

## Family affairs

### Part II

By Robi Auscher

Second generation, that of my three female cousins, used to be split right after WWII between Zionists and Communists. Within a decade the latter became disappointed with the system for very good reasons. Most of them or their offspring reached Israel and live here to date. Stuck in Bucharest were Illy Klein-Călin who acted as editor of the country's German newspaper "Neuer Weg" and her husband Klein-Călin Kari, a chemical engineer and their daughter Stella who married a Romanian MD and lives in Turnu Severin. All others moved to Israel. Their beginnings weren't easy at all. My divorced cousin, Hedy, Josef Auscher's daughter reached Israel in the early 1960s with two old parents and her daughter, Erika, and had to sustain the family on her own in a 2<sup>nd</sup> rate neighborhood in Beer Sheva. Only after retiring could she indulge into moving to the country's central part. Litzi, my widowed cousin, Victor Auscher's younger daughter reached Israel in the mid 1960s, burdened with her mother and two children and had to support her family on her own. She remarried to Gyuszi Meier. Andrei an engineer, Illy and Kari's son, also landed in Israel. Unfortunately, he passed away in his fifties. While Hedy was extremely delicate, Litzi was the outspoken type. I am in close touch with Hedy's daughter, Erika Segal-Weisz and her husband Israel and with Dr. Avigdor Gonen (Kertész Viktor), Litzi's son. They have three children each and live in Tel Aviv and Rehovot, respectively.



*With Erika and Israel Segal at the Jewish cemetery, Timișoara 2008.*

While fleeing from Timișoara in 1944 when the town's Jews feared that the German army might return to the area under the pressure of the Red Army's advance, the row of carriages in which Litzi travelled ran into a German military convoy. Blue-eyed and with flawless German she was the speaker to present themselves as local Germans fleeing from the Red Army. The German

military invited them to join to get their protection. They were asking for pointers to reach their destination. Litzi declined politely the offer to send them right away in the wrong direction. We had a German couple as neighbors in the Hochstrasser house, Prof. Dr. Victor Mauritz, a high school teacher and his wife. They were nasty, ugly and sour. When they walked near their Jewish neighbors getting ready to flee from approaching German troops, he hissed: "I hope never to see you again". Havas Gyuri promised them a smack upon return. After a few weeks, on August 23<sup>rd</sup> Romania was "freed" by the Red Army obliterating the German danger. We moved back from the hills. It was a period of euphoria with new bars, clubs and restaurants opened in Timișoara, playing western songs and cinemas sporting western movies. Within a couple of years, however, the party was over. I remember my mother coming home one day worried to tell us that Gary Cooper's movies have been prohibited.

During WWII one of our rooms was seized to accommodate a Red Army Major. He was Jewish and got close to the family. He gave one clear-cut advice to the owners of the textile factory. Pack up and leave the country as long as you can. The communist regime will creep in and they will take everything you own and close the borders. My father visited Palestine before the war in 1939 with the intention of selling the factory and establishing a new one in Eretz Israel, and he was active in Aliya Bet, the illegal immigration movement from Europe to Palestine. Still the family didn't fully perceive the new imminent danger of upcoming communism. They paid a high price for it.

*"Socialism is the philosophy of failure, the creed of ignorance, and the gospel of envy. The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings. The inherent virtue of Socialism is the equal sharing of miseries."* —Winston Churchill.

Churchill was right again. The family's source of income was cut off overnight. All adults had to look for odd jobs to survive. They shared equally the miseries. My father worked for an insurance firm ("Sovromasigurare") but after spending four years (1940-1944) at forced labor camps, later, between 1948 and 1955 he was arrested four times and spent an overall period of another four years behind bars. The first three arrests and ensuing trials dealt with the factory. In 1952 he was arrested for Zionist activity, condemned to 15 years of jail spent mainly at Jilava. He was released in 1955. Thus, between the ages of 4 to 8 and 12 to 19, I grew up without my father. All his arrests happened on the street. An official car would stop next to him, he would be pushed in and disappear without any announcement to family. Usually, we got a phone call from friends who have seen him being arrested on the street, never from the authorities. Thus, grew up with Mom. I missed my dad for a total of 8 years spread over a period of ten years. This was her faith too from a spouse's angle. Despite the bad years she has done everything that I won't miss anything and grow up in normative circumstances. It was years later, at the 50<sup>th</sup> reunion of our graduation from high school in the year 2004, to find out that many of the gentile

kids too had a parent, uncle, brother or other relative who were arrested often for years. No one advertised this at that time.

