

MY LIFE

Otto Feller

*I dedicate My Life Story to my dear wife,
with whom I shared so far 62 years of marriage,
in love and good understanding.
I hope we will still enjoy each other for years to come.*

Otto

I feel a special obligation to share my Life Story with my grandchildren about my difficult and emotional life experience. I hope to help my family to connect with the reality of the Nazi and Communist era and get a better understanding of what was like to be a Jew during those dark years. In 10-15 years, there won't be any survivors that can tell personally about those times.

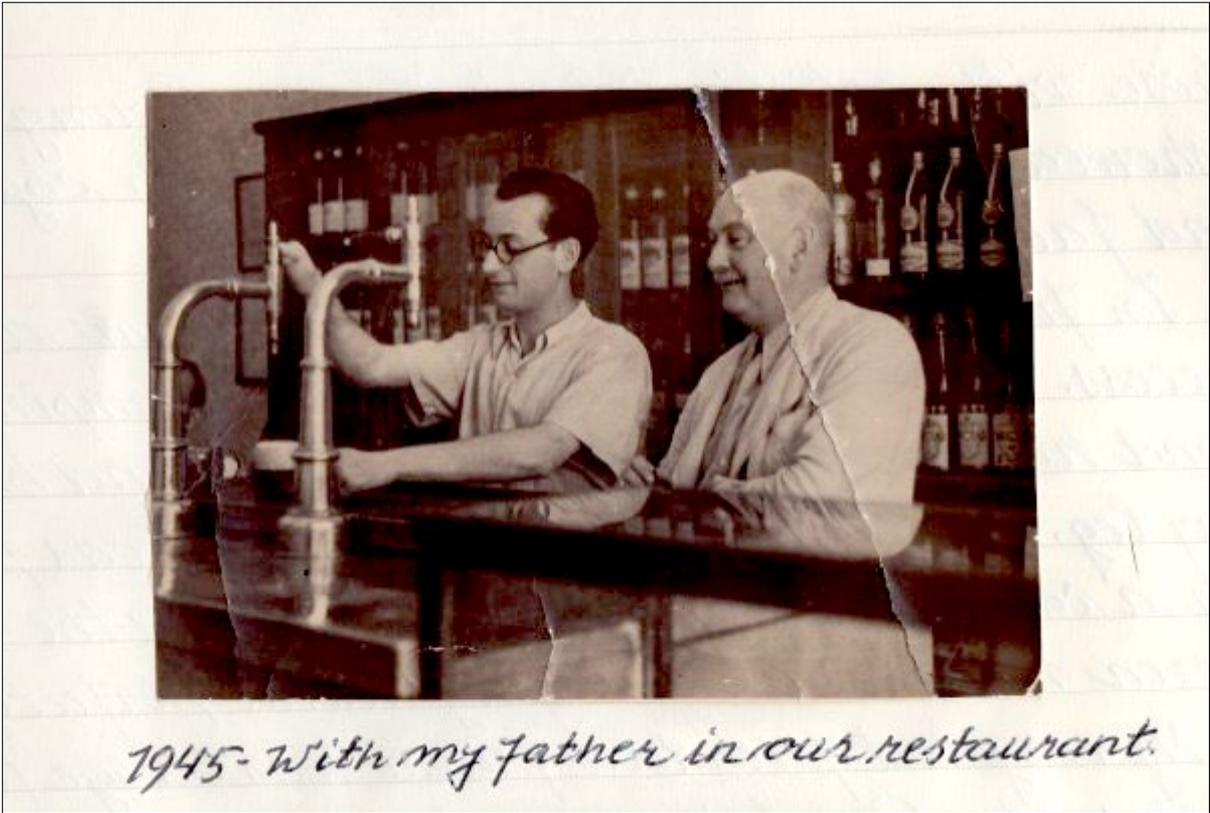
Before the War

In most lifetimes, people may realize two, sometimes even three major life changes. Even if they do manage more than that, it is usually done in an orderly and chronological fashion, planned one step at a time, of course. My choice was not always made willingly, but was often necessary, due to hardships and suffering, occasionally more intense than most of us would be able to imagine. Yet, the changes that had been a major part of my life make a unique and interesting story, that fill me with fierce pride and great determination.

I was born on June 22, 1922, in Timisoara, a major city in Western Romania, also called “Little Vienna”. A city of flowers and parks with about 14.000 Jews before the second World War. The first European city which in 1790 introduced electric and gas lighting. My father, Joseph Feller, was born in Colomea, Poland, in 1889. My mother, Malvina (née Gruby) was born in 1891, in Novisad, (Austro-Hungary). As a young man, my father moved to Austria to work as a salesman in a department store. In 1914, he moved to Sofia (Bulgaria), where he had two brothers. In Sofia, he met my mother who was visiting her brother. They started dating and in 1915, they decided to get married. In 1917, my sister Sabina was born, and after two years, they moved to Timisoara (Romania) because my mother couldn't bear the frequent earthquakes in Sofia, and she was very close with her married sister, Melanie Kallai, who lived in Timisoara.

In Timisoara, my father opened The Chocolate King, but his chocolate store sadly went bankrupt in 1930. In 1931, he got involved with the biggest beer factory in the city owned by a German firm. They opened a small beer pub with appetizers and my father became the owner. He was a very hardworking person who quickly learned his new profession, and the

little pub soon gained the reputation of having the best beer in town. In my early years, I attended a Jewish



kindergarten and grade school, where religion was very important, and we prayed every morning and learned to read Hebrew. Four years of grade school and eight years of high school were traditional in Europe at that time. We learned Romanian, Latin, Hebrew and French in school. At home, we spoke German and Hungarian.

In the third and fourth grades, students were expected to excel in their school work, especially those with artistic talent. Even at a young age, I showed artistic creativity, drawing objects and faces whenever I could.

In the first grade, I had a bad accident during recess. We were playing too rough, jumping and hitting each other, when I fell and broke my leg. In the hospital, my whole leg was put in a cast, and I was home in bed for the next seven weeks. Luckily, my leg healed perfectly.

My very best childhood friend was George (Gyuri) Schwartz. Our friendship lasted until he passed away in Israel at age 62, fortunately I got to see him before he died, when I visited Israel.

My childhood was filled mainly with school and work, and I had little time for the usual playing that most young people enjoy. Since I was 10 years old, I was required to help my father in the pub after school. I served customers, washed glasses and drew beer from the tap. I became very adept at pouring beer, and the clientele were fascinated by my skill. The beer tap had to be turned very slowly to get the proper beer and foam. When the glass was full, the foam had to be so high and solid that a toothpick would stand straight up in it. Customers had to wait a little longer to get that perfect foam, and my father told them to get used to it. The restaurant and pub earned a reputation for serving the best beer in town, even though all restaurants and pubs bought their beer supply from the same source. During lulls in serving, I would sketch the people around me. I was a big help to my father, as we had only one employee in the first year.

The business began to thrive, and my parents worked from early morning to midnight, seven days a week. The cooking was my mother's job, and she worked in the kitchen in our second floor apartment and a maid carried the food down to the restaurant. My mother's soups and stews were well known throughout the city, and customers often came from far away to enjoy her cooking.

