background) – through no fault of their own, since they were taboo topics – could not be aware. In the absence of such handles on it, even the most intelligent of them could obtain only with a great deal of effort – from specialist books, bulky monographs, and dusty archives – the kind and volume of knowledge and the conceptual framework involved, that was, as one might put it, handed to me on a plate by Fate, and without which it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to orient oneself amidst the various nooks and crannies of Hungarian societal development and social psychology, topics which continue to remain highly sensitive both at the emotional and at the political level. And even if they should somehow manage to do this (and there is no reason why they should not), it remains questionable whether, behind the *termini technici*, there is genuine, personally lived-through, and sometimes suffered-through, practical experience.

In retrospect it seems very likely that it was on the basis of these childhood and adolescent memories that I kneaded together, between 1962 and 1970, in the depths of my consciousness, my “ideal” Jewish personae which, though far from perfect, helped me greatly to orient myself and to shape my typological sensibility: they ensured a relatively secure point of departure, despite the fact that I knew almost nothing at the time about the stages and hidden hierarchies in the evolution of Hungarian society, the formation of the middle class and of the nation, the time-depths involved, and the internal system of prejudices that everywhere reached far down into the depths.<sup>10</sup>

And here I must return to one of my fundamental experiences in Hungary: neither during the years spent in Sárospatak (1962 to 1965), nor around 1968–1970 in the Arts Faculty in

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<sup>10</sup>“The [...] (Hungarian) social class system not only does not strive for neutrality of values but on the contrary must gain the validity of the categories of its estates, and subsequently of the quasi-estate, middle-class categories, as well as the justification for individuals’ standing, on a different level, in the form of qualification [...]. To both sides of the pervasive divide [in the evolution of Hungarian society and in public thinking] and to every kind of societal division, to every means of bettering oneself in society, qualitative concepts were attached, which manifested themselves in the way the groups treated each other and in the forms of contact.” Zoltán Tóth: A rendi norma és a „keresztyén polgárisodás”. Társadalomtörténeti esszé. [The Norm of the Estates and ‘Christian Embourgeoisement’. An Essay on Social History]. *Századvég*, (1991), 2–3. 69–91.

Budapest, did it, for a long time, dawn on me why many strict, one might even say diehard, members of the Budapest socialist nomenklatura, young people enrolled in the Lajos Kossuth College for Boys, who preserved the values of the Calvinist world of the 1930s – and later my fellow students in their early twenties in the capital – sought my company, in particular? Whereas they could have taken their pick of children of intellectual families from the countryside, or even from “genteel” families that had slipped down the ladder.

Because that was how I saw them, as genteel Hungarian boys and girls from Budapest, for with one or two exceptions, they all had Magyar names and apart from their clothing being somewhat better quality than ours, they differed from us not in the slightest, unless perhaps in that they (though not all of them) seemed to be a little more self-assured and were less afraid of our strict teachers than were we.<sup>11</sup> Though already in Sárospatak it did begin to dawn on me that I seemed to know them better than did my fellows – but the nature of this instinctive knowledge did not become clear even to myself for a long time, and it never occurred to me that the attraction might be reciprocated (that is to say, that they felt that the more than averagely sensitive character that I brought with me from my previous minority existence might be closely related to theirs). To say nothing of the fact that many of them, by chance, as it were, experienced with a shock so much the greater the true state of affairs,<sup>12</sup> which has by now spawned a library of specialist literature.

It was equally curious that, wherever in the course of my wanderings in the outside world (London, Amsterdam, Bucharest, Vancouver, New York, Paris) I happened to sit down alone in a café or pub, I would invariably be approached and asked in the course of the conversations, whatever the language, whether I did not, by any chance, happen to be Jewish?<sup>13</sup> Because my interlocutors would invariably turn out to be descendants of Jews who had emigrated from Central and Eastern Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Borsi-Kálmán (2002): op. cit. 229, 232–233, 261.

<sup>12</sup> The associated questions of ethics and identity – which subsequently inevitably affect ways of life, group formation, choice of life partner, etc. – were formulated at age 30, just at the high point of the “regime change” in 1989, by an author a little younger than “the great generation”, in an important if little-cited essay, which may be summed up thus: “Is it possible to regard someone as a Jew, *is it possible to expect* him to regard himself as a Jew, if in his most impressionable years it never occurred to him that he was a Jew, and it was only from one day to the next that he was informed, or realized, that he was a Jew, that is to say that he was unexpectedly landed with a burden he had had no connection with in his upbringing: *is it conceivable* that such a person (whether an adult or, as is more common, a child) can acquire a Jewish identity overnight, that he can develop a complete Jewish identity (without, subsequently, having to pay a price), and that that identity becomes an organic part of his whole consciousness?” László Márton: *Kiválasztottak és elvegyülők* [The Chosen and the Blenders]. Budapest, Magvető Kiadó, 1989. 24–25. (Emphases in the original.) The present author fully identifies with Márton’s diplomatic answer to this question: “I leave the response to the reader”. Ibid. 25.

<sup>13</sup> I once experienced this myself, even in the Eötvös Collegium, in the early autumn of 1968. See further Borsi-Kálmán (2002): op. cit. 263; Borsi-Kálmán (2018): op. cit. 167.

In conclusion: my partially “quasi-Jewish” socialisation in the Jewish quarter of Szinérválja in another, some half-century old, historical time was felt by those of my coevals in Hungary (especially in Budapest) who had become detached from their Jewish roots, or who had consciously kept their distance from them, to be intuitively “quasi-Jewish”, even if – like me – they could not really have been aware of its nature and possible outcome. In other words, it was a matter of the fortunate coalescence of a “secondary Jewish identity”<sup>14</sup> from two kinds of origin and different motivations.

And this probably remains the case to this day.<sup>15</sup>

## Epilogue

In the catacombs of the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem, which preserve a complete record of the Central European Jewish communities destroyed during World War II, the most striking stele happens to be that of the Jews of Szinérválja, a fact which should be interpreted as an elegiac memorial to the scintillating quondam communal – and increasingly middle-class – life of the Hungarian Jews of Szinérválja and its relative (but at the same very real) weight. This is evidenced not only by the unusual, almost half-a-door-wide plaque in white marble that bears the inscription The Jewish Community of Szinérválja, but also by how it stands out from the forest of Polish, Ukrainian, Romanian, etc. texts by virtue of the fact that it is written in the Hungarian language and, furthermore, has had the ancient Hungarian coat-of-arms engraved on it.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For my part, as some kind of summing up, I am inclined to identify this very complex identity-seeking/identity clarifying process as a kind of “secondary Jewish identity”. I have tried to summarise my views on this topic in: *Töredék. Töprengés a honi antiszemitizmus természetéről, avagy óvatos javallatok a magyar–magyar viszony rendezésére* [Fragment. Reflections on the nature of anti-Semitism in Hungary, or cautious proposals for dealing with the Hungarian–Hungarian relationship], a volume of 324 pages currently accessible as an e-book on the website of the [National Széchényi Library](#) and the [István Bibó Intellectual Workshop](#). An expanded version: Borsi-Kálmán (2014): op. cit.; see also Béla Borsi-Kálmán–Iván Zoltán Dénes–Zsuzsa Ferge–Ambrus Miskolczy(eds.): *Homályzónák/Zones d’ombre. Felvilágosodás és liberalizmus/Lumières et libéralisme. Tanulmányok Kecskeméti Károly 80. születésnapjára* [Mélanges offerts à Charles Kecskeméti pour son 80<sup>e</sup> anniversaire]. Budapest, Kortárs Kiadó, 2019. 419–436. The same phenomenon is discussed in its historical context by one of Hungary’s leading contemporary thinkers: “[Why did Hungarian Jews] remain Jewish? [...] Why did they not become Hungarians [Czechs, Poles, Romanians] of the Mosaic faith [in the way that in the western parts of the German lands Jews did indeed become Germans of the Mosaic faith]? *I feel that they were very much on the pathway to this.* But then came the Holocaust. And nothing and no one will ever erase the memory of this, and not only from the survivors and their descendants. *Is it perhaps the traces of these memories that I recognise in the Other?*” Vajda (2018): op. cit. 5.