When I think of my mother, the word that instantly comes to mind is temperament. Mother was a temperamental person, often short-tempered. But never with her son. She was strong physically, a sports lady who was skiing at young age and rode a lot on her bicycle. She was well-known in Holon, where they lived in Israel, for riding the bike around town with her fluttering white hair. Every Saturday at 6 am she was on her wheels to reach the beach for a swim. As a kid I was an awful eater, skinny and not very brave. Mom used to hide pieces of lump sugar in my room. Hoping that if I find them would eat them. We grew up with Gyuri Austerweil as brothers. He was an avid eater. Mom used to invite him to meals so he could showcase how to finish a whole plate. Nonetheless, I wasn't impressed, didn't follow suit and never ate my part. It was usually Gyuri who finished off my plate too. Mother chronicled that my awful eating was the reason they didn't have another kid. I was driven by fear due to an event I've been through as a kid.



*With Gyuri Austerweil (r.).*



The owner of the Hochstrasser house where we lived had two large farms. One next to the Serbian border at Kikinda, the big farm (Nagy tanya), and the small farm (Kis tanya) which could be reached crossing the Green Forest (Pădurea Verde). We returned by horse-driven carriage from the little farm through the forest when in the evening's twilight we came across a body lying in a ditch on the roadside. This was right after the war and casualties caused mainly by Red Army's drunken soldiers were common. The corpse was dumped on our carriage and we rode back to town. Since then I got the jitters whenever we went for trips to the forest or green space. I was afraid of water and it took me two or three summers until I learned to swim. While at the little swimming pool of the Scudier Park (Köpöcsésze), standing on the steps to get into the water, the mother of one of the kids began to splash water on me. I got scared and from then onwards tried to keep distance from pools and water. ILSA's big-names did their best to teach me how to float. To no avail. At the end an amateur, family's friend threw the lifeline and I finally picked up the basic moves. Mother's usual pep talk was: you shouldn't be afraid of anyone, except of me. She had a small nucleus of 3-4 very close friends. She never quarreled

with them. Then she had a second tier of 10-12 friends with whom you could never know whether she was on her cyclical good or bad terms. She started skiing when she had barely turned 10. Later, she was going to the mountains in the winter and lodged with the boys in the cabins. This liberal attitude was unpalatable to her fiancé's family. The bond was called off. Ivan Por described her as: "Klári was the darling of the golden youth of Timișoara, a beautiful and liberated young woman". She spent two years in a commercial school in Vienna and upon return worked as clerk in a bank in Timișoara to marry serendipitously at 23 in 1934 my dad who was 10 years her senior. Quite a customary gap at that time. They honeymooned in Paris and travelled quite extensively even after my birth on Christmas 1936. I was left with my grandmother when they visited Paris again after a couple of years. I got whooping-cough and my life hung in the balance. After my dad's visit to Palestine in 1939 WWII broke out and the quiet middle-class life came to its end. I wasn't her wannabe. Took more after my dad's calm. I believe his balanced character was his pristine survival's key over the next 15 tumultuous years (1940-1955) out of which eight, as mentioned, were spent in forced labor camps and behind bars. For several years after his release from prison, I could hear him stepping back and forth in his room, talking to himself in an excited manner in German. He got rid of the habit after Aliyah (1957). He couldn't find a job in his profession in Israel. Had to shift stance and sell lottery cards as many new immigrants from Romania did. He worked well into his 80s. Was active in the Bnei Brith lodge of Tel Aviv and was a gratified person. He never told me anything about these years. I wonder whether he followed a Securitate rule not to disclose anything that happened inside or, very much as many Holocaust survivors, he just wanted to defend me of all his vicissitudes. Not to overload a young psyche. Did he expect my direct questioning in light of my slight transcendency toward someone who was past his prime? Did he try to get rid of a haunting past to open up a new chapter in life? Was it a common decision of my folks or only his or it just happened at random? Should I praise him for not sharing with me his awful experiences or blame him? Open questions that remain unanswered. They don't haunt me, they're just bugging me.



*My cartoon of dad*



*Mom and dad*



*Father's pic at the Sighet Memorial of Communism and Resistance Victims (I).*

Mother, a down-to-earth person, got ready for Aliyah by taking pedicure apprenticeship and this was the job that she practiced later on in Israel. She received clients at home and worked out of home mainly in Tel Aviv. She had her way to forge real friendships with many of her young and elder clients. After a full day's work in Tel Aviv she would go with a friend to the movies. In Tel Aviv's homes for the aged, she worked pro bono. She was afflicted with breast cancer at around 45. Underwent surgery and enjoyed 20 good years thereafter. To be hit by cervix tumor in her late sixties. She was knocked by a scooter and broke a leg. The bone didn't join because of her radiotherapy and the powerful physique-endowed woman was confined to a wheelchair to undergo painful therapies. She passed away at 69 in 1981. Dad, who suffered for years of angina pectoris died at 85 in 1986. When I think of her, the word that instantly comes to mind is sunshine. I am fully aware of the cliché but I do owe her my upbringing. She created that unwavering, gyroscope-like stability of a rough waters-surrounded boat. Loaded me with that instinctive savoir-faire to address the shadows looming down the road.



*Mom and son*



*Mom with two of her grandchildren, Daphne and Yoada.*

Reaching the age of schooling, kindergarten and first four primary grades (1943-47) were spent at Iosefin's Jewish Elementary School, in the synagogue's courtyard. Relished 1<sup>st</sup> grade with noted Szerén néni, the 2<sup>nd</sup> with boss-eyed Kálmán Tancsi who, suffering of a skin disease scratched his palms most of the time to blow away the dandruff. Third grade with severe Fleischer néni. Had a hard time to get used to her and threw up every morning over the school year's first three weeks. Fourth grade with empathic Hugo Heršcovici. We passed these turbulent years of WWII in relative tranquility. Saved from the beatings of the german youngsters and of Legionaries' frenzy. Dad was away. Mom would mount me on her bicycle and we would go for out of town forays. Jews were not allowed to leave a certain circle around town but she couldn't care less. I remember the town's german occupation, the headquarters in the Weiss Palace next to the Opera, with the stiff guards kissed and nagged by Crazy Amalia (Bolond



Amália), German soldiers walking on the streets or moving around in their sidecar motorcycles, plenty of German newspapers sold at the kiosks. As a kid the term Nazi wasn't clear to me. I thought it's just the name of another crazy guy roaming around Scudier Park, called Nazi. When the adults discussed the fall of Benghazi (North Africa) during the war, I asked- is Benghazi a horse that fell?



*With Gideon (Gyuri) Spieler. Karmeí Josef, 2019.*

We made friendships at the school resisting the ravages of time. By and large with classmates Laci Hammer, Ervin Halle, Pollack Fredi. With Fischer Robi and spouse Spitzer-Fischer Zsuzsi, Micha Harish being in close touch to these very days. New friendships were forged at the Jewish Lyceum (Zsidlic), the next move in 1948, with Molnár Andris (Andrei Manor), Pali Perlstein, Gideon (Gyuri) Spieler, Borgida Gyuri, and the late Amnon (Andrei) Volkmann, Freund Péter, Steiner Jancsi (Stufa). We were given matriculation numbers at registration. A badge with the L.I. (Liceul Israelit) initials and the personal number, had to be fastened on the sleeve. My badge was "L.I. 1". Only once a couple of scoundrels cried mocking after me on the street: Zsidó Aladár. Unfortunately, have spent but a single year at this school. Too short a time for a significant impact. At the end of the school year, the Jewish high school was closed for good. Meanwhile all other minority schools such as the German, Hungarian and even a Serb section remained open. In that same year many of us been active in the Hanoar Hazioni's nest. Have checked out first the Hashomer Hatzair nest with distant relative Roli Frankl and the Bnei Akiva nest but most friends were at Hanoar Hazioni and this was in line with my folks' orientation. They have been "Haoved Hazioni" members. Our tribe's instructor been Mager Pali. Never heard about him since. In the summer of 1948 my mom agreed to send me to "hachshara" at Vatra Dornei for three weeks.

At 11 have been the youngest of the group and spent the first night on the train sleeping with head on the laps of Fischer Annie who was 15, Popper Robi's girlfriend. Galambos Victor was the only member of my age group.

We had a few "halutzim" from Eretz Israel as instructors, apparently kibbutz members. They were tanned and well-built and trained us in close combat. All Zionist movements were abolished at the end of the same year.

In the winter of 1949 at the age of 13 had my Bar Mitzvah. Since the synagogue in Iosefin wasn't heated in the winter, the event took place in a heated room assigned for prayer on the community's compound. I don't remember who prepared me or what was the weekly Torah portion. I do remember, however, that miraculously, my father was present and proud of his son.