When friends came asking if I could come out to play, my father's answer always was, "NO, Otto has to serve the customers." My mother even argued with him to let me go out and

enjoy my childhood. I didn't really mind helping in the restaurant, I just wished I didn't have to work nearly every day, sometimes from 3-9 pm.

My sister Sabina, who was five years my senior, was never expected to work in the restaurant or in the house, and she always had plenty of time to be with her friends. I felt that she was a bit of a snob, preferring to make friends among the more affluent families of the city. For my part, I did not fancy wealthy folks. Sometimes I even disliked them and what they represented. I was always drawn to the underdog, the persecuted and the poor, perhaps because I felt a strong kinship with them.

Because of our Jewish identity, my family was considered to be a minority by the native Romanians in the town. We suffered a lot of verbal and physical abuse from many in the street and from government officials. When I walked to or from school, children from other schools often tried to attack us, yelling obscenities against Jews. They recognized us after our school uniforms. Whenever I went out, I had to worry about attacks from people who hated Jews. I tried to avoid them if I could, but they still tried to hit or spit on us and remind us that we were dirty Jews. I even fought with two or three people. To cope and survive, I strove continuously to be better than average and I tried to excel in all that I did.

My family belonged to a Conservative congregation, but we were not very observant. My father attended services only on the High Holidays. I loved the cantorial music and the voice of our cantor. Since I went to a Jewish school and attended services every Saturday morning, reading Hebrew was very easy for me. Our religion teacher prepared me for my Bar Mitzvah. The ceremony was very nice, and the rabbi and cantor both said that my Hebrew reading and chanting from the Torah were exceptionally good. Naturally, my mother cried.

As a teenager, I loved music and singing. I studied violin for about three years (I'm sorry now that I didn't continue!), and I studied accordion when I was 16. I loved it! Two of my friends were learning to play clarinet and bass, so we started a jazz trio, playing and singing mostly American compositions. For the front of our music stand, I made a design of Disney's three little pigs, each playing his instrument. We performed at high school events and at friends' parties.

The hard work in the restaurant and pub lasted for nine years. My father sold it because he was literally sick and tired. He developed a nicotine infection from smoking 60 cigarettes a day. Since my father couldn't get a Romanian citizenship and therefore couldn't own

property, he had to pay costly bribes to state officials. He was forced to rely on the good will of a benefactor who would apply for the necessary licenses. In return, of course, those benefactors expected a sizable percentage.

Five months after selling the restaurant, my father bought another one. The license was held by a non-Jewish friend, as my Jewish father couldn't get one. We moved to a bigger apartment above the restaurant. After making some necessary improvements to the property, things went well for about eight months.

I had no illusions that my father would ever achieve his dream of receiving the citizenship. I really found it difficult to understand his obsession of becoming part of a country that rejected him and treated so many of its people unjustly. Actually, this was the situation in most European countries.

One thing I did know was that I would not stay in Timisoara all my life. I didn't know when or how I would leave, but without a doubt, I wanted to go to Palestine to be part of the Zionist movement to help establish a homeland there. I heard about this Zionist movement in school. While my father would have loved to let me go, he was aware that most of the ships were sabotaged by the English and never reached their destination, one of them, by name of Struma, on her way to Palestine, was bombed and sunk in 1942 and 791 people died, only one survived.

When I finished high school, my father and I debated whether I should continue with school. Because of the political climate and being Jewish, he felt that I should learn a craft. Since I was talented at drawing, I decided to look for something in that field. So did all my friends. We found a textile factory that was introducing creative designs for printing scarves and material for dresses. I was 17 years old when they hired me as an apprentice for three years and in the second year, I already became head of the art department and had four people working for me. During my three-year apprenticeship, I attended a master class school every evening. I was accepted into a special textile professional school, where I received a degree in textile engineering. At that time, I was the head of the whole "Imprime" department of 35 people.

The Terrible War Years

It was 1939. Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, all were victims of Hitler's march across Europe. War had broken out between the German troops and Poland, and the fighting was intensifying. Romania, characteristically a nation of followers versus leaders, again aligned itself to stay in the good graces of her conquerors. Romania saw her neighbors falling one by one and chose to sacrifice her integrity to gain favoritism with the fanatical Third Reich. Racism, which had always existed subtly, now exploded into a full fledged political issue. Jews were forbidden to attend the university and could not apply for licenses. Jews could only hold low paying, menial jobs. The atmosphere became more and more oppressive. People who used to be friends were afraid to be seen with a Jew. Now, when passing an acquaintance on the street, eyes were averted to avoid recognition.

Some people formed organized groups, calling themselves Legionnaires or Iron Guard. They became bolder as they humiliated their victims, marching and singing that ended "...because the thieves and Kikes extort us all the time." They vandalized the homes of former neighbors, placing derogatory signs in the shop windows.

During this time, the Nazis and Croats in Yugoslavia killed my maternal grandmother who was diabetic and had lost both her legs; my mother's three sisters and their families; and many cousins. My father's family in Bulgaria survived, but one of his sisters and her family were killed in Poland.

One day, two Legionnaires came to the restaurant and forced my father at gunpoint to sign a document saying that he willingly donated the restaurant to the Legionnaires' organization. The fact that the store was under my father's friend's name did not help, and my father lost his entire investment.

We were forced to give up our apartment, and we had to move to my uncle's apartment. I was taken by the military to sweep the streets. The worst part of the job came when the big markets closed, because the farmers used horse-drawn carts. People stood on the sidewalks making fun of us Jews. That was very humiliating; little did we know at the time that the future would be far worse. When the freezing cold winter came and there was snow, we were forced to break and clean the ice from between railroad tracks. It was very hard to work in the freezing temperatures.

In 1941, I was called to the military headquarters and sent to the train station for transport to a place called Pancota. They put us in wagons used to transport animals, and we had to stand tight to each other for eight hours. After arriving at our destination, the commandant

shouted “You are here to work, and your assignment will be to dig an irrigation canal. Those of you who cooperate will not get to know my anger, but those who do not cooperate will be severely punished or sent away to Transnistria (a concentration camp that meant death).”

There followed a month of physical and mental abuse, cruelty and deprivation. From the train station, we were taken to a ruined former castle and were placed in an animal barn with only straw on the ground for our so-called beds. It was a very tight sleeping space. At 6 am, it started. “Up, up, up you lazy Jews,” the guards would shout. That was the introduction to what we would be forced to get used to.

The shouting, moaning and snoring sounds were everywhere. It seemed that there was never quiet in the middle of the night. With about 400 people, there was constant noise. Very often, someone who could not take it any more would scream, “Shut up.” This only added more noise and confusion. There were no toilets – only a big empty area of a barn that everyone had to use. Because I am shy, that was a big problem for me. After a few weeks, the ground was filled with the human waste of hundreds of people, and we could hardly walk there anymore. One day, an Orthodox Jew with a long beard slipped on the human waste, fell forward, and his whole face became full of it. It was funny, but very sad.

Our main boss was a captain trained by the Nazis, and he treated us worse than animals. We had only one fountain where we could get very cold water for washing ourselves. We had to wash quickly, because in 30 minutes we had to stay in line for some black hot water called coffee and a piece of so-called bread. After that breakfast, we rapidly marched five miles to where we had to start digging a big canal that would both improve irrigation and serve as a stop against attacks by enemy tanks. We were assigned each day to dig in a certain area, barefoot in mud full of blood suckers and bamboo plants. The majority of the men couldn't finish the work in nine hours, so we were forced to stay under supervision until late in the evening. If by any chance somebody couldn't finish his job, he was punished by not getting food for the day. If somebody tried to escape, he was beaten with a double belt on his naked behind, sometimes 25 times. We had to watch all of this to learn from it. If the person yelled with pain, he got extra hits. The supervisors were very strict. Soldiers always carried guns and watched us all the time, even at night. We had to be careful not to complain or criticize the government.



This picture was taken in secret, showing us digging barefoot in mud.

Several weeks passed, and each day was a monotonous repetition of the hunger and fatigue of the day before. We were always tired, and there was never enough to eat. The watery soups, black tasteless bread and weak coffee they fed us were simply not enough, especially with the heavy physical demands on our bodies. Lice also were a problem. Gasoline was poured all over my body to get rid of the pesky insects, adding burns and sores to my already miserable condition.

Many people, especially those with families, were crying and complaining that they would be never released and would never see their families again. Some people became desperate to know what was happening at home or on the front lines. Unfortunately, their pessimism affected us, too. I tried to stay strong by thinking about happy times with my friends and family. Sometimes, I craved a cigarette, which could be rarely found. To get half a cigarette I often helped an older person finish a digging job he wasn't able to do on time.

After a few months of digging, we had covered a few miles and therefore moved to other locations. One day, I developed a bad infection in my leg from the mud and blood suckers, and my leg swelled to double its size. At the same time, I had a stomach infection, and my eyes and face became yellow. I was told that I had infectious hepatitis, which meant I was contagious and had to be separated from the other prisoners.

I was sent to an old abandoned cemetery in an outlying village in the middle of nowhere. The cemetery had a little building with no doors or windows, and the floor was just dirt crawling with flies and bugs. Being the middle of summer, it was hot, and flies swarmed all over my body. I got some straw for my bed, and I used the grass and weeds outdoors for my bathroom.

I was already used to that. Our Jewish doctor made an incision in my infected leg and a lot of blood and pus sprayed all over. He told me that he didn't have time to put on a bandage, so I should do it myself. At this point, with absolutely no hope of being free ever again, my life had no meaning and I really didn't care if I lived or died. I was far from my group, and only a friend of mine was allowed to bring some food (with a soldier escort). I didn't eat for one week, and even today, I can't understand how I survived.

After two weeks, the doctor arranged for me to return to my home town (Timisoara), where my parents and relatives would care for me. I was sent to a hospital, where I stayed for one month (it took a big loan to pay the hospital bill). The day I left the hospital, I had to appear before the military commandant who immediately sent me back to the labor camp. I was so weak that I could hardly walk.

Back at the camp, everyone asked me questions. How is the situation at home? What do you know about the political situation? Is there hope for us Jews? Will we be able to survive? I had no good answers for them. I had to start work again, and it got worse because the winter nights were so cold. We were freezing, since we only had a small wood burning stove. We had to dig outside, even though the ground was completely frozen and I developed frostbite on my feet and nose.

After many months, we were finally exchanged with a new group of Jews, and we were sent to Mocreia, a mountain area about 200 miles from home. There, we used a long steel chisel and big heavy hammers to drill deep holes in the mountain, insert dynamite in the holes, and

ignite the dynamite. We would yell "FIRE," so everyone would take cover because the explosions threw huge rocks around.

I spent three months in Mocreia before being sent to Deva, a city in Transylvania, where we built railroad tracks in the mountains. We worked for five months through the fall and the harsh winter. Every day, they took us in open wagons from our residence to the working area about eight miles away. That was unpleasant, especially in the freezing winter when there weren't any places in the open wagons to protect ourselves from the snow and blowing wind. Again, the supervisors would yell, scream and call us "dirty Jews."

Next, I was transferred to a construction area where we loaded and unloaded sand and rocks from trucks. We had to shovel quickly and without rest. After about two months, I was transferred to carry cement for the construction of a big underground bomb shelter for the Army High Command. We were being bombed almost every night by American airplanes. We were afraid of the bombs, but happy that the Americans were getting closer to us. The moment the city sirens sounded, I had to walk two to three miles through dark, empty streets to an assigned area. Sometimes, we found dead people, and we had to carry them to a morgue. Several times during the air raids, we were standing in deep underground chambers that we had dug ourselves. Pressure from the bombs made the walls collapse. Many of our comrades were asphyxiated, and some died next to me. The building where my parents lived was hit by firebombs, which caused a fire in one of their rooms.

From the time I first started working at the labor camps, we were forced to wear a yellow arm band with a Star of David to be recognized as Jews. We lived in the western part of the country, but we knew that the Romanians had killed Jews by the thousands in the eastern area. Jews were packed into freight transports called death trains. Thousands of people were crowded into cattle cars – no windows and in unbearable heat – which were forcibly closed. The Antonescu regime did not consider Jews to be human beings, and they hoped to clean all the land of Jews. We didn't know it at the time, but we later found out that in just one month, we were scheduled for the death camps.

Finally, on August 23, 1944, we were liberated by the Russian army. We were sent home and told we were free. But in just two weeks, the German army approached our city, and that frightened the Jewish community. Everybody decided to move east, where the Russian army was established. Since there were no cars or trains, our whole family gathered some

belongings and started to walk 52 miles. On the road, we were bombed by German planes. We had to dive for the ground; fortunately, nothing happened to us. Two days later, we arrived in Lugoj, where we rented a room. For the first time in our lives, we were happy to see Russian soldiers. My sister's boyfriend came with us, and he carried my sister's belongings, which were pretty heavy. When we arrived and she opened her luggage, he saw that she had packed her silver shoes and cocktail dresses. He became very upset, and I was laughing, knowing how snobbish she was.

In just three or four days, the German army was beaten into retreat, and we started to walk back to our city. Even today, August 23, 1944, remains a special day of freedom for me because the previous four years were very hard.

In Communist Romania

Back at home, I joined a group working to establish a Socialist Romanian government. I believed that this was the best solution for us Jews. The concept of a leftist Socialist government was that everyone, regardless of race or religion, would have equal rights. At that time, these ideas and participation in such meetings were illegal. Some improvements were made. The Romanian government changed some laws, the army joined the Soviet army and started to fight against the Nazis, and the Legionnaires were dissolved and many members arrested. But the laws were still undemocratic for Jews. So I demonstrated on the streets and made posters against the government. My father was against that and said that nothing good would come from my ideas. He proved to be right. But at that time, I truly believed that the marxistic ideology and program of the Russian Socialist Party were ideal. I was warmly accepted back at my former job, and I was again put in charge of my former department. For a while, everything went OK. In the meantime, we moved back to our apartment. My father joined with his Romanian (Gentile) friend and got a loan to buy back the restaurant in his friend's name. How ridiculous! This store was rightfully my father's property and the Legionnaires had forcibly taken it from him. My father had to buy back the

restaurant with the loan he received. The restaurant was popular and I sometimes helped out.

There were new elections that included at least eight different political parties. I voted for the Communist party, which was elected by fraud, because the Russian army was still in the country and somehow forced the Romanians to install a so-called labor government sympathetic with the Soviets. My father said, "My own son is my enemy," because the Communist party forbade private ownership of property. According to Communism, all property would belong to the state and citizens would be paid according to their knowledge and ability. Former so-called Capitalists (those who owned factories or big farms) were all imprisoned or sent to labor camps because they had become rich by exploiting their employees.

In 1948, the Romanian government nationalized all factories, big enterprises, banks, etc. I worked for about two more years under the new state ownership. There were hardly any jobs to be found. Most people who owned small businesses had to give up everything and were forced to find employment by the state; otherwise, they would starve to death. The state laws were made to destroy private ownerships. Meanwhile, my father's restaurant wasn't doing well at all. Taxes were raised, and he was not allowed to serve meat. One day, the police raided the kitchen and found two pounds of meat. They arrested my father immediately, and he was taken to a basement cell where the ceiling was so low that he couldn't stand up straight. When he returned home three days later, he said, "They destroyed me!" That reminded me of when he said, "My son, with his beliefs, is my own enemy." That almost destroyed me. In a way, he was right, but my beliefs were the result of everything I had endured as a child and young man. Because I had been beaten several times, called a "dirty Jew" and spent four years in hard labor camps, I sympathized with many of my Jewish colleagues with Socialist ideas. I dreamed of a world where every person was considered equal, regardless of religion, race or nationality. You never heard this from any other party.

Very often during the four years in the camps, I asked God what terrible sins the Jews had committed that he punished us. I stopped believing in God, and I didn't visit a synagogue for years. I surely changed my opinion years later when we lived next door to a beautiful Conservative synagogue. Although we didn't participate, we watched the big crowds of Jews

from our windows during the High Holy days. Interestingly, this later was the synagogue where I officiated as Cantor for eight years.

The economy became so bad that there were no goods to buy, especially in grocery stores. People stood in long lines for two eggs, one roll of toilet paper, bread, etc. Meat was rationed to two pounds per week. When you saw people standing in line, you joined the line because you knew it would be for something you needed. You stood in line knowing that even if it got to be your turn, there might not be anything left. You always had to carry a bag, because stores didn't have any. I once stood in line from 9 pm through 11am next day for a winter coat, and I didn't get my size.

Although life in general was very hard, my private life was pleasant. I had five close friends and many girls in my social group. We went to movies, operas and theaters together (television didn't exist yet). Weekends were filled with fun parties. I joined a group of young people in a state-sponsored ensemble of choir, dance and orchestra, called **Flacara** (Flame). I had a fairly good voice and loved to sing, so I decided to take voice lessons. I took private lessons from three different professors and finally from a former singer with the Vienna Opera (who later became a good friend). He became a voice teacher and a piano accompanist at the state opera in our city. Under his supervision, I joined a group of singers performing solos, duets, trios and quartets from opera compositions. I enjoyed that very much.

In the Flacara ensemble, I was getting solo parts with very nice success. The programs included Romanian, Russian and Hungarian dances and music. I became very active in the ensemble, and since I was unemployed at that time, they paid me to be the group organizer and administrator. All the other 110 members were volunteer performers. We had an excellent director who was in charge of the ballet, choir and orchestra performances.

The ensemble performances were so successful that the government sent us to perform around the country's major cities. Audiences were enthusiastic, and we had a good time. The relations among all the girls and boys were excellent. The government heard about our success and decided to send us abroad to three different countries. We left a few weeks later for Yugoslavia, Albania and Bulgaria. I left home worried about my father's health and his restaurant's situation. We enjoyed great success in many different cities. All three countries were affiliated with the Soviet Union's ideology, and our program was aligned with Communist political views. It was difficult for me to visit some of

the places where I had traveled as a child to visit my mother's family – all of whom had been killed by the Germans and Croat members of Yugoslavia. It was very hard for me to see those places again. In Albania (a very poor country), we were served the best they could afford. We could hardly eat their food because even the bread smelled like goat. So we ate mostly canned herrings.

Traveling by bus, we saw beautiful scenery and high mountains. Many of the girls became dizzy because of the high altitudes. Next, we traveled to Sofia, Bulgaria, where I paid a visit to my father's side of the family. Before I left home, my father asked me to visit his parents' and brother's graves which I visited with two of his cousins who were still alive.

During the three days in Sofia, I was lucky to receive permission to call home. I got the terrible news that my father was dying and I should return home immediately. That was hard to arrange because we were on a collective passport, but I was able to leave within 48 hours, and I arrived home 18 hours later to find my father in bed in very bad condition.

I started to weep bitterly next to him and was pulled away by my mother and sister. My father recognized me and asked, "Did you go to the cemetery to visit my family's graves?" After I said yes, he closed his eyes and died. It was June 1948 and he was 59 years old. The whole time he was ill, he had been asking, "When is my Kaddish coming so I can die?" I was amazed that he was able to wait for me to come home. For the next six months, I didn't shave, and I went to the temple to say Kaddish twice a day.

The restaurant now became a problem because we had to pay high taxes and business was very bad. I decided to try to give it away for almost nothing. I found a client who agreed to pay off the taxes and provide my mother and me with three meals per day. He later lost the restaurant to the government when it nationalized all properties.

Meanwhile, my sister married John Gereb an accountant in Bucharest, where she lived. She worked for awhile with our cousin Hedy, making sweaters and scarves.

I had to volunteer every Sunday to collect fruit, corn or whatever was necessary. Sometimes, I even cleaned buildings that had been damaged by bombardment.

(...)

After our return from touring in three countries in 1948-49, some new volunteer singers and dancers joined our group. People sold cookies during our rehearsal intermissions, and a new girl in the choir said, "I don't have any money. Could you buy me a cookie?" I bought her a

cookie, we started talking and we decided to go to a movie after the next rehearsal. I accompanied her home from the movie, walking in the dark through the park. We talked for a long time on a park bench, after a few minutes, I kissed her. This was the beginning of my relationship with Aggie. Her mother was anxiously waiting outside her home because it was so late. We decided to get together again.

I found out later the reason why Aggie joined the ensemble and asked me for a cookie. Two weeks before Aggie's mother took part at a performance of the ensemble, where I had a solo part. She went home, and told her daughter: "Why don't you join that group because I liked the performance and there was a nice Jewish soloist boy who had a pleasant voice." Aggie always wanted to join the group, but her mother didn't let her because she was afraid she might go on tours.

At that time, I lived with my mother in a four-room apartment. This luxury didn't last long, because new laws allowed one room per couple and one room for children over age 18. So, we had two rooms left, and we shared the kitchen and bathroom with two other families.

