

# To Be Honest



*three generations of unexpectedly dramatic family saga*

by

P. S. Ehrlich

Revised Anniversary Edition



# To Be Honest

*three generations of unexpectedly dramatic family saga*

by

P. S. EHRLICH

Revised Anniversary Edition

*with 220 illustrations and even more footnotes*



[www.SkeeterKitefly.com](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com)

2024

## BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly**Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor**13 Black Cats Under a Ladder**Bolster, Not Molest Her — Book One: Wish Again**Bolster, Not Molest Her — Book Two: Vicki in Vanderlund**Bolster, Not Molest Her — Book Three: Thrown for a Look**Bolster, Not Molest Her — Book Four: Phantaphyre**Cover design by the author**To Be Honest: Revised Anniversary Edition*

Copyright © 1986, 2003-09, 2024-25 by P. S. Ehrlich

*Split Infinitive Edition March 2024*

A Split Infinitive Production

All Rights Reserved

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission.  
For information contact the author at [ps Ehrlich@gmail.com](mailto:ps Ehrlich@gmail.com).



## Contents

Introduction	1
ONE: KOLOZSVÁR	7
1 <i>Józsi</i>	9
Appendix A: Ehrlichs—The Previous Generation	19
2 <i>Matyu</i>	23
Appendix B: The Kohns/Kuns in Kolozsvár	37
3 <i>Apart and Together</i>	43
Appendix C: Berta's Death and Resting Place	55
Appendix D: Casa Matei Corvin—and the House Next Door	58
4 <i>Mártuka</i>	63
5 <i>Episodes and Happenings</i>	73
6 <i>Kivándorol Amerikába</i>	87
TWO: CHICAGO	101
7 <i>Departure and Arrival</i>	103
8 <i>The First American Year</i>	115
Appendix E: The American Cousins	127
9 <i>Gyurika</i>	133
10 <i>Furriery</i>	145
11 <i>New Deal on Devon</i>	155
12 <i>Martha and George</i>	167
THREE: AND BEYOND	185
13 <i>New Horizons</i>	187
14 <i>Left All by Ourselves</i>	207
Appendix F: Jenő's Family	214
15 <i>A Strange Funny World</i>	217
Appendix G: The Guthries, Chessers, and Lewises	233
16 <i>The Little Princess</i>	239

17	<i>The Little Postscript</i>	259
18	<i>Fortitude and Delicacy</i>	278
	Afterward: From Being Honest	298
	Appendix H: Mathilda and <i>To Be Honest</i>	317
	Appendix J: Martha and <i>To Be Honest</i>	321
	Appendix K: George and <i>To Be Honest</i>	326
	A Final Recap: George and His Parents	332
	Selected Bibliography	338

## Illustrations

*For this revised edition I have tried wherever possible to rescan illustrations from original images. When those were unavailable, some Photoshoppery has been applied to old Xeroxed copies.*

01	József Ehrlich, circa October 1914	17
01	Matild Kohn in 1915	18
01a	Mór Ehrlich's gravestone in Győr-Szigeti Temető cemetery	21
01a	Regina Grunhut Ehrlich's gravestone in Győr-Szigeti Temető cemetery	22
02	Matild Kohn's Birth Certificate, 1895	31
02	<i>Jenka néni</i> and her children arrive in America, 1907	32
02	<i>Samu bácsi</i> 's household in the 1910 census	32
02	Matild Kohn in June 1912	33
02	Matild in a hat (of her own making?), 1916	33
02	The Kohns in Cluj, 1925	33
02	József Ehrlich in 1916	34
02	The engaged couple, 1916	35
02	Their engagement ring (held by great-granddaughter Amber, 2014)	36
02b	St. Michael's Church in Cluj's Union Square (Piata Unirii), 2009	39
02b	The Someșul Mic (or Kis-Szamos) River, 2009	39
02b	The lake at Cluj's Central Park, 2009	39
02b	Cluj's Central Park, 2009	40
02b	Cluj's current Neolog Synagogue, 2009	40
02b	The garden behind Cluj's Neolog Synagogue, 2009	40
02b	The house Matthew thought might be the Kohn (Kun) home in Cluj, 2009	41
02b	Its address on the Ehrlichs's 1922 wedding certificate confirmation	41
02b	The house Google Street View identified as the Kohn address, 2023	42
02b	That house and the one earlier thought to be the Kohn home, 2023	42
03	Matild and József with Matild's sister Margit, 1917(?)	52
03	Matild in March 1918	52
03	Matild and József on their wedding day: July 21, 1918	53

03	Matild and József's wedding certificate confirmation, 1922	54
03	Matild and her brother Dezső on Armistice Day	54
03c	Record of Berta (Mrs. Móric) Kohn's death and burial, September 1917	56
03c	A view of Cluj's Neolog Jewish Cemetery	57
03c	Another view of Cluj's Neolog Jewish Cemetery	57
03d	Map of Kolozsvár (Klausenburg) from the 1905 <i>Baedeker's Austria-Hungary</i>	60
03d	The birthplace of Matthias Corvinus (Casa Matei Corvin), 2009	60
03d	Another view of the birthplace of Matthias Corvinus (Casa Matei Corvin), 2009	61
03d	The House Next Door (where the Ehrlichs lived and had their millinery), 2009	61
03d	Matthew Ehrlich outside the House Next Door, 2009	62
04	Márta in January 1920	71
04	Márta in June 1920	71
04	Márta in September 1920	72
05	Matild and Márta in March 1921	86
05	"Our First Family Portrait," April 1921	86
06	Márta in May 1922	98
06	Snapshots of Márta, featuring Fáni and Jani: June 1922	98
06	The Ehrlichs in September 1922	99
06	Márta in her nightgown, November 1922	99
06	Passport photo, January 1923	100
07	The Tóthfalussys's farewell rose, June 1923	111
07	Visa: "3 (three) Persons born in Roumania"	112
07	The S.S. <i>Constantinople</i>	112
07	Left half of the S.S. <i>Constantinople</i> 's September 1923 manifest	113
07	Right half of the S.S. <i>Constantinople</i> 's September 1923 manifest	113
07	Bébi (Violet Ladner) in 1935	114
07	Chicago's Irving Park in 2006	114
08	Jeni Kohn's 1923 passport photo	124
08	<i>Jenka néni</i> with her daughters and niece, circa 1940	124
08	<i>Jenka néni</i> with her daughters and niece, March 1941	124
08	Mathilda and Martha with their American cousins, 1924	125

08	The Ehrlichs and relatives in August 1924	125
08	Martha with the Temmer boys and Mathilda, October 1924	125
08	Evelyn Ruhig and Martha, circa 1926	125
08	Joseph and Mathilda with their American family, 1944	124
08e	Ted Ruhig, Alex Temmer, Evelyn Ruhig, Ernie Temmer: before 1942	132
08e	Steve and Kati Hoyer with son Bill and granddaughter Susan: 1944	132
08e	Martha with three Ruhigs, two Sesslers, and two Hoyers: June 1944	132
08e	Ernie Hoyer, Ted Ruhig, Kalman Ruhig, Albert Sessler: June 1944	132
09	2607 W. Division St. in 2004	140
09	“Second floor front” in 2004	140
09	“Forgive me for this picture”: Winter 1925	141
09	Sunday in the Park with Gyurika, Summer 1925	141
09	Martha on ponyback, January 1926	142
09	George and Martha, March 1926	142
09	Lakeside Place in 2006: vacant lot	143
09	Lakeside Place in 2006: another view	144
10	Poem from “Nagymama” Sarolta Ehrlich, August 1927	153
10	Martha on a “winged” tricycle, Summer 1927	153
10	Citizen Joseph: June 12, 1929	154
10	Mathilda and Joseph, 1929	154
11	The Ehrlichs in the 1930 census	163
11	George, Martha, and Mathilda: Christmas 1930	163
11	1553 W. Devon Avenue: an exterior view, 2004	164
11	1553 W. Devon Avenue: another exterior view, 2004	164
11	1553 Devon Avenue: a floorplan drawn by George in 1984	165
11	Ehrlich Furs advertisement printed by George circa 1939	166
12	The Ehrlichs in 1934: “A Century of Progress”	179
12	George and Martha, 1934	179
12	Nicholas Senn High School	180
12	The Ehrlichs in 1935	181
12	Citizen Mathilda: July 8, 1936	182

12	Mathilda in St. Petersburg, February 1936	182
12	Martha: Senior Year at Senn, 1936-37	182
12	George with his parents and Reva Belle in St. Petersburg, February 1937	183
12	George pitching hay at the “rural resort,” Summer 1938	183
12	The Ehrlichs, Summer 1937	183
13	Martha the Freshman at Illinois, 1937	196
13	Martha and Mathilda, Mother’s Day 1938	196
13	Orchesis article, circa December 1938	197
13	Mathilda with Mrs. Dever and Lila Renbarger, 1939	197
13	The Ehrlichs in the 1940 census	198
13	Martha the Illinois graduate, June 1941	199
13	Martha in Sanborn, North Dakota, 1941-42	199
13	Martha and cow in Sanborn, North Dakota, 1941-42	199
13	George at thirteen, January 1938: “Today I Am a Man!”	200
13	Sketch of Patsy by George, circa 1938	200
13	Sketch of Patsy by George, circa 1939	200
13	Painting of the Ehrlich bookcase by George, 1940	201
13	Martha and George in Urbana, 1941	202
13	Martha and George in Racine, 1941	202
13	George the high school graduate: June 1942	202
13	“And Then There Was George”: July 1942	203
13	George in uniform at Martha’s Urbana apartment, early 1943	203
13	George washing dishes at Martha’s Urbana apartment, early 1943	203
13	George reading at Martha’s Urbana apartment, early 1943	203
13	Mathilda and Patsy, circa 1942	204
13	Joseph and Patsy, circa 1942	204
13	Martha and George, early 1943	204
14	Joseph and Mathilda on their silver wedding anniversary, July 1943	205
14	Joseph’s World War II draft registration, 1942	206
14	George’s World War II draft registration, 1943	206
14	Mathilda with the Red Cross, April 1943	206

