

MY LIFE

A Personal History in Eventful Times

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FOREWORD

The subtitle of my recollections evoked in my mind two quotations from the past. One is the old Chinese curse: "You should live in interesting times" and the other is a citation from Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire". He postulates: "The happiest times in the lives of people were those about which no history was written".

The Chinese curse overshadowed my life and that of my immediate family. We lived in Eastern Europe, that all along its history, as well as in the twentieth century too, was the scene of major political and geographical upheavals. My parents were born around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. This was created in 1867, as a consequence of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848-49, and the defeat of it. The ruler, Franz Joseph of the Habsburg House, was the emperor of Austria and became crowned as the king of Hungary. This double monarchy, an odd entity, had common governmental organization for external affairs, finances and army; all the other governmental services were separate for the two partners, who were supposed to be equal in everything. A major complicating factor was that the monarchy had large Slavic minorities (Czechs, Slovaks, Croatians, Slovenes, Ukrainians, Serbs), as well as Romanians, etc. who by the turn of the century were in the grips of a more or less intense nationalistic fervor. A major part of the monarchy was sandwiched in-between the German speaking central authority and the huge Russian empire on the East, that was actively fanning the Slav national feelings. Other small national minorities were also within the boundaries of the monarchy.

The heir to both thrones, the archduke Franz Ferdinand, was hated by the emperor because of his marriage to a woman of the minor nobility. The heir hoped that after his uncle, the emperor, will die, he will be able to transform the double monarchy, into a confederation of states established by the component nationalities. Therefore the archduke was hated by the Hungarians who were to lose their prominence in the new "Danubemonarchy", as well as by all the other component nationalities who wanted independence, and not further existence under Austrian rule. The killing of

the archduke in June 1914 (by a Serbian national), became the apparent reason and the kick-off of the First World War.

For my family, all of the above was complicated by the fact that we were Jewish. Despite the fact that by the second half of the 19th century, Jews in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy were accepted citizens and emancipated fast and freely, anti-Semitism was still intense. In the years 1882-83, the old blood-libel was revived in Hungary: a Christian girl (Eszter Solymos) was supposedly killed by Jews in the village of Tisza-Eszlar, in order to have her blood used in fabrication of Passover Matza. The accusation and the judicial proceedings produced in Hungary an upheaval similar to the Dreyfuss affair in France. The affair apparently ended after Kàroly Eötvös, a lawyer, writer and MP managed to get the accused Jews acquitted. However there were major anti-Semitic incidents and fear of pogroms in Budapest and many other Hungarian cities.

Romania, like the Russian empire, was a hotbed of hatred towards the Jews. In the year 1905, widespread pogroms broke out in Russia, that contributed to the major immigration of Jews to the United States, and to Zionist settlements in the Holy Land, at that time under Turkish occupation. The creation of a new city next to Jaffa in the year 1909, named Tel Aviv, was one of the consequences of that exodus from Russia. Romania at that time, was still one of the three states of Europe (next to Russia and Turkey), where Jews had no civil rights, and had to carry an internal passport-like document.

Eastern Europe, is definitely an area to which Gibbons' postulate applies. Located in-between three empires (German, Russian and Turkish) it was not able to coalesce into national states like Western Europe. In all of modern history, there were constant kaleidoscopic changes in the political configuration of the component parts. Small national groups lived occasionally, for a short time independently, but for most of the time they were either fighting among themselves, or were subjugated by one or the other super-power. They did generate lots of history.

The treaty of Versailles, that put an end to World War 1, saw the creation of a modern, united "Great Romania", a constitutional monarchy, where all citizens, even the Jewish ones, were supposed to have equal rights. Nevertheless, anti-Semitism persisted and was even officially accepted and condoned.

I was born barely a decade after the creation of the new, "Great Kingdom" of Romania, and raised in those years, when Romanian nationalism was burning with a bright flame. From the start I and my immediate family we were a foreign body, both as nationals and in the usage of language. My native city, Arad, was previously never part of Romania. The citizens who in

my time were Romanian nationals had until 1919 always lived under Hungarian rule, they had learned in Hungarian schools, served in the Hungarian armies and spoke fluent Hungarian. The Jewish middle class, to which my parents and grandparents belonged were either ardent Hungarian patriots, or felt that they belonged to the Austro-Hungarian empire and were at home in both Hungarian and German languages. Additionally we were Jewish.

The first fifteen years of my life witnessed the emergence of a Romanian government that was fascist and subservient to Nazi Germany. The next seventeen years brought the establishing of a communist regime and servitude to the Russian Soviet. Me and my family, we were both considered disposable elements and even enemies of these regimes: first because of our ethnicity (being Hungarian speaking Jews) and second because of our social origin (being capitalists and middle-class). Both regimes did the utmost to destroy us as individuals, as a group and a class, and we were lucky that we survived and managed to stay alive.

Many years back I read a poem by the Hungarian poet Görgy Faludy, entitled "The Ballad of Charlie Zero", that had impressed me profoundly. It recalls an evening of the retired citizen Charlie Zero, who decides to write his autobiography. He sits down to his desk, with a big stack of white paper. The first chapters were to deal with childhood and school, but as he tries to think back, there is nothing to write about. The years of growing up and studying, are also times when nothing noteworthy has happened to him. Getting married, settling in a job, having children, all these are routine events, there is no outstanding or dramatic happening that would warrant mentioning. Next Charlie contemplates adult life, retirement, old age, etc. etc. When dawn arrives, Charlie Zero is found dead, slumping on a heap of white paper, and only the first page displays the proud title in large letters: "My life". I have transplanted this poem in English and occasionally proffered it to friends. This poem and its implications have haunted me over the years, and were the reason that I have started to make notations of certain periods of my life. After having retired from active hospital work, these essays coalesced into a continuous narrative, somehow partitioned according to history and time periods. It filled me with great satisfaction that I seemed to be able to give an account of my person and the family's activities in those variegated times I have lived in. I was lucky in that mother, grandmother, a great-aunt as well as great-grand-mother all have put to paper recollections of their times and lives. They did write in Hungarian and German, and I duly translated most of it into English. It is not a literary work, but it is intended mostly for the next generations. I don't have children but Ed's children (Gene and Madeleine) as well as his grandchildren (or maybe even the following generations) may be interested in their roots and family histories. By the

time young people are becoming interested in the past, there is usually nobody left from whom one should receive information. These pages may help fill that void.