<sup>15</sup> In the interests of the never-attainable, complete (historical) Truth, I have to say that while this “knowledge” would have made it easier to do so in theory, the thoroughly politicised, enduringly estate-like (suspicious) character of Hungarian social relationships and the complete and total identification that it *demand*s from both sides, did not, ultimately, make it possible for me to fit fully into any of the key segments or categories. That is to say, anything that I gained on the swings, I lost on the roundabouts (Cf. Tóth [1991]: op. cit.), and see further Borsi-Kálmán (2002): op. cit. 232–234, 264–266; Borsi-Kálmán (2018): op. cit. 179–190; and also Péter N. Nagy’s conversation with lead researcher Luca Kristóf in: A világ pörög, az elitlista stabil. A kulturális kiválóságokról szóló felmérésről [The world spins, the list of élites stays still. On the survey conducted among outstanding cultural figures]. *Élet és Irodalom*, 17 May 2019. 7.

<sup>16</sup> I am grateful for this information to my former diplomatic colleague in Bucharest, József Nagy, who later served as Ambassador in Chişinău and Bogotá. I was able to confirm this with my own eyes in the summer of 2008, on my first visit to Israel.

## Appendix

By way of a melancholy memorial I list here the personal data of those (including my father's playmates, some born in the same year as he, 1920) who are recorded as having been born in Szinérváralja:

Benedikt, Miklós, 17 April 1913 (mother's maiden name: Judit Stern) – disappeared: Dubenko, 23 January 1943.

Berger, Jenő, 17 June 1907(mmn: Mária Dávid) – disappeared: Alekseyevka, 17 January 1943.

Berkovics, László, 1915 (mmn: GizellaMarkovits) – disappeared: 21 December 1942.

Berkovics, Sándor, 7 February 1920 (mmn: GizellaMoskovics) – disappeared: Ilovskoye, January 1943.

Bíró, Géza, 28 November 1909 (mmn: Ilona Neumann) – died: Szatmárnémeti, 11 November 1944.

Dolf, Hermann, 30 August 1917 (mmn: VeronGoldberger) – disappeared: January 1943.

Felberbaum, Lajos, 1918 (mmn: Eszter Markovits) – disappeared: Novy Mir, 25 January 1943.

Grosz, Géza, 1 March 1902 (mmn: Vilma Schoberl) – disappeared: Atamanskoye, 23 January 1943.

Grosz, Mór, 22 July 1920(mmn: Berta Perl) – disappeared: Hoskoye, January 1943.

Helprin, Márton, 14 November 1920 (mmn: Regina Katz) – disappeared: Oziryany, 1 February 1944.

Herskovits, Ignác, 28 December 1903 (mmn: Matild Herskovits) – died: Dubenko, 22 January 1943.

Herskovits, István, 3 October 1921(mmn: Matild Rosner) – wounded: Hajdúszoboszló, 21 August 1944.

Herskovits, László, 1919 (mmn: Matild Rosner)– disappeared: 17 January 1943.

Herskovits, Márton, 13 July 1913 (mmn: Matild Herskovits)– disappeared:Dubenko, 23 January 1943.

Hossko, József, 3 June 1920(mmn: Rozália Lówy) – disappeared: Ilovskoye, January 1943.

Izsák, Ábrahám, 24 December 1910 (mmn: Hani Friedmann) – disappeared: Atamanskoye, 23 January 1943.

Izsák, Adolf, 10 December 1919 (mmn: Helén Najovics) – died: Nikolayevka, 17 January 1943.

Izsák, Jenő, 26 August 1914 (mmn: Hani Friedmann) – disappeared: Atamanskoye, 28 January 1943.<sup>17</sup>

Markovits, Sándor, 6 March 1908 (mmn: Regina Glück) – disappeared: Atamanskoye, 23 January 1943.

Moskovits, Sámuel, 19 September 1909 (mmn: Eszter Salamon) – disappeared: Budeny, 16 January 1943.

Neumann, Sándor, 1911 (mmn: Szerén Weil) – died (no further data available).

Simon, Jenő, 1919 (mmn: Helén Steinberger) – disappeared: Shimonkovce, 23 March 1943.

Weisz, Zoltán, 1911 (mmn: Malvina Izsák) – disappeared: Hungarian eastern front, January 1943.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Dr Gavriel bar Shaked(ed.): *Nevek. Munkaszázadok veszteségei a keleti magyar hadműveleti területeken* [Names of Jewish Victims of Hungarian Labour Battalions], vol. II. A–J, New York, 1992, Szól a Kakas Már–Beate and Serge Klarsfeld Foundation–Yad Vashem. 50, 56, 68, 69, 82, 171, 225, 386, 392, 461, 474, 475, 504, 516.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* vol. III. K–ZS. 232, 266, 293, 513, 704.