

Biographical Memoir

(Excerpts)

Anthony Klein

Ancestry

(Continuation)

I have vivid memories of my maternal grandparents home: a freezing-cold bedroom with a cast-iron stove that was rarely lit, a large living-dining room with solid heavy furniture, a couch where I used to be put to sleep after family dinners, opposite a 'grandfather clock' whose pendulum I would watch and listen to while going to sleep.



Tereze (née Mandl) and Salamon Kohn – great grandparents



Rebeca(Regina) (née Kohn) and Joseph Teichner – maternal grandparents

I particularly remember the Passover ‘Seder’ ritual dinners at which, being the youngest I had a special role to play in reciting the ‘Mah Nishtana’ – the set questions in Hebrew to which grandpa would read the “official” answers. So in response to “Why is this night different to other nights?” the reply starts with: “Avadim chainu... Slaves we were in the land of Egypt ... “ etc., commemorating the Exodus and eating matzo – the unleavened “bread of affliction”.

Grandpa also had a precious radio set in the living room, a mysterious object driven by two large batteries and equipped with a horn loudspeaker, whence a disembodied voice would speak to one. I remember it well because it gave my little fingers their first electric shock when, out of curiosity, they tried to find the little man who spoke from inside.

Outside the living room was the large kitchen, with its massive cast-iron stove and huge oven in which delicious white bread was baked weekly, after the laborious kneading of a great lump of dough. (A tiny lump of this had to be pinched out and thrown into the fire for some reason that probably goes back to Zoroastrian, fire-worshipping superstitious sacrifice). Delicious bread would be the end-result, a slice of which, smeared with goose fat and sprinkled with paprika – occasionally with a slice of baked goose-liver – would be a regular treat when visiting grandma and grandpa. Outside the kitchen and facing the courtyard, was a glassed-in porch with a table for informal dining and a door leading to the larder – grandma’s special place containing rows upon rows of large glass jars with preserved fruit and vegetables, large containers with pickled cucumbers, pickled cabbage, and who knows what other great delicacies.

Grandpa’s day began with daily shopping at the market square (Traian Square) a couple of streets away, where a polyglot group of peasants from the neighboring villages would bring their produce. I say polyglot because they came from their separate Hungarian or German or Serbian or Romanian villages and simply had to speak each other’s languages for the purposes of commerce. The Habsburg realm was a truly multi-ethnic, if not multi-cultural empire, whose inhabitants possessed the virtue of not hating one another any more than necessary. Grandpa, of course, spoke all their languages, as well as Romany, so as to be able to talk to the many gypsies who also inhabited the area and engaged in horse-trading and other more nefarious activities. There was a story, probably true, that grandpa ran away from his mother’s clutches once, at the age of three, only to be found, hours later, being suckled by a gypsy woman outside her caravan – hence grandpa’s so-called ‘gypsy blood’ – for example he had a great liking for gypsy music.

After the market he was to be found in a coffee-house, reading the newspaper, playing cards with his cronies, or having his ‘elevenses’. Alternatively, he might be in a pub near the railway station where he would sometimes meet and share a beer with his old employees from the brewery. Lunch was the main meal of the day, prepared by grandma who rose early to light the kitchen stove, followed by a regular afternoon siesta. He was, after all, a ‘very old man’ – well over 60 – by the time I knew him.

All went well until sometime during the Second World War an influx of Romanian refugees from the East, such as Czernovitz, and increasingly drastic anti-Semitic measures resulted in the confiscation of Jewish properties by the state. That was sometime in the 1940s. My grandparents were forcibly evicted and came to share our 2 bedroom rented apartment in another suburb. Our living room became my bedroom, and my grandparents took over mine. We also had my cousin Hedda staying with us, sharing their bedroom – she was the daughter of my mother’s middle sister Yolán who remarried and went to live in Serbia with her new husband and left Hedda behind to complete her dressmaking apprenticeship. By the time she was ready to join them they had been deported by the Nazis to the Theresienstadt concentration camp and were never to be heard from again.



Rose (née Teichner) and Imre Klein – my parents

So I had a 10 years older ‘big sister’ living with us for a few years, under rather crowded circumstances but I was unaware of any hardships, being under 10 years of age at the end of the war. Grandma took over the kitchen, of course, and grandpa used to take me regularly for walks in the park and a couple of times he took me fishing in the Bega river and once ‘we’ even caught a sardine-sized tidier, with a bent pin. He taught me games such as ‘Ten-man-Morris’, played on an improvised board with peas and beans – a sort-of 3-dimensional noughts and crosses, as well as chess and childish card-games. Grandpa was an avid card-player who used to tease my father along the lines of: “You like playing cards? So, why don’t you learn to play properly?” They used to play a Hungarian version of whist, with special packs of Hungarian (or German?) cards. That was their main form of entertainment – Jews’ radios having been confiscated by the authorities as one of the many restrictive measures.

Another of the restrictive measures was that we were not allowed to leave the city boundaries. Thus the small woods outside town that used to be a favorite picnic spot where I was taken as a toddler, became out of bounds. So was the river beach above the hydroelectric dam on the outskirts of town, where I used to be taken before the war. The only place where Jews were allowed to bathe was an inner city

swimming pool where, in due course, I learned to swim. Later, as I grew a bit older, I was allowed to brave the river Bega, which although pretty muddy, didn't seem to have done me any harm.

In retrospect, being surrounded by loving parents and grandparents, who shielded me from the surrounding hardships, I grew up in a fairly happy and secure environment in spite of the wartime privations. We even had good white bread made from flour that my father obtained by bartering from the surrounding villagers.

The main snag during this time was that my father, being a Hungarian citizen, needed to renew his passport and Romanian residence permit at regular intervals. Although accomplished by means of bribery, it gave rise to more than one episode of threatened deportation to Hungary – on one occasion he was even forcibly taken to the Hungarian border and threatened with expulsion. Because of such hassles, my mother became a nervous wreck, with concomitant gastric and thyroid problems that didn't disappear until we came to Australia.

My father, meanwhile, was conscripted for a while into a forced labor brigade along with most other Jewish men in Timisoara, in spite of being a 'foreign' (i.e. Hungarian) citizen. Luckily he survived it without too much harm. There was even one episode, (fortunately only one) where a group of Jews (mainly men) from Timisoara were deported to Transnistria, in Eastern Romania, whence they never returned. However, by some miracle we survived - but I am convinced that it was only a matter of time. We were saved because the pragmatic Romanians saw what was coming and 'changed sides' towards the end of the war and became allies of the advancing Russians who kicked out the occupying Germans and became our 'glorious liberators' in August 1945.

All this time, my mother's oldest sister Ella, who had married Geza Spitzer, a Vienna University-trained civil engineer, had been in Australia: They emigrated in the nick of time, in 1939, as will be described in a later chapter. After re-establishing contact with them after the war, and having become resigned to the sad fact that Hedda's mother had perished in the holocaust, it was agreed that Hedda would join them in Melbourne and live with them. This she did, in 1946, travelling alone, as a vulnerable 20-year-old girl, by train from Timisoara to the Italian port of Genoa and thence on an Italian ship to Melbourne. My father who accompanied her by train as far as the Yugoslav border, bought her a wedding ring as a form of false protection. She survived unharmed, lived with the Spitzers for a while, until she met and married a very nice and decent bloke from Adelaide – the late Ron Gild. They lived in Adelaide and had two boys, Geoffrey and Robert. Hedda died in Melbourne in 2008, Ron having pre-deceased her by several years.

The grandparents were soon to follow but unfortunately Grandpa suffered heart failure in 1947, which delayed their departure. However, he recovered sufficiently the following year so that they undertook the long sea voyage and arrived safely in Melbourne to be greeted by their eldest daughter Ella, her husband Geza Spitzer and son Victor. They lived with the Spitzers for several years, having started a new life, in their late 70's, in a strange country and a strange environment. Grandma was also reunited with her sister Esther whom she had not seen since before the war.

The youngest sister Frieda, the 'old maid', also joined them eventually in Melbourne where after a few years she married an older man, Sam Mantelmacher, whose family had perished in the holocaust.

My parents and I were finally able to join the rest of the family in 1953, after leaving Romania and spending a year in Israel, as will be described in Chapter 3. Grandpa died in 1955, at the age of 83. Grandma then moved in with my family for the last few years of her life; she died in 1958, aged 82.

My late cousin Vic, who died in 2013 at the age of 89, remained my closest relative in Melbourne, after my mother's death, and we became very close, almost like brothers, especially after 1986 when they built a house in the next street from ours. During our regular morning and weekend walks we often rehearsed the family stories and reminisced about our common grandparents and their house, about the Jewish primary school and the Jewish High School that we had both attended – albeit 11 years apart. Alas, I remain the only repository of these memories... so just as well I have written some of them down.

To be continued in the next issue of the Jewish Timisoara website www.bjt2006.org