14	A 1944 memorial stone in Cluj's Neolog Jewish cemetery	213
14	Another 1944 memorial stone in Cluj's Neolog Jewish cemetery	213
14f	From <i>Aufbau</i> , March 9, 1945	215
14f	Jenő's son Ivan with his bride Edith	216
14f	Jenő's daughter, "the other Martha"	216
14f	Mathilda reunited with her sister Ily, 1967	216
14f	Mathilda again reunited with her sister Ily, 1974	216
15	Martha circa 1943-44 (with glasses)	228
15	Martha circa 1943-44 (without glasses)	228
15	Martha with family members and Esther Ewald, circa 1942-43	228
15	Martha and Murel Lewis, August 1944	229
15	Newlyweds and bride's parents: August 20, 1944	229
15	Martha and Murel's honeymoon in Wauchula, Summer 1944	229
15	Martha receiving her master's degree, October 1944	229
15	Murel with Mathilda, Joseph, and the day's catch, February 1947	230
15	The Ehrlichs and Lewises in Florida, February 1947	230
15	Martha and Murel in Miami with Bobbi Johnston, 1947	230
15	Murel and pregnant Martha in Miami with Howard Johnston, 1949	230
15	Private George in Miami Beach, August 1943	231
15	George home on leave: July 1944	231
15	George in Army Air Corps training, Boca Raton: December 1944	231
15	George home on leave: March 1945	231
15	Lieutenant George, March 1945 (the photo that made Martha cry)	232
15	A Christmas game of <i>márias</i> : 1948	232
15	Mathilda with George the Bachelor of Science: June 11, 1949	232
15g	Andrew Lee Lewis and Ella Belle Chesser Lewis's grave marker	238
16	Martha, post-nosejob: late 1949	253
16	Martha and Sherry, December 1949	253
16	Martha and Sherry, June 1950	253
16	The elder Ehrlichs and Sherry in the 1950 census	254
16	Martha in the 1950 census	254

16	George in the 1950 census	254
16	112 Stanage in Champaign, 1985	255
16	Martha and Sherry, December 1950	255
16	Sherry Renée, January 1951	255
16	Joseph and Mathilda in April 1951	256
16	Joseph, Mathilda and Sherry in April 1951	256
16	Sherry and Joseph in April 1951	257
16	Sherry with Martha on her 2nd birthday, June 1951	257
16	Sherry with Joseph and pony on her 2nd birthday, June 1951	257
16	1010 West Stoughton in Urbana, 1985	258
16	Sherry combing Joseph's hair at Stoughton, December 1952	258
16	Joseph and three dark-eyed ladies, August 1954	258
16	The Urbana Junior High School faculty, May 1954	258
17	<i>Muszka bácsi</i> , 1950	272
17	"Aim Less" and her daughter: Halloween 1954	272
17	4505 N. Western Avenue, 2004	272
17	Grandma and Sherry at the new house on Western, May 1955	272
17	Joseph, Mathilda and Sherry, June 1955	273
17	Nick Mlinarich, Sherry and Martha: June 18, 1955	273
17	The family joins Nick and Martha on their wedding day: June 18, 1955	273
17	Joseph and Mathilda in Kenosha, March 1956	274
17	Sherry playing chess with Joseph, June 1958	274
17	Nick Mlinarich and his Camel, circa 1958	274
17	George sampling bourbon, July 1950	275
17	George sculpting wood, July 1950	275
17	"Poor George: Thesis to Do / No Money / No Job in Sight," April 1951	275
17	George sculpting stone, February 1951	275
17	George at Randolph Air Force Base, April 1952	275
17	The Omega watch in 2016	275
17	The University of Kansas City	275
17	Mila Jean Smith abroad in Bristol, February 1955	276



17	George and Mila Jean, April 1956	276
17	George and Mila Jean on their first wedding day: May 26, 1956	276
17	George and Mila Jean on their second wedding day: June 16, 1956	276
17	Mila Jean in the squirrel stole Joseph made for her, April 1957	277
17	Paul Stephen with his four grandparents, May 1957	277
17	Paul Stephen and Sherry Renée, July 1957	277
17	Sherry in costume with Grandma, June 1957	277
18	The Mlinarich house in Fithian, 1985	293
18	Mojave High School, 1958	293
18	Nick the shop teacher at Mojave High, circa 1958	293
18	Martha teaching again, 1959	293
18	8125 Nipa Avenue in California City, 2008	293
18	Mathilda with Paul Stephen in Kansas City: August 1958	294
18	Paul Stephen in his raccoon coat, November 1958	294
18	Crisis resolved in Kansas City, 1959	294
18	Paul Stephen by Robert MacDonald Graham, 1960	294
18	The little pink house in St. Petersburg, February 1961	295
18	Interior of the little pink house, February 1961	295
18	Retirement in St. Petersburg, April 1959	295
18	“The happiest man in retirement,” March 1961	295
18	Paul Stephen with his mother and four grandparents, September 1961	296
18	Matthew Carleton: December 1962	296
18	5505 Holmes, the New Ehrlich Place: October 1962	296
18	5505 Holmes sixty years later (courtesy of Google Street View)	296
18	Joseph and Mathilda, December 1962	297
18	Grandparents and grandsons in Kansas City, April 1963	297
18	Sherry on her 14th birthday, June 1963	297
18	Joseph’s grave marker at Hillside Memorial Park, 2011	297
Aft	Mathilda and her three grandchildren, August 1963	311
Aft	Mathilda and Margaret Temmer, March 1964	311
Aft	Mathilda, S.R. and Martha, November 1967	311

Aft	Family “portrait” taken by Rose Ruhig, June 1970	312
Aft	Martha and Nick, June 1979	312
Aft	Mathilda, S.R., Amber and Martha, September 1979	312
Aft	Nick, Amber and S.R. on the Laydens’s wedding day, June 1985	313
Aft	Amber, S.R., Mathilda and Nick, July 1985	313
Aft	P.S., Mila Jean, George and Matthew, November 1985	314
Aft	Martha’s Mojave <i>Mustang</i> yearbook dedication, 1986	314
Aft	Martha and George, circa 1987	315
Aft	P.S., Mathilda and S.R., August 1987	315
Aft	P.S., Matthew, S.R. and Amber, December 1991	315
Aft	Amber, S.R. and Nick, December 1991	315
Aft	The embroidered lithograph that Joseph obtained in France circa 1918	315
Aft	George and the KCMO Library’s “Community Bookshelf,” May 2006	316
Aft	Mathilda’s grave marker at Hillside Memorial Park, 2011	316

*to our grandparents  
and their children, our parents*



*To be honest, to be kind—to earn a little and spend a little less, to make upon the whole a family happier for his presence, to renounce when that shall be necessary and not to be embittered, to keep a few friends, but these without capitulation—above all, on the same grim condition, to keep friends with himself—here is a task for all that a man has of fortitude and delicacy.*

—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON



## Introduction

On Mother's Day in 1974 I wrote my Grandmother Ehrlich that:

*I know you ... view my high school graduation<sup>1</sup> with more sentiment and such, but to me it's only the prelude to a lot more work... Today at dinner, Dad told us several stories about his childhood in Chicago and the like, and [that] he'd wanted for some time to write all his memories down. I suggested that we tape record his stories, and later I could write them up for the future.<sup>2</sup>*

Four such sessions were taped that summer: three with my father and the last with my grandmother, who visited us in Kansas City MO that August. I learned that my grandparents had kept a childhood diary for their firstborn, my father's older sister Martha; which Grandma Ehrlich then undertook to translate from the original Hungarian, sending me a copy in installments. Martha herself wrote me, contributing her slant on the family history; as did her daughter, my cousin Sherry Renée. In October 1974 I replied to S.R.'s reminiscent letter, saying it was just what I needed to untangle my mental logjam: "I [had begun] to wonder just what I was going to do with all the material I was getting. I never dwelled on the matter for fear of finding myself at a dead end."

Logjam broken, I planned to divide the Ehrlich Family History into two volumes: the first concerning my grandparents, the other my father's childhood. But by "dwelling on the matter" I *did* find myself at a dead end—wanting to turn the material into a novel, without much of a clue as to HOW. So the History's finish date kept moving "father and father off" (as I Freudianly remarked in March 1975).

As a writing project it remained officially active for another year or so. Doubtless trying to prime the pump, Grandma Ehrlich wrote her own five-page autobiography in 1976. I took three separate stabs at a fictional adaptation—*As the Day is Long*—but these stabs did no more than scratch the surface. And when my grandmother asked in 1979 that I send the diary translation to S.R., I did so after only the most token effort to make myself a copy first.

Despite this sparkling track record, I was asked in 1983 to rebuild my mother's

---

<sup>1</sup> Which followed seventeen days later on May 29, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> My first experience of transcription soured me for life: "Took me a week to transcribe one hour's worth of tape onto seven pieces of paper."

albums of memorabilia. This led me to a wealth of maternal-side genealogical information, which I translated into so thick a grove of hand-drawn family trees that I ended up calling it *Family Forest* (for the next twenty years, till it was loaded onto my [www.SkeeterKitefly.com](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com) website as *Fine Lineage*.)

In August 1983 I regathered the Ehrlich History material, “again being struck by the interesting story it would make.” Setting to work on this in January 1984, I expected it to be soon over and done with. There was a palpable need for haste: Grandma Ehrlich, now aged eighty-eight, had entered a nursing home fully expecting to die, while terminal cancer was forcing my Aunt Martha into painful early retirement. So I slapped together *An Honest Tale Plainly Told*<sup>3</sup> in February 1984 with more than the usual feeling of obligation to redeem a forsaken project. All the eyes in all the old photos seemed to stare at me askant, making observations on what a *henyélő*<sup>4</sup> I was.

As things turned out, both my grandmother and aunt would hold on for several more years; and both expressed delight with *An Honest Tale*. To me, however, it was no better than a cobblejob: a patchwork pastiche of excerpts, extracts, and badly-xeroxed<sup>5</sup> illustrations. It did manage to present the upbringings of József Ehrlich and Matild Kohn; their meeting in Budapest and marriage in Kolozsvár<sup>6</sup> (where they produced daughter Márta); their coming to America and settling in Chicago (where they added son George); and how József, who wanted to be a teacher, ended up in the fur business. But my guiltridden jury-rigging haste hadn’t allowed me time to retrieve my aunt’s childhood diary, so I postponed recounting Martha and George’s adventures till a second volume could be compiled—by September 1984, I thought.

That summer I called on the family’s principal out-of-town figures, some of whom lived in Washington state and some in the Mojave Desert. For the first time I was able to study the original diary kept for Martha from 1919 to 1934, written entirely in Hungarian. My grandmother’s 1974 treatment had begun midway, with the journey to America; the

---

<sup>3</sup> From *Richard III*’s “An honest tale speeds best being plainly told.”

<sup>4</sup> Hungarian for “idler, sluggard, lazybones.”

<sup>5</sup> The first attempt to photocopy the Ehrlichs’s 1923 passport actually (and surreally) brushed off the page when the toner didn’t adhere.

<sup>6</sup> The capital of Transylvania: called Cluj by the Romanians, who took over the city and region shortly before Martha’s birth.



earlier years in Kolozsvár looked to be unfathomable. But my initial despair was quickly dispelled by the discovery of a *complete* English translation, made by Grandma Ehrlich back in 1953. This version introduced me to a host of long-lost European relatives, speaking in their own words. Contemporary events left their mark as well: little Márta's second birthday was fittingly celebrated in September 1921, but as an aside her father wrote:

*We hope we can give you the upbringing we both wish to. It is very hard my dear, lots of difficulty lies before us. You will think it was impossible when you are old enough to read this book. Hope you never will have to know the terrible things that are going on in this world today.*

The Ehrlichs, subjected to shakedown harassment, had just lost their millinery shop.

The family history had a succession of imposing backdrops: World War I, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the loss of Transylvania to Romania, the postwar surge of anti-Semitism, the cutback of American immigration, struggles adapting to the New World and weathering the Depression, dealing with the frightful loss of those left behind. And my grandparents coped with life in different ways: the ebullient Matyu “fell in love with America the very first day there,” quickly making good in her chosen field as an expert milliner, fearlessly tackling an unfamiliar language and environment. The more inhibited Józsi had a harder time of it: never comfortable with English, he dreaded being taken for an ignorant unlettered “bohunk,” and given the chance would have quickly decamped back to Europe. He found contentment in his home and household, raised his daughter to become the dedicated teacher he'd wanted to be, and above all remained true to his principles and beliefs.

I uncovered such a wealth of untapped material that the project's focus shifted. Discussing it with my cousin S.R., we conceived a Definitive Edition—*To Be Honest*—that would be “not dry” but written with a view to publishability. *An Honest Tale Plainly Told* would serve as both source and further draft. Martha's Diary, presented in its twice-translated entirety, comprised Volume II in August 1984; the rest of Martha and George's adventures (through 1942) went into Volume III, completed in November. The Definitive Edition's three-part/eighteen-chapter scheme was defined in April 1985 by a scissors-and-tape layout and reinforced by an index-card boildown. Paying a visit that month to the

University of Illinois campus, I began extensive research into the European side of things, from the Hapsburgs's heyday to the Holocaust<sup>7</sup>. By the end of spring I'd crammed thirty-four single-spaced pages with ancillary notes, causing my old Smith-Coronamatic typewriter to literally shake itself to pieces. That summer I went so far as to accompany S.R. on her honeymoon odyssey to the Mojave Desert and back, digesting (to and fro) a superabundance of Ehrlichian archives<sup>8</sup> from 1943 to 1963. Volume IV waddled forth in August 1985, so heavyset that I had to jettison its Ancillary Appendix—and move *To Be Honest's* overoptimistic deadline to March 1986, half a year further along.

The Definitive Edition taught me the fine art of REWRITING—how to revise, revamp, and rectify. During the next six months I edited, abridged, and condensed my multivolume *embarras de richesses* down by 50%, bringing *To Be Honest* in precisely on schedule. During the summer of 1986, this draft underwent fine-toothed emendation (or rather extirpation—few pages escaping scissors and tape). The final version of *To Be Honest*, completed in September, tipped the scales at around 75,000 words: suitable tonnage for a marketable book. The next step was to prepare this piggy for market—a process so unprecedented, so far as I-and-mine were concerned, that it engendered a whole new spate of aches as I reduced the book to a twelve-page Outline, then a single-page Synopsis, capped off (on the sixth or seventh try) by a Cover Letter that wrapped up my first-ever Book Proposal. And then, “as Victoria said when Albert croaked—‘All, all is over!’”

More than I knew. Between October 1986 and February 1987 I sent out Book Proposals to a couple of publishers and a couple of agencies, getting all four BPs back with commendable if regrettable swiftness. The last-arriving letter came from an genuine (so to speak) New York literary agent, who'd decided *To Be Honest* was not something she could “market with success or with enthusiasm at this time.” By which point I had come to the same conclusion: structured as it was, the book had proved unseaworthy. Despite a year's worth of polishing and furbishing and waterproofing, it had ended up less-than-marketably “dry” after all.

---

<sup>7</sup> See the Selected Biography for my sources.

<sup>8</sup> I spent eight straight hours that 4th of July in a Motel 6, sorting and glossing a Hefty Bagful of old photographs.

My basic instinct, as in the mid-Seventies, was to novelize the material—along similar lines, perhaps, as Diane Pearson’s *Csardas*<sup>9</sup>. Although this descends at times into subgeneric romance, *Csardas* is soundly plotted and deftly written, maintaining historical authenticity through the changing fortunes of a half-Jewish Hungarian family from 1914 to 1948. But how to make *To Be Honest* that shipshape, if not unsinkable?

“More ‘narrativized,’” I decided, “fewer quotation marks.” If I stuck to the diary format, it might compensate for the sketchiness of the opening chapters by keeping Józsi and Matyu’s childhoods at a reminiscent remove. Gaps could be filled with artistic license: “I suppose I should put down on paper what I remember of my own father,” József might write, describing how as a boy he could be disciplined by a stern paternal look, but his capricious brother Sándor had to have his hand smacked with a ruler (and would then boast about it, claiming Father had sent all the way to Vienna for this ruler, keeping it under lock and key in a special drawer).

Et cetera and so forth. But while the story’s beginning could be shored up, its ending posed other problems. Difficult to save it from being a downer: at the end of his life my grandfather suffered from Parkinson’s disease, and when ultrasonic surgery failed to ease its tremors, he must have felt let down by the rational world where Science held the promise to solve all problems. And in fact he pretty much turned his face to the wall and died.

Another insoluble dilemma was posed by Grandpa Ehrlich’s having been in the fur business. No matter that in the days before central heating, a fur coat was a winter necessity; you can hardly envision a modern-day miniseries about an *unvillainous* furrier. Yet change him to a milliner, or a tailor or haberdasher, and you lose unique details of the Depression fur trade: each year’s first snowfall would net the children a whole nickel each, because snow heralded the beginning of “the season”—people would pick up their coats from storage (and pay their bills, enabling the Ehrlichs to pay *theirs*).

No: better, perhaps, when all was said and done, to “mine” the Family History for material rather than expect it to stand up on its own. So I thought until 2003, by which point the Skeeter Kitefly website was up and operational but running low on fresh entries. Why not let *To Be Honest*, a full-length whole-written book, take its share of Internet bandwidth?

---

<sup>9</sup> Published by J.B. Lippincott in 1975; Kirkus Reviews called *Csardas* “a potentially successful popular effort even if heavy to carry on the subway.”

The first three chapters were uploaded in March; the next three in October; the seventh not until Memorial Day 2005; and the remaining nine at intervals during 2006—while all the eyes in all the old photos again stared at me askant. (Once a *henyélő*, always a *henyélő*.)

Significant new material was discovered concerning the Ehrlichs in Győr (Grandpa's birthplace) and how Grandma's brother Jenő and his family survived the Holocaust; this was uploaded as appendices in 2008. A year later my brother Matthew visited Cluj, Romania (formerly Kolozsvár, Hungary) and reported his findings about the Kohns/Kuns there; these resulted in three more *To Be Honest* appendices.

As I worked intermittently on *Fine Lineage*, and added other family historical webpages in 2016—*George's Navigations*, *The George & Mila Show*, and *Arrived Safely No Catastrophes Yet Love Jean*—I turned up occasional new details deserving inclusion in *To Be Honest*. But not till 2021 did I resolve to create a revised and better-illustrated edition, drawing upon newly-available resources, to mark [a] the centennial of the Ehrlichs's October 1923 arrival in America, [b] the fiftieth anniversary of my own embarkation on the project in May 1974, and [c] my Grandfather Joseph's 130th birthday, with a view to [d] making this my Last Word on the Subject.

Neither in 1986 nor in 2024 did/do I claim that ours is the most dramatic Family History ever written, or the most poignant, or the most (at times) absurd. Merely to its being “interesting enough even for a stranger,” as Grandpa Ehrlich himself observed in 1931; and true to life. True, of course, since it came from being honest.

---

Thanks to my cousin S.R. for her assistance in preparing the original edition of this Family History; and to my brother Matthew for his encouragement and many contributions, particularly in visiting and reporting back from Cluj (formerly Kolozsvár) in 2009.

P.S. EHRLICH

March 2024

## ONE

### KOLOZSVÁR

*“Wait a minute, children,” the grandfather said after thinking long. “Wait a minute. I’ll tell you the story of my own life. It’s not as fancy as those fairy stories, but maybe it will be more interesting because it is true and you haven’t heard it yet.”*

—Sándor Petőfi, “The Grandfather”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> From “A nagyapa,” published in 1847; translation © 1973 by Anton N. Nyerges.



## 1

*Józsi*

In later years József <sup>10A</sup> Ehrlich was not to speak much of his childhood or youth. What remains is a series of glimpses and educated guesses.

He was born on March 17, 1894, in Győr, Hungary: a “medieval walled city on an island<sup>11</sup>” halfway between Budapest and Vienna, where the River Rába (Raab) meets the broad blue Danube.

He was the third from youngest of eleven children born to Mór/Móric<sup>12</sup> Ehrlich and Sarolta<sup>13</sup> Rotmann, but never knew his four oldest brothers and sisters; at least one of them had already died before Józsi was born.

His father was a rabbi, belonging to the moderate reform movement called Neologism that flourished in the cities of western Hungary. Unlike Orthodox Jews, the Neologs conducted services in Hungarian rather than Hebrew, made use of choirs and organ music, and emphasized something of aesthetics in their teaching<sup>14</sup>.

To the boy Józsi, his father must have seemed fairly remote. The only notable memory of Mór Ehrlich that Józsi would ever mention involved not the man but his books: beautifully bound volumes kept behind the glass doors of a fine bookcase.

Mór died circa 1905, when Józsi was eleven. For many years Józsi would keep a small silver wine cup that his father had used in religious ceremonies.

After the rabbi’s death, each of his surviving children had to leave home in his or her turn because their mother Sarolta lacked the money to feed the younger ones. At least three

---

<sup>10A</sup> József and Józsi are pronounced “Yoh-zhef” and “Yoh-zhee.”

<sup>11</sup> Győrsziget or Győr-Szigeti (Győr Island) was a separate town on the far side of the River Rába/Raab. One-third of its population was Jewish in 1869, as opposed to only 10% in Győr itself. By 1920 Győr’s Jewish population would approach 6,000.

<sup>12</sup> Hungarian Móric = German Moritz, French Maurice, English Morris. Single “c” in Hungarian is pronounced “ts.” Mór, the short form, has often been used as a first name in its own right.

<sup>13</sup> Sarolta = Charlotte. Single “s” in Hungarian is pronounced “sh.”

<sup>14</sup> In the 1830s, liberal advocates such as Lajos Kossuth and Baron József Eötvös asserted it was the duty of everyone living in Hungary to “Magyarize”—i.e. adopt the use of Magyar/Hungarian language and customs. Many Jews did so wholeheartedly, thinking this the swiftest road to emancipation; and many of these adopted Neologism.

went on to become teachers: Adolf, Rózsa, and waggish Sándor. Another daughter, Margit, married a German general; but since he was a Gentile, Sarolta would neither recognize the marriage nor accept Margit's two sons.

Józsi had a younger brother, Miska; and a younger sister and playmate, Eszter "with the long blonde hair" whom he loved dearly; but at the age of ten or so Eszter came down with tuberculosis, and she too died.

In March 1907 Józsi turned thirteen and became, in the eyes of his family and people, a man of duty. Not long afterward his mother told him he was going to have to live as one. She sent him off to Budapest, saying he must go to school there and complete his education; and Sarolta gave him a prayer book, telling Józsi to turn to it when things seemed hardest for him.

He departed from Győr with the equivalent of eleven cents in his pocket, leaving behind the little enclosed world he had known. Heading sixty miles east, he found himself in Metropolis.

Budapest had been created<sup>15</sup> as the capital of Hungary only thirty-four years earlier, but in that single generation's time there had risen a booming modern city of nearly one million people. Great buildings of ornate magnificence had gone up: the Parliament, the law courts, the opera, many theaters and many museums. To the north was a new industrial quarter from whose tall chimneys smoke poured; five colossal bridges spanned the Danube, linking ancient Buda with ambitious Pest; and through the busy streets people were always hurrying as carriages clattered and trolley cars clanged.

For three or four years József lived with his aunt, Mór's sister Hermina, whose surname would be remembered as Greenhute<sup>16</sup>; and attended a *Gymnasium* or secondary school that prepared students for admission to universities. To pay his fees, and later to earn his keep after leaving Hermina's house, Józsi began to tutor other students. In exchange for this he would get room and board, but he sometimes had so little money-in-pocket he could not afford to buy oil for a lamp, and so had to do his own studying by the light of the moon.

He persevered. He resolved never to be a burden to his relatives, but always be able

---

<sup>15</sup> In 1873 by the merger of Buda, Óbuda, and Pest. By 1900 almost a quarter of its population was Jewish, and some people called the Hungarian capital "Judapest."

<sup>16</sup> See more concerning this in Appendix A.



to make it on his own. Unhappy things had happened in the past and might recur in the future, they might be inevitable and unavoidable—but he would take them as they came, find his own way around or through them.

József never did turn to Sarolta's prayer book. It was only much later, and by accident, that he discovered a little cache of money his mother had hidden inside it for him.

At first he dutifully went to temple and followed the rituals of Judaism, because it was expected of him. But if he was offered a meal of sausage or pork as pay for tutoring, the choice was to eat it or go hungry; so he ate the pork or sausage, was not struck by lightning, and little by little began to challenge the Law. In school Józsi excelled at mathematics, where everything was provable or disprovable; in algebra he found balance and equilibrium, formulae that worked out and stood up to challenge. Compared to math, religion seemed not all it was cracked up to be; and József stopped going to temple.

For the rest of his life he would be devoted to the truth, as he saw it. He could accept that a Creator had “wound up the universe's clock,” but to put faith in anything more anthropomorphic was futility at best, and medieval superstition at worst.

And József did not intend to be medieval. He was going to live in the 20th Century, the enlightened world of electric lights and motorcars and aeroplanes and dirigibles; the rational world where modern technology could find cures for all diseases, where science held the promise to solve all problems. As the German proverb put it, *Jedes Warum hat seinen Darum*—Every Why has a Wherefore<sup>17</sup>, i.e. “everything has an underlying reason.”

József's devotion to the truth was further expressed in a determination to live up to his name. *Ehrlich* is a German word meaning “honest,” but also translatable as “fair,” “loyal,” “sincere,” and the like. As such, it is not undesirable as a family name (merited or not) and such usage doubtless increased in 1787 when Joseph II<sup>18</sup> decreed that all the Jews in

---

<sup>17</sup> Cited by Dromio of Syracuse in the German translation of *The Comedy of Errors*, Act 2 Scene 2.

<sup>18</sup> A student of the Enlightenment, Emperor Joseph intended to turn his Jews into “useful citizens of the country” by ending their longtime isolation and assimilating them into general society. He believed the surest means of this lay in secular education, and by 1783 the Jews of Hungary were ordered to establish German-language elementary schools. There the same subjects were to be taught and the same textbooks used as in national schools, with anything offensive to “religious nonconformists” omitted from all. Jews were required to learn Latin and Hungarian as well as German, with Hebrew to be used only in worship. They could now attend universities also, and study any subject there except theology. After Joseph's death in 1790, the position of Hungarian Jews had its ups and downs—briefly granted full citizenship during the 1848-49 Revolution, then being fined heavily and collectively by Austria after the Revolution was crushed. Emancipation was not won until 1867.


his Austrian Empire, including the Kingdom of Hungary, should adopt German surnames<sup>19</sup> “by which they were to be henceforth known.”

The Ehrlichs had chosen to be honest, and József saw this as a solemn duty; yet he was also intent on acting like a gentleman. Politeness pays; always keep your word; never argue about religion with anybody; never try to hurt anyone’s feelings, no matter what the cost to your own.

Even when people didn’t always treat you the way they ought to. Even when so-called friends didn’t prove to be as fair or loyal or sincere as they might.

Whatever else happened, children could always be relied upon. Being children, they were still candid and open and honest, and it was a pleasure to tutor them. A pleasant thing, too, to be looked up to for knowledge and regarded as wise.

His relatives wanted him to be a rabbi like his father, but when József took his *Abiturium*—the final exam—he deliberately failed Hebrew, while passing everything else. József had decided to become a teacher.



For a Jewish graduate of a Budapest *Gymnasium* in 1911, there were many career opportunities. Even at this late date the Austro-Hungarian Empire was basically a feudal regime, ruled by great landowning families who upheld antiquated traditions; and since the gentry refused to engage in anything so bourgeois as trade, they encouraged the Jews to enter commerce and industry as well as the professions, arts and sciences and literature. Education was the key to establishing status and security, and no one in Hungary valued education more highly than the Jews. By 1911 they had achieved a “preponderating” position in the nation’s economic and cultural life; nearly half of all Hungarian lawyers, physicians, and journalists were Jewish.

There is a Hungarian phrase, *Ez jó iskola volt neki*, which can be translated as “It was an education for him,” “It taught him a lot,” “It did him a power of good,” even “It made a man of him.”

In 1911, at the age of nineteen, József Ehrlich cast his lot in with education.

---

<sup>19</sup> Hungarians “put the patronymic first” (as Count Dracula remarked to Jonathan Harker), so the name order was *Ehrlich József* until migration to America.

It was customary for teachers in secondary schools to graduate from a university, and in later years József would hint that he had attended one; but he more likely went to a Budapest *tanítóképző* or teachers college<sup>20</sup>. There for three years he was trained as a *tanító*, an elementary schoolteacher; and during the last year or two he got to do some bona fide teaching. This was at a *fasor* or “park school,” a home for half-orphans who had lost one parent and could not be kept by the widowed one—a situation József was certainly familiar with. There he taught math and history<sup>21</sup> on what would be a junior high level, to twelve- and thirteen-year-olds. For this he received not only meals but a little money, and thus was able for the first time to buy himself such things as suits of clothes (as well as lamp oil).

József shared a room with a young man who worked at night and slept by day, the two of them exchanging the room’s single bed. Here Józsi had time to play the violin and do a little reading; he’d become partial to the works of Sándor Petőfi (1823-1849), Hungary’s greatest lyric poet<sup>22</sup>:

<i>Elmerengek gondolkodva gyakran,</i>	<i>My thoughts go wandering through space,</i>
<i>S nem tudom, hogy mi gondolatom van,</i>	<i>and I do not know what I think.</i>
<i>Átröpülök hosszában hazámon,</i>	<i>I fly across the length of the land</i>
<i>Át a földön, az egész világon!—</i>	<i>across the earth and over the world.</i>
<i>Dalaim, mik ilyenkor teremnek,</i>	<i>My songs which are created then</i>
<i>Holdsugári ábrándos lelkemnek.</i>	<i>are moonlight of my fanciful soul.</i>
 <i>Ahelyett, hogy ábrandoknak élek,</i>	 <i>I ought not to live for these fancies,</i>
<i>Tán jobb volna élnem a jövőnek,</i>	<i>but work for the future perhaps,</i>
<i>S gondoskodnom... eh, mért gondoskodnám?</i>	<i>take care... but why feather my nest?</i>
<i>Jó az isten, majd gondot visel rám—</i>	<i>God is good and will provide.</i>
<i>Dalaim, mik ilyenkor teremnek,</i>	<i>My songs which are created then</i>
<i>Pillangói könnyelmű lelkemnek.</i>	<i>are butterflies of my careless soul.</i>

<sup>20</sup> In 1940 the American census would show Joseph Ehrlich’s “highest grade of school completed” to be eighth, with no reference to any secondary or collegiate experience. This must be an error, given that being a *Gymnasium* graduate enabled József to become an army officer. It’s almost as though his census entry got swapped with son George’s future father-in-law F.S. Smith, who got credited with four years of high school—though all evidence indicates F.S. left school at age fifteen and began working fulltime.

<sup>21</sup> His daughter Martha thought he also taught physics.

<sup>22</sup> József obtained a softcover copy, still extant, of Petőfi’s *Összes Költeményei* (*Complete Poems*) in 1912.

*Ha szép lánnyal van találkozásom,  
 Gondomat még mélyebb sírba ásom,  
 S mélyen nézek a szép lány szemébe,  
 Mint a csillag csendes tó vizébe—  
 Dalaim, mik ilyenkor teremnek,  
 Vadrózsái szerelmes lelