

Chapter 1

Childhood in Czechoslovakia

When I was born in Moldava nad Bodvou, Czechoslovakia, in 1929, my parents could not have foreseen the danger and destruction that would befall our family only a decade later.

Our town had a population of approximately five thousand people, most of whom were Roman Catholic and Reformist Christian. There were also about ninety Jewish families, totalling not quite five hundred people. The town had a secure atmosphere and I had many friends, both Jewish and non-Jewish. At one end of the main town square there was the Roman Catholic church, and at the other end there was the Reformist church. Constructed during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the baroque-style public elementary school and the post office were also near the main square. There was a high school located nearby.

I lived with my immediate family – my father, mother, grandparents, uncle, and aunt – in a large dwelling; each segment of the family had its own quarters. The businesses of the town were operated mainly by Jewish owners, including the confectionery

store, a large general store, two bakeries, two pubs, several stores for yard goods and materials, a glazier, and an herbalist. My father owned a pub called the Cellar, where people came to drink and socialize, and where he made and sold a variety of bottled liqueurs in mint, apricot, and chocolate flavours. There was a Jewish butcher and a family-operated bicycle shop that also had a Shell Oil concession to sell gasoline. The town's medical establishment included two Jewish doctors, a Dr. Fried and a Dr. Laszlo, and two Jewish dentists, one of whom, Dr. Gertner, was our family dentist. Two other pubs and a butcher shop were owned and operated by non-Jewish residents. The town's administration was overseen by the equivalent of a mayor, who was also the head of the district of Abaúj-Szántó. There was also a police station in the town.

My mother, my aunt, and my grandmother, like the rest of the town's Jewish women, were intelligent, well-read, capable, and contributing people. They all did volunteer work, such as crafting embellishments for the synagogue and helping the poor. We also opened up the orchards on our property to the needy, who could come and pick fruit in season. When knitted dresses came into style, the women took up knitting as well, making garments for themselves and their daughters.

My extended family included my grandfather, Raphael; my grandmother, Malvina; my aunt Bella; my uncle Eugene, who was my father's brother; and his wife, Irene. While they all shaped my early life, my grandfather taught me many life skills that I still use to this day, and I particularly respected him and valued his attention. My father had another sister who lived in a town called Almás with her husband and children. Their family name was Lazarovits. My mother's helper, Anna, was another



The wedding picture of my Uncle Jenö (Eugene) and wife Irene, taken in 1930.



important person in my early years. Anna came to live with us when I was born, and she was a strong woman in both body and spirit. Although she wasn't Jewish, she knew our customs and could recite some of our blessings for food. In my mind, she was also a part of the family.

I admired my grandfather's strength and knowledge. He'd been a cavalry officer in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and had fought on the Russian front in the First World War. The Jews of Austria-Hungary (who were emancipated in 1867) revered Emperor Franz Joseph, and the elders in my town who were veterans and comrades of that period wore beards and side curls just like his. My grandfather and my uncle Eugene operated the lumberyard on our property. On market day, up to ten farmers parked their horses and buggies in our yard while they sold their goods at the marketplace. I loved horses, so it was a big event for me. Before the farmers left, they would purchase lumber from our yard, and my grandfather recorded the purchases in his big ledger. (After they brought in their harvests, they would pay for their purchases with either grain or livestock.) When they were gone, it was my job, together with my grandfather, to clean up the manure left behind with a broom that had a very long handle. The manure itself was used to fertilize our vegetable garden, and its natural odour didn't bother me. In addition to the steady work of the lumberyard, my grandfather and I also pruned and grafted the fruit trees in our orchard. I always preferred these duties to school, no matter how hard the work.



When my grandfather went to buy sections of forest to be converted into lumber, I was sometimes invited to go along with him. Once, we entered a copse of tall pine trees, and I could hear the wind in the canopy and smell the scent of the pine while my

grandfather was checking for the size and girth of the trees to be cut down. In my mind, I wondered if he knew how to get out of the dense forest. But my grandfather showed me how to find the particular signs that would help us navigate our way. On the way out, he taught me about wild mushrooms that were edible and others that were poisonous.

We lived in a rural area where horses and cattle were numerous, and there were occasions when these animals ate grasses that were not good for them to digest, making them bloated and in need of immediate relief. When there was no veterinarian to perform this service, my grandfather was called to release the gas from their bellies. The farmers were grateful that he was available, and his expertise in this area impressed me. I learned many skills by observing him — particularly the importance of a job well done.

My father, on the other hand, had embraced the automobile age in the 1920s and early 1930s, when many social and cultural changes were taking place. At one time, he owned and operated a bus that had a route from our town to Košice,^{*} the capital city of our province, approximately fifty kilometres away. The driver of the bus was also the fare collector, and after a while my father realized that the man was keeping some of the takings and the route was losing money. So within a year, he sold the bus. He also owned a convertible car that he drove for many years, but eventually it became irreparable and was left in the corner of our yard, where it sunk to its axles. My friends and I would sit in the rusted vehicle and pretend to drive it.

* This city was known as Košice under Slovakian rule and Kassa when it was governed by Hungary. I have opted to use whatever name the city went by at the time, which means I will sometimes refer to it as the former and sometimes the latter.



My younger brother Eugene (left), Alfred, and me in 1939.



Around 1925, my father established the Cellar, a popular pub where people liked to socialize. I sometimes was given the job of putting exotic labels on the bottles of liqueurs and red wax on the corks, and then adding my father's own seal to the wax. Each bottle was then put into a woven sleeve and dusted with white chalk powder to give it the appearance of age. I sometimes delivered these bottles to customers in the town. I enjoyed my time at the Cellar, and my father allowed me to be his responsible helper. On the cold, dark evenings after Hebrew school in winter, I often went to my father's establishment and waited there until closing time at approximately 8 p.m. He would give me a bit of alcohol to gargle to kill any winter bacteria. I was happy to wait for him rather than going home alone in the dark.



I recall times when my friends and I, after school let out at 4 p.m., bought kaiser buns from Deutch's bakery and then went to the Cellar, where we were allowed to open the spigot on a cask of liqueur and soak our buns under it. All my friends wanted to come to the Cellar to get fortification before Hebrew school. My father, although a strict parent, had a great sense of humour, and it was a happy time for my friends and me.



While my father was the provider, my mother sustained the secure atmosphere and the rhythm of the home environment. She supported our physical and psychological daily needs. I was born in 1929, when she was twenty-five years old and my father was twenty-seven. My brother Eugene was born in 1932, my brother Alfred in 1936. My little sister, Judit, was born in 1943, making a difference of fourteen years between us. All of us were born in the family home and delivered by midwives. My brother Eugene was the smart one, and I felt unfavourable compared to him whenever he finished his homework with little trouble and I did not.

It seemed that he was able to handle the curriculum of both the public school and the Hebrew school easily. There was a natural sibling rivalry between us. Blond-haired, blue-eyed Alfred, on the other hand, was coddled by me and every other member of my family, and was considered the baby until Judit came along seven years later.

* * *

My earliest memory is riding on the crossbar of my father's bicycle as he took me to Hebrew school to introduce me to my teacher. For the first time, I was leaving the security of my family, clutching only a paper bag with a buttered kaiser bun and a tomato for lunch. The school was located next to the synagogue in the centre of town, approximately one kilometre from our home. To a five-year-old boy, it seemed a long distance away. My father handed me over to the teacher, who spoke to me in Yiddish, which I couldn't understand. At home, we spoke Hungarian, my mother tongue.

I was very frightened by this strange new environment. It was a beautiful sunny day and there were many kids my age and older playing games in the schoolyard. Some of them were whittling and making whistles from willow branches. Some had their shoes off and were trying to catch small fish under the rocks of the River Bodvou, which flowed next to the school. Gradually, I made friends and was allowed to walk to school on my own. In the one-room classroom, there were three tables with benches; the children were grouped around them by both age and ability. This was a *cheder* (school) for boys to study the Scriptures (the Hebrew Bible).

A single teacher supervised the entire group, and he was strict and forceful. He used a stick to keep order, meting out punishment against those who did not learn the text properly. I was made to sit on the bench at his right side, and I received punishment regularly for my unresponsiveness. I'm sure that he was trying to demonstrate his expertise as a teacher to my father, who was a respected person in the community. But the more he punished me, the less I wanted to learn.

The pressure of this hostile environment, combined with my classes in the public school system (which I started a year later), was more than I could handle. Not only did I have to learn Yiddish at age five, but I also had to learn Slovak at age six in order to participate in the public school curriculum. Public school ended at 4 p.m., and then we went to Hebrew school until 7 p.m. I also attended Hebrew school on Sundays, and when the Hungarians took over the country in 1938–39, I went to the public school for half a day on Saturdays too. Little time was left for childhood games. My rebellious nature was reflected in my unsatisfactory performance in both schools, which resulted in punishment at home from my father, who expected better results. Luckily, my mother was more understanding, and she came to my rescue on many occasions.

One day, our neighbour Ily's brother arrived for a visit in his fire-red Škoda sports car. I noticed this beautiful car parked in front of their home and was drawn to it like a magnet. In my mind, I saw myself climbing behind the steering wheel and taking off in it. Eventually, everyone came out of the house: Ily carrying a picnic basket; her son, Nori; and her brother, an artist who was tall and smartly dressed. They were going to visit the stalactite caves in Dobsina, approximately one and a half

hours away. I was dying to be invited to join them, but when Ily said, “Why don’t you come along, Tibor?” – I was known as Tibor when I was young – I was faced with a major decision, because it was our Sabbath and driving in a car was strictly forbidden. If my father found out, the punishment would be dire. Torn between fear and desire, I opted to hop in the car and suffer any consequences later; I was determined not to miss this opportunity.

When we drove through town, I slipped down very low in the car so no one would see me. The stalactites were absolutely amazing, and I had never seen anything like them before. On the way home, my stomach was churning from the fear of what awaited me. It was dusk by the time we arrived. I slipped out of the car, trying not to be noticed, and pretended to be coming home from a long hike. The house was ominously quiet as I approached, and I felt everyone must know of my indiscretion. My father, who must have seen the car return, confronted me as soon as I entered the house and took me out back to the orchard, where he gave me a good whipping. He told me I had committed a great sin by disrespecting the Sabbath. My mother was sympathetic, but she said nothing. I gritted my teeth and took the punishment, but I wasn’t deterred from acting on my impulses, then or in the future.

On one occasion, my friend Gaby Lichtman and I ran from the Hebrew school to his house to get some books to read before evening prayers. Every day at Hebrew school, we would break at sundown to pray at the synagogue, then return to school until 7 p.m. This particular day was in the depths of winter, so it was getting dark by five o’clock, which left us only ten minutes before we had to be at the synagogue. I loved books with cowboys and

bandits, and I quickly stuffed several under my shirt and winter coat. By the time we got to the synagogue, though, the services were already in progress. I got into line with the rest of the students and said my prayers, but the teacher had seen us arrive late, and he gave me a nasty look. I knew that I was in trouble.

When we sat down, the teacher came over to slap me in the face. I tried to avoid his hand by twisting away because I didn't want to be punished in front of the entire congregation, and when I did, all the books came spilling out of my shirt and onto the synagogue floor. I was hugely embarrassed, and hoped the floor would open up and I could disappear. This incident brought shame to my father, who was also attending prayers, because the entire community had witnessed my poor behaviour. I knew the consequences would be twofold: my father would punish me, and even worse, all the books would be confiscated and I would no longer be permitted to read stories of adventure.

Most of my learning developed outside of the schools, guided largely by my aunt Bella, who read frequently. I learned to read Hungarian sitting on Aunt Bella's lap, and by age five, I could already read books. A beautiful woman, Aunt Bella was an invalid due to polio, which limited her mobility. Despite her disability, she kept a cheerful disposition and took great interest in all our lives. The household routine revolved around her special needs, which were attended to primarily by my grandparents. Grandfather helped her to get up from bed, and Grandmother washed and dressed her, combed her long, silky hair, and braided it and put it up in a bun. Bella was very well read despite a lack of formal education, and she willingly shared her knowledge with us. I enjoyed many moments listening to her repertoire of stories, and my brothers and I vied for her attention.

In addition to Bella's daily routine, the rhythm of our house was also regulated by the seasons. In the summer, when the vegetables were ready for picking, all the women got together for days of food processing. They made preserves, coleslaw, and pickles that would last through to the spring. In the fall, we harvested vegetables such as carrots, radishes, and potatoes, and buried them in sand in our basement cold cellar.

Sauerkraut was a staple food in the home. It was made in the fall in a ritual that I can clearly remember today. We grated enough bushels of cabbage to fill a large wooden drum, pounded the grated mass with a wooden mallet until it was watery, and then layered the cabbage with bay leaves, corn, choke apples, and peppercorns. When the drum was full, we covered it with a wooden top and placed a heavy stone to weigh it down and initiate the fermentation process.

Making fruit preserves was another annual family ritual. Most of the orchard trees were plums, and we harvested them to make dozens of jars of black plum jam. When the plums were ripe, they were picked and seeded, and the following day, my grandfather and I would set up an outdoor wood fireplace to boil the fruit in a large copper vessel. It took a whole day for the plum jam to cook, so we usually did it during a full moon, which allowed us enough light to work late into the night. When the jam was ready, it was thick and heavy, and my job was to stir the delicious mixture and transfer it into sterile jars. The jars were capped with wax paper and tied with string, labelled by year, and then divided equally among our three families. As a wonderful reward for my hard work, I was allowed to lick any remaining jam out of the copper pot.

Once a week, my mother, grandmother, and aunt would

prepare the dough for the week's bread supply. My job was to transport the dough in a four-wheeled cart to Mr. Deutch, the town baker, on my way to school. After school, I came back to the bakery to pick up the three loaves of bread Mr. Deutch had baked. The bakery was filled with wonderful aromas that delighted the senses. The loaves were stacked on shelves and I searched the name tags for ours. When I got them home, my mother often cut off a big slice for me and coated it with goose fat and paprika.

The three families – my family, my grandparents, and my aunt and uncle – had their own living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens equipped with wood stoves for cooking and baking. It was wonderful for me because on many days I could choose my menu based on the smells coming out of the three kitchens. I loved fish, and every Thursday in the summers, a local fisherman would bring us two trout, which my mother would bake in butter for dinner. It was delicious. But I detested her tomato soup with rice and would run to another kitchen whenever she made it.

Grain-fed chickens and ducks roamed everywhere in our yard. Geese were fed with boiled corn and kept in their own separate area, where they quickly fattened up. This poultry provided for all our needs, and we were self-sufficient in meats and fats for cooking and baking. The winter diet relied more on meat and fat. Since we were a traditional orthodox Jewish family, we had to process the meat ourselves and render the fat from the geese so nothing was wasted. We ate delicacies such as goose liver, goose rinds with mashed potatoes and sautéed onions, and many other specialties. Feathers and down were plucked and used for pillows and duvets.

A tall fence enclosing our compound had a main gate for vehicles and a small gate for foot traffic. It was patrolled by our three dogs: a large Alsatian named Farkas (*wolf* in Hungarian), and two fox terriers, Ali and Prince. Farkas was the alpha dog, and he was particularly attuned to his surroundings. We could tell by the tone of his bark whether someone approaching the compound was friend or foe, and we always felt well protected.

Because our spacious property lent itself to all kinds of fun, my friends would often gather there to play games such as cowboys and bandits. We would hide in the attic of the old stable or climb the branches of the walnut trees or disappear into the woodshed. We also got into a lot of trouble, for which I often paid the price. When I was eleven years old, I took note of Grandfather's hiding place atop the wardrobe cupboard in his bedroom. This was where he kept special things away from prying eyes. The tall cupboard was half of a his-and-hers set made of ornately carved dark wood. I knew there were goodies up there and was curious to see what treasures I might find. One day, I climbed up on a chair to get to the top, and there I found a bulky leather holster that I picked up in my hands. It was heavy and I wondered if it had a pistol inside. I opened the leather flap, and lo and behold there was a small polished Beretta with a black handgrip. Excited beyond expectation, I was determined to get to town immediately to show it off to my friends. Nobody would be able to top me! I held the holster under my armpit tightly and headed out, all the while hoping Grandfather would not notice it was gone.

When I reached town, my friends gathered around me and I showed them the gun. They were very impressed, and some ran off to get more friends. Soon, I was surrounded by fifteen excited boys, every one of whom wanted to handle the pistol.

Some of them dared me to fire it. I pulled the trigger but nothing happened, so I pulled harder and harder. They began to tease me, saying the gun was a fake. I was angry that it wouldn't fire, and I managed to remove the magazine. We were all amazed to find twelve bullets inside. Fortunately, nobody knew about (or accidentally released) the safety catch. By this time, I was getting very anxious that I would be discovered, so I called an end to the fun and headed home.

I sneaked back into Grandfather's bedroom and replaced the pistol, hoping he wouldn't notice. For weeks after, the boys were still chattering about the gun, but somehow I was never called to account for my actions. In hindsight, I realize how dangerous it was to have a loaded gun and fifteen naive boys grabbing and handling it. If the gun had discharged and injured anyone, there would have been serious consequences for my family, since civilians were strictly prohibited from keeping handguns under Hungarian rule.

On another occasion, eight or ten friends and I were trying to emulate the habits of older boys in the town who were doing more "grown-up" things. Smoking was forbidden, but at eight years of age, we did not take that as a deterrent. We had no money, so I volunteered to get some from my father's till at the Cellar. I went to the store and told the shopkeeper that the schoolteacher had asked me to pick up cigarettes. I put the money on the counter and was given ten cigarettes wrapped in newspaper. My friends and I took off to a nearby secluded mountain area to light up. Everyone was inhaling and blowing smoke rings, and soon we all became dizzy. We were coughing and spitting, and it was not a pleasurable experience for any of us, but we wanted to be like the older boys.

When I returned home, my mother immediately smelled smoke on my breath and knew exactly what I'd been up to. She told me in no uncertain terms never to do it again. In spite of the warning, I continued to smoke with my friends whenever we managed to scrape together some loose change.

Dr. Fried, our family doctor, was an elegant man who always smoked a cigar when going on his walks about town. I found the cigar smoke very pleasing and would follow him around to get a whiff as he walked. Eventually, my friends and I decided to pool our money to buy one large Cuban cigar to share. We returned to my family's property with the treasured purchase and stole away inside the large chicken coop. We tried to light the cigar, but we didn't realize that we had to clip the end to create an airway for the smoke. Everyone tried unsuccessfully to light it, progressively chewing up more and more of the end, making a mess of it. As matches from all the lighting attempts accumulated on the floor, the straw started to smoulder and soon smoke filled the small pen. It attracted my grandfather, who opened the door and yelled, "Get out! You are burning down the chicken coop!" When we got outside, I could see smoke coming from every crevice. My friends took off, leaving me to face the talking-to from my grandfather. But still we were not deterred. We started making corncob pipes and smoking dried leaves instead of tobacco. It was awful stuff, but we kept at it during the fall, when there were plenty of leaves to use. I carried on smoking until I was twelve, when I had to leave home for my apprenticeship.

Looking back, I see how outrageous some of my actions were. I also see how much thought, effort, and work went into running the household, and how much I took for granted. My mother fed us a nutritious, balanced diet, cooked from scratch



BY CHANCE ALONE

every day, and she gave me a spoonful of fish oil with a drop of syrup for additional health before I left the house for school. She was also an amazing seamstress, and she made many of our clothes at home. How she managed with no running water, no washing machine, and no other modern conveniences is beyond my comprehension. She must have experienced stress and tension in the course of her day's work, and I realize now how much she sacrificed for her family's well-being.

Chapter 2

Summers on the Farm

My mother's family lived approximately two hundred kilometres away in a small farming community called Kolbašov, near the large city of Michalovce. Grandmother Friedman and my two unmarried uncles, Herman and Pavel, ran the large family farm, where they produced corn, grain, and flax. They had a herd of milk cows, sheep, and goats, as well as several teams of horses that they used for tilling, hauling, and other kinds of work. This was a very enterprising farm with many young people hired to help out. At sunrise the cattle were taken out to the various pastures to graze, and they were brought back at noon and again in the evening to be milked by hand into pails. The farmhands processed the milk in separators for skimmed milk and butter. They made cheeses from sheep and goat milk. At the end of the day, the teams of horses were also returned from the fields, unharnessed, groomed, and freed to take a run to the water trough.

My first extended visit to the farm was in 1935, when I was six years old. I spent the entire summer there that year, almost two

months. I returned again in the summers of 1936, 1937, and 1938. Summer holidays at the farm were a time of freedom, with no public school or Hebrew school. I felt so unconstrained. Many of my cousins from nearby towns came for the summers as well, and we were a happy group of eight or ten children. I was particularly attached to two older cousins, Edith and Lily Burger. Another cousin, Laly Friedman, was allowed to saddle his horse and ride at any time, whereas I could ride only in front of my uncle on his saddle.

We children had so much to occupy our minds. We used to visit the newborn calves, putting our hands in their mouths and letting them suck our fingers with their toothless gums. We picked wild strawberries in the fields. Uncle Herman and Uncle Pavel were very busy running the farm, but they always managed to find some time for us. We were given the task of taking the sheep and goats to pasture. Trying to keep them all together was a challenge, especially when the goats wandered off, climbing ever higher on the hillside. I loved it when my uncles took me on their saddles and galloped off to faraway fields to see how the harvesting work was progressing.

At the end of each long day of activities, we children were dirty and dead tired, and we were allowed to go to a nearby mountain stream to splash around and wash. The water was freezing cold.

The first summer, I met a local boy my age, and every year we spent time together exploring the wider area. One day we found a cemetery that was overgrown by trees, and he told me there were ghosts there that came out every night. I was scared, but we dared each other to go inside. Neither of us was able to muster enough courage alone, so we went in together. In the middle

of the cemetery, there was a large pear tree loaded with huge fruit. We could not reach them, so we found some stones and pelted the branches to shake a few loose. The pears were sweet and juicy, and I really enjoyed them. We had all kinds of fruit in our orchards at home, but the fruit from someone else's garden always tasted better. We revisited this cemetery quite often.

My last trip to the farm was in the summer of 1938, when I was nine years old. My visit was interrupted midsummer when my uncle Herman abruptly took me to the railway station and sent me back home. Czechoslovakia was under threat of invasion by Nazi Germany and the situation had become unstable. I never saw my mother's family again. At nine, I didn't fully understand what was taking place, but I noticed the rising tensions in my hometown. Since we lived so near to Hungary, the streets had to be patrolled at night and the Czechoslovakian army was moved up to reinforce the border. As children, we were excited to see the soldiers with all their equipment, and we didn't realize the dangers looming ahead.