Aggie and I continued to be together at rehearsals and the ensemble received a free one-month vacation at the Black Sea (Mamaia). We all accepted this gift with joy. This month was especially happy for us because of our new friendship. We spent the time with some rehearsals and performances, and we enjoyed lots of free time and fun at the sea. This was when we decided to become engaged.

Aggie had had a boyfriend for the past three years, but she decided to trade him in for an older guy – me! He was very angry and said, "What do you find in that horse head with glasses?" Three months after we returned from the month-long vacation, the Union of the Working Class didn't have enough funds to finance the performances and closed the ensemble activities. A friend of ours who held a so-called political secretary position at the State Philharmonic Orchestra asked if I would be interested in a job as a musical secretary. I accepted the offer because of my experience in the musical field.

In 1950, Aggie and I were married without any religious ceremony (because of the Communist regime). We only appeared in front of an official at the State Mayor's office. Some of our family members and friends joined us to celebrate. I moved to the apartment that Aggie shared with her mother. Our bedrooms were separated only by a glass door, so it

was not very pleasant. The living conditions at this time were terrible. My mother had to share her apartment with two other families. The government then moved her to a different apartment where she had to pass through another family's room and share her own room with a young girl.

My new job, which lasted for eight years, went very well. I was a member of the management team, which included the director, political secretary, conductor of the 85-member orchestra and the concert master. I helped to decide the concert programs, take care of the musical library and advertising. I was also involved in writing sheet music, because printed music was hard to obtain and usually had to be copied by hand. I made money on that separately. I soon felt that the orchestra would benefit from having a symphony choir. This idea was accepted with enthusiasm, but organizing it with volunteer singers was my job.

It wasn't an easy job to organize that choir. To start, I had to ask for an OK from the Art and Culture department of the Communist party. They accepted my proposal with the condition that each person who would be professionally accepted should be going through a political verification, because appearing on a stage in front of the public should be politically clean. I was brave enough to argue that in this way I wouldn't be able to find quality performers. Because they didn't argue, I did it my way.

My suggestion was that we needed that choir to perform beautiful "Russian and Romanian Working Class Songs." To be safe, our first performance with the orchestra was a composition for "Stalin's great achievements" at a November 7th holiday. I started calling companies and big factories, asking them to send people for audition. After two months, I was able to find 100 good singers.

Aggie, who had worked for five years as an accountant in a big textile factory, was also accepted. The newspapers were writing about our future programs, and the public was thrilled to hear famous compositions that required choral arrangements, such as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, Mozart and Verdi Requiems. We successfully performed all of these pieces.

In addition to my regular job, I started making big posters to advertise our weekly programs. In my free time, I learned to use special pens to copy sheet music. My work looked like printed musical sheets, and I became well known for the quality of my work.

Many composers and famous musical directors in the country asked for my work. It was not an easy job, but it paid well. The choir rehearsed four evenings each week, and after three years with new auditions, the choir members were paid as a part time job.

Meanwhile, my mother-in-law remarried and moved to the city of Brasov. It was 1957 when the political and economic situation became very bad. Most people would have liked to leave the country for the West, but it was impossible to receive a passport. Leaving a Communist government country was considered to be a crime. There was an opportunity especially for Jews to leave for Israel, because the Romanian government received big "bribes" from Israel for each Jewish family. Jewish people started slowly leaving, selling whatever they could. I got upset with the government and changed my mind about the Communist political policy. So, we decided to apply for a passport to Israel.

After my mother-in-law left the city, we were alone in a two-room apartment, which officially was illegal. We found a family with two children that had only one room and traded apartments with them. The area was nicer, but we had to share the kitchen and bathroom with three other families who also had one room each. This meant we had 13 people living in a 4-room apartment, and it was terrible. Each room served as a combination bedroom, dining room and family room. The kitchen was dirty, and nobody cared. The entrance to one of the apartments could be reached only through the bathroom where a lawyer was living. He didn't allow a key to be used in the door. When Aggie had to use the toilet, I had to go with her and block the lawyer's door in case he wanted to leave. In another room lived a couple with a baby and her parents. They came from a farm and brought live chickens that ran around in the kitchen. If we complained, we were told, "Go to Palestine!" We couldn't answer that we would love to. If my mother-in-law or her husband came to visit us, they had to sleep in a room with us because hotel rooms were available only for state officials. That's how we lived for 12 years. We lived in tzuris but had a great social life and many good friends.

By 1957, I realized that my ideology and sympathies with Communist Party had changed, and antisemitism was back because so many Jews held important positions in the Communist Party. Yet, applying for a passport wasn't an easy decision. To leave the place where you were

born, quit your job and travel to a country where you don't know the language was heartbreaking. At age 36, I didn't know if I could make it. We were not free to just pack and go. On a deeper emotional level, leaving meant saying goodbye to loved ones and possibly never seeing them again.

Waiting for the Passport

In 1958, we applied for a passport to Israel. The very next day, our employers informed us that they were very sorry to have to lay us off. I had to participate in a meeting organized by the Workers Union where I was criticized by some members who said I was an enemy of this country and not worthy to eat the bread of the country. We even lost our part-time jobs in the choir, which was the only income we had left. I tried for a few months to find a job cleaning offices or whatever, but I was always refused.

Four months later, a friend offered me a job for a minimum pay carrying cement at a construction company. I did this for six months until the president of the Romanian Composer Society asked if I would be interested in copying music sheets for him and for the musical society. I accepted the job with pleasure and worked from home. This president later contacted an organization called "Cooperative" that hired people and paid them by the piece. Since it was illegal to own a typewriter, this Cooperative had stores (like real estate offices) that copied and typed official papers. He advised the management to open a store of copying sheet music for the State Opera and State Symphony and their choirs. Those institutions needed the music badly, since printed music was hardly available.

The Cooperative opened a store in the downtown area, and I hired two more people who could read music and had good penmanship. The Cooperative paid us in cash, retaining 40 percent. We were soon very busy and got many orders. After three months, I hired three more people who worked from their homes. My job was to design the musical notes with special instruments, and those were used for print. That was paid by each line, and the composers kept me very busy.

About four years after we had applied for a passport, we were denied permission to leave the country. In addition, we had another big problem. My mother-in-law's new husband didn't want to leave the country, she could apply for a passport only if he gave her permission and divorced her. Aggie didn't want to leave without her mother, so what were

we to do? It was a very hard decision. We had to convince her husband either to join us or to divorce her. His daughter and grandchildren didn't want to leave. I traveled to Brasov to convince him to make a decision. He finally agreed, and my mother-in-law applied for a passport. Years later his daughter and family emigrated to the USA where his son-in-law had a brother. Sadly, he died alone in Romania.

After we lost our part-time choir jobs, we joined the choir at a nearby Conservative synagogue. It was a beautiful building built in 1899 in a traditional Moorish style, with two floors reserved for women, a big electric organ and an impressive Bimah. The choir had eight singers, and in a short time, Aggie and I were singing duets and solo pieces. After about one year, the cantor left for Israel, and there was no replacement. Because they liked my solos and duets, they asked me to take the position. I laughed, saying I was not prepared for this! But an older gentleman offered to give me free lessons. I accepted because I loved the Hebrew compositions, and we started with the Friday evening liturgy. It wasn't easy. There was some written music, but I had to memorize or write down most of the prayers and melodies as my teacher chanted.

After about three weeks, I performed on a Friday evening. It was a really big event, and the rabbi and congregants were enthusiastic. There was a big repertoire to perform. They told me that my voice and my interpretations of the songs with a lot of Jewish feeling made them very satisfied. I decided to go ahead and started to study for the High Holidays. The volume of music to study was enormous, since the cantor performs for many hours especially on Yom Kippur, but it went well. The pay was minimal, as the congregation was in a bad financial condition.

Meanwhile, Aggie and I participated in a paid vocal octet that Romanian composers used to perform their compositions. Aggie also sang in a jazz quartet that performed in different concerts and was recorded at the local radio station.

In 1963, my sister and her husband received permission to leave the country. They left for Austria and six months later immigrated to Milwaukee where they had friends. After four years of waiting for permission, we applied again. In 1965, we finally received the papers to leave with our mothers.



It was not easy to leave everything, and we had to manage a lot of paper work. The government allowed us to take only two suits or dresses -- no jewelry, money, papers or pictures. Our apartment had to be painted and left in order, and we had to make sure that our neighbors had no problems with us. The last Friday evening performance in the synagogue was full of emotion. Rabbi Dr. Neumann gave a good-bye sermon about our performance, saying that the congregation was losing two people who were very much appreciated for their performances. This sermon lasted 25 minutes, and all of us had tears in our eyes. To my surprise, a friend of mine recorded the whole service and so I have a CD (which is not the best recorded quality), but at least I have something to remember it by.

We received our airplane tickets to Naples, Italy. From there, the Jewish organization (Sochnut) was supposed to take care of us and send us by boat to Israel. Our passports were taken by the Sochnut, and they took us from the airport to a very rundown hotel. There we were told that our boat would arrive in Naples in three or four days. We had no cash with us, so I earned some liras by trading cigarettes and hard salami we had brought with us. As we walked around the city, we were surprised by the beautiful shops and especially by the

variety of foods in the grocery stores. We really enjoyed the beautiful and friendly people, language and music.

Our dilemma now was to change our destination so that we could be with my sister in the United States. It was very hard and uncomfortable to tell the Sochnut representative, especially since the Sochnut had actually paid the Romanian government for us. Also, we knew that Israel needed us. We decided to hitchhike to Rome where we could get in touch with HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), an American organization that could help us change our destination. Stopping a car on the highway was difficult, but finally, a big truck took us to the outskirts of Rome in the evening hours. The truck driver was very nice and helpful, even buying us coffee on the road.

From the outskirts of Rome, we used our few liras to take a bus downtown. We had the address and telephone number of some friends, the Fabian family, so we stopped at the railroad station to make a phone call. We only had enough money for one call, and when they didn't answer, we didn't know what to do. We were alone and didn't speak the language. We tried to ask people, and we walked and walked until we finally arrived. Now we worried that our friends wouldn't be at home. Suddenly, we heard loud Hungarian coming from an apartment and it felt like a huge rock had been lifted from our hearts. I can't describe our feelings when we heard Hungarian conversation coming from that door. After walking at night through a foreign place without any money, it was an unbelievable relief. The family welcomed us with open arms. We were close friends at home, and we'd helped them sell their belongings before they left.

Mrs. Fabian was a ballerina at the opera and Mr. Fabian was a dentist. They had two children. They had permission from the Italian officials to work and stay in Italy. They helped us to get in touch with HIAS to change our destination to USA. We received some cash from them to return by train to Naples where our mothers were nervously waiting for us.

There began the uncomfortable three-day drama to change our destination with the Israeli Sochnut and the American HIAS. The Sochnut representative argued that we should go to Israel where they needed us, and my sister and her husband should join us there. They were right in my opinion, but that was impossible.

So HIAS gave us train tickets to Rome and paid for renting a two-room apartment. Money for food was minimal, but we survived with no money left for extras. We walked and walked around the beautiful city, and when we entered a grocery store, we still couldn't believe the

sight of so many different products. It certainly was different from a Communist country store! We walked at least five miles to our daily English lessons, and our mothers took sewing classes to help them get jobs in the U.S. Our friends invited us often, and we were having a good time with them. A young Italian couple lived nearby, and they helped us a lot with their friendship. I once started singing Italian canzonettes to them - they couldn't believe how beautifully I sang and pronounced the words. Aggie started conversing in Italian in just one month, since Romanian and Italian are closely related languages.

Our apartment was very near the train station where, for the first time in our lives, we saw automatic steps – an escalator. We went up and down like little kids, enjoying it together with our mothers. After two months, we had to move to a different apartment that we shared with a young Hungarian couple who had left Hungary illegally with a small cheap car called a Trabant. They were very funny, and we had a good time with them. They couldn't learn even a few words in Italian, so Aggie helped them often.

After we arrived in Italy, we started having problems with my mother-in-law. Since her divorce, she had become very dependent on us, and she was left alone with my mother whenever my wife and I went out for fun with our friends. She was very unhappy, and she blamed us. That continued for many years, even after we lived with her in the U.S.

In Italy, we tried hard to save some liras so that we could send packages of scarves and clothing to our families. Not a day went by that we didn't worry about our future in America. Will we be able to get a job? How about the language problem? How would we survive on our own? At age 43, was I too old to be starting a new life? Overall, we knew that our lives would not be easy.

While in Italy, we walked the streets of Rome and visited nearly every museum and famous church, including the Vatican. This was educational and increased our knowledge of art and history. One day, we had a fantastic visitor. Our former rabbi from home, Dr. Ernest Neumann, had received a passport to visit Israel and stopped in Rome for a few days. Because he was short on money, he stayed with us. We shared our room and food and tried to show him the city. He invited me to join him visiting the Chief Rabbi Elio Toaf with whom he had a meeting. There, he asked me to sing for the rabbi, being always very proud of my performance as a cantor.

On New Year's Eve, 1965, the Fabian family invited us over but said we should be careful when walking on the street. It seems that the custom there is to throw out old stuff from balconies and windows! We even saw furniture dropped. It was very unusual.

It took exactly 5 months to get our visa for USA and received tickets for the Alitalia flight to New York. On March 28, 1966, the Fabian family and their neighbors came to the airport to wish us good luck in our new life.

New Start in the US

We arrived in New York and then changed planes to Milwaukee. On the flight to Milwaukee (our first American plane), we were served a hot black beverage which turned out to be coffee. We had no idea what this was, as we were used to strong coffee.

We carried our belongings through different doors, and for the first time, I realized that the doors opened automatically. For us, that was something new. Sabina, John, some of their friends, and some friends from Romania were at the airport waiting for us. We were taken to my sister's former apartment at 2636 N. Newhall Ave. as they had moved to a nicer one. For us, this apartment was wonderful. It was cheap, had enough room for us and my mother-in-law, and we didn't have to live with strangers like we had in Timisoara. We received money from the Jewish Family Service (JFS) for food and necessities, and we later paid back my sister and JFS. The trip from Italy was paid off, too, once we started working.

Now, we started our new lives. A Jewish organization the Jewish Family Services asked about our professions and told us what was available. I had experience as a textile engineer designing materials for women, but there was nothing like that available locally. However, there was a job in silk screening, designing and printing T-shirts. I also hoped to pursue my cantorial knowledge.

While looking for jobs, we were happy to see that the Bel Canto Choir was advertising an upcoming concert of Verdi's Requiem. Since we both had performed it several times in Romania and knew it by heart, we auditioned and were both accepted. They were happy to have us, and we participated in two concerts. After the concert, we naively asked how we would be paid. We were surprised to learn that the performers all volunteered and even had

to pay membership fees. We had been in the country for only a few months, so we couldn't afford to pay the fees. Regardless, we enjoyed the prestige of singing in America.

Aggie soon started working at the Milwaukee Investment Company. My sister's friend arranged auditions for me in three different synagogues, but there were no openings. The rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel was very excited to hear me sing, but he couldn't offer me a job because the current cantor was under contract. We received a free one-year membership at Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun, a Reform congregation, which we accepted. For us, a Reform synagogue was strange, as we'd never had one in Romania. Slowly, we got used to it.

Now I tried for a job in the T-shirt business. I interviewed with Eder Flag and Shirt Company and with Crown Prince, and both companies offered me a job starting at \$2 per hour. At that time, this was a nice beginning salary. I chose Crown Prince, where the Jewish owner, Howard Schudson, was impressed by what I had gone through. He introduced me to one of his sons who was working at the shop during his summer vacation. Today, that son is a well known scientist. My job was good, and I felt appreciated. The company, which had 15 employees, mainly produced printed bowling shirts and T-shirts. In June before my birthday, Mr. Schudson invited us to his home. That was very exciting for us. His son David picked us up and took us to the family's beautiful home in a wealthy neighborhood. The conversation was a little difficult for us, but it went OK. After dinner, Mrs. Schudson brought out a big cake, and they sang Happy Birthday to me. I was very moved.

After two months, I got another part-time job at Collegiate Sportswear doing artwork for shirts and baseball caps. This job paid \$3.50 per hour. Without a car and a driver license, I had to take the bus at 7 am. to my full-time job downtown, and at 5 pm. I took a bus to my part-time job on west Center Street. I got home at 9:30 pm. It wasn't easy, but I was happy doing it. Here, too, they liked me and my work, and I became very friendly with the owner's family. I started taking driving lessons and bought a used Chevrolet; in just three months, I got my license.

Aggie and I had been married for 17 years when she became pregnant. Her delivery was very difficult (26 hours of labor), but we were overjoyed to see our daughter for the first time. Judy was beautiful, and all of our friends and family adored her. She was the first baby born in our group of Romanian friends. After two years, we moved to a bigger apartment that had more living space.

After six months, Collegiate Sportswear offered me a full-time job at \$4 per hour, and I accepted their offer. It was a smaller shop that had been open for about two years, but they introduced a new technique called heat transfers. Their business really went up. After one year, Mr. Schudson from Crown Prince called to offer me a better salary if I would introduce them to the heat transfer technique. I accepted the offer. They gave me a very nice raise, and I took over as the production manager with responsibility over all departments. In just one year, the company doubled the number of employees, business was booming. I began traveling to trade shows across the country where we displayed our merchandise like die cut letters, heat transfers, T-shirt designs, bowling supplies, tote bags, etc.

Aggie was working as an accountant in a stock brokerage firm, where she was very much appreciated, and later she became a manager in the accounting department. I was still doing some art work on the side for Collegiate Sportswear, so I was working long hours. It was hard for me to be with Judy as much as I would have liked. We spoke Hungarian and German in our home, we were afraid that Judy would pick up our English accent. It wasn't until kindergarten that she heard and learned English words.

We made many friends, most of whom were immigrants from Romania, Hungary and Germany. Before we had a car of our own, our friends drove us to the lake on weekends and to picnic areas in local parks where we enjoyed grilling and playing games. We even got together with our co-workers. Judy became very popular with all our friends.

In 1970, we were able to buy a home in one of the best area of Whitefish Bay with excellent schools. The house looked like it came from the pages of Hansel and Gretel, and it had two bedrooms upstairs and one bedroom on the first floor for Aggie's mother. We weren't sure that we could afford the house, but it worked out. I enjoyed the home, especially the backyard where I could plant flowers, trees and even vegetables. We planted an apple tree, which in later years gave us thousands of beautiful apples. We made many improvements in the home, like carpeting, painting and tiling the kitchen. I did most of the work myself. Looking back now, I don't know how I had time for everything! We had a busy social life and hosted many dinner parties, with my mother-in-law's help.

Judy did nicely in kindergarten and she learned English quickly. She also took ballet lessons. Years later she took piano lessons at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music with the best piano teacher, Ms. B.(Banaszinski) who was Liberace's and Ralph Votapek's teacher. Judy played classical pieces in recitals and won many contests. We built a nice rec room in the

basement where Judy and her friends could play. Aggie, meantime, switched to a different investment company The Loewi Co. where she earned a better salary.

In 1970, we passed our exams and became American citizens. This was definitely a special event in our lives. In 1971, I traveled to Romania and Israel. In Romania, I met my father-in-law, who was in a Romevery bad financial shape. I also visited with Aggie's uncle and his family, the Bercovicis, and our former rabbi and his wife who invited me to a nice dinner. It was depressing to learn that none of my former schoolmates or friends remained in Timisoara.

After five days, I traveled to Israel, which was incredible for me. When I saw the ground for the first time from the airplane, I cried. Many family members and friends were waiting for me, and it was a very emotional, happy get together. I split my stay between my twin cousins, Tibor and Victor Kallai's family. On a Saturday, they took me to a very crowded Mediterranean beach where they stuck a pole in the sand with a sign that read, "Reserved Only for People from Timisoara." I can't begin to describe my feelings when I met 40 people -- family, former friends, and schoolmates with their families. Being together with Tibor, Victor, Elisabeth and their mother Melanie, was always fun for me, and I laughed my heart out. It was special! What I missed in my hometown, I found in Israel, since all my family and friends emigrated meantime.

In 1974, Aggie and Judy traveled to Romania to visit the Bercovici (Aggie's uncle) and Ernsti and Ani Wargha (friends). From there Lidia Bercovici (niece) and the Wargha's traveled with them to the beautiful Carpathian Mountains (Dracula's castle!), and Bucharest, and Judy had a nice time with Lidia.

We often enjoyed outings to lakes and museums; we even traveled to Chicago and took some of Judy's friends along. We had great fun on driving trips to Florida, Disney World, California and Arkansas. We visited Israel twice to enjoy time with our families, the twins, their sister and children.

Judy finished Cumberland School, and she was an outstanding student at Whitefish Bay High School.

In 1977-78, Cantor Garber invited me to join the Wisconsin Jewish Music Council, a group of cantors and professional musicians who performed on special occasions. I even performed a solo piece on national television!

In 1979, we learned that a new cellist named Wolfgang Laufer – originally from Timisoara -- was joining the Fine Arts Quartet. We used to sing with his father in the synagogue from 1958-1962, when they emigrated to Israel. He at that time was 15 years old (it's a small world after all). I phoned the cellist, and he immediately remembered us. Sadly, his father had died two weeks before in Israel. We became very good friends with him, his wife Mariana (a former ballerina in Bucharest and Israel), and his children Judy and Danny. When he passed away suddenly in 2011, we lost a very dear friend, and the world lost a famous artist.

Judy earned straight A's and was the school's valedictorian at graduation in 1985. She continued her studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and then was accepted at many of the best universities in the country, including Harvard. She chose the University of Chicago's Law School, where she earned her law degree in 1992.

To Our Daughter, Upon Receiving Her Law Degree:

Today, our daughter graduated from law school. Only yesterday, two people arrived from Romania, moneyless, jobless, and in the prime of their lives. Our first blessing showed up in the form of an adorable little girl after 17 years of marriage. Our job situation improved, and we could offer our daughter a home in a good neighborhood with excellent schools. Throughout the years, she won all the school, piano and foreign language competitions she participated in. Our hearts were filled with pride and joy watching her become valedictorian of her high school, leading a procession of about 200 students.

And then came her first move from home to UW-Madison, where she earned excellent grades. What should she become, and which universities should she apply to? She was accepted at six wonderful schools and chose the University of Chicago. Hopefully, she made the right choice. Where did those three years go?

Today, our daughter has a good career, and we know that she will be a winner no matter what she does in life.

We are very proud of you, Judy, and we love you always,

Mom and Dad

After Judy's graduation from law school, she traveled with a group of young people to Italy, France and England. We flew to Paris and London, where we spent two days together with Judy. Returning home, Judy took a job with a firm in Chicago.

My mother died in 1989 at age 98. We were very close, and I will always miss her. Three years later Aggie's mother died. Those events were difficult for us.

Lidia and her husband Paul Adler, arrived in New York from Romania. They started a successful new life in New Jersey, he as a computer analyst with a big firm. Few years later they visited us for a week, bringing their newborn son Daniel and her parents, Eugen and Lizetta, who came from Timisoara.

Ernsti and Ani Wargha received permission to emigrate from Timisoara to Nuremberg, Germany. After two years, they were able to visit us. We had a wonderful time traveling with them to Washington, New York and Niagara Falls. About two years later, they repeated their visit, and we drove to Door County. They then traveled to California, and we met them in Seattle for a driving trip to Vancouver and the Canadian Rockies. We traveled to Budapest twice, and we once took a train from Budapest to Nuremberg where Ernsti rented an RV. Together we drove to Austria, Italy and Switzerland. That trip was unforgettable for our visits to Vienna, Florence, Pisa, Milan and Venice.

I joined the choir at Congregation Emanu-El, which I enjoyed, and a year later got the job as cantorial soloist at Congregation Sinai. I held that job for eight years. Congregation Emanu-El gave me the position of Hazzan Sheini, replacing Cantor Eichaker most Friday evenings and on the second day of Rosh Hashanah services. After the congregation moved to River Hills, we joined Congregation Shalom and I joined its choir. Throughout those years, I also sang with the Milwaukee Jewish Community Chorale.

After working for 28 years, Aggie retired. Her firm gave a big party for her, and she received a nice profit sharing check. Her work had been highly appreciated. In 1995, I retired at age 73 after 30 years of working. This meant we were starting a new and different lifestyle. It was pleasant and relaxing at first, but after a few months, we both wanted to find part-time jobs. In 1996, Judy married Erik Hudson, a paralegal in her law firm. The wedding at the Hilton Hotel was beautiful. We had about 90 guests that included some of our relatives: Hedy (cousin) from Germany, Lidia and her family from New Jersey, and Usher and his wife from New York. Judge Audrey Brooks officiated at the ceremony, and Rabbi Barry Silberg and Cantor Ron Eichaker blessed the couple. I loved the music, and I enjoyed dancing to the

orchestra from Chicago. Three years later, our grandson Sam was born, and after another two years, we were blessed with our granddaughter Ilana.

In 1999, we had an opportunity to work part time using our knowledge of foreign languages. AB Data, which represented the Swiss Holocaust Victim Assets Litigation, asked us to contact Jewish communities all over the world to help find survivors or their families regarding their losses during the Holocaust. Aggie worked with Romania, Hungary and Italy, and I contacted Germany. We were paid quite well, but our satisfaction came from helping people get restitution for their suffering.

In 2001 John my brother-in-law died. A few years later Sabina had to be moved to a retirement home, she started having problems with a degenerative eye sight and dementia. I have a Power of Attorney and I am taking care of her medical and financial problems. She is 95 years old and in good physical health.

In our free time, we often drove to Chicago even for just one day to visit our daughter and her family. Those were wonderful times. Judy had a good job as an attorney, but after 10 years, she became a legal recruiter so that she could work fewer hours and spend more time with her children. In 2004, Judy and her family moved to Milwaukee where she was able to work from home and we could help with the children. It made us very happy to spend time with them.

In 2007, we made the big decision to sell our house and move to a two-bedroom condo at 1600 W. Green Tree Rd. apt.308 We were aging, and climbing the stairs to the second floor was becoming difficult for Aggie. I also was developing some health issues. I had some bleeding problems following surgeries. Even with a factor VIII transfusion before and after each procedure, I would bleed and develop blood clots. The doctors can't find the cause, as I have almost normal coagulation blood test results. I am evaluated each year at the Blood Center. I also was diagnosed with heart disease at age 72, and I underwent three angioplasties and received a stent. I also have liver complications due to Hepatitis C, which I contracted in the labor camp. Every six months, I have an ultrasound to be sure it isn't malignant.

At age 87, I passed out once at the pool in Florida and twice during services while singing in the temple choir. This was very unpleasant, and I decided to finish my singing career so that I wouldn't cause any more commotion. This was a difficult decision for me, since performing brought me joy for more than 70 years.

In general, my life has been successful in many ways despite some unforgettable bad times. My teenage years were pleasant because I had so many great friends, and strict parenting by my father helped me to be successful in my later life.

I survived the labor camps, WWII and the Communist era -- difficult and hard times of my life. Singing, enjoying concerts and opera and having many friends helped ease my existence. Being married to Aggie for more than 60 years, Judy's birth, her marriage to Erik and later the births of Sam and Ilana, our sweet grandchildren, have made my whole life perfect. Most of these achievements would not have been possible without emigration to this great country; no wonder it is called the Land of Opportunity.

Today, as I write the story of my life, I am 90 years old and my health is relatively good. Hopefully, I will have many more years to enjoy life with my family.

To my dear family: I am confident that if your mother and grandmother survives me, all of you **will take good care of her.**

OTTO FELLER

I would like to thank Jodi Peck for her tireless help with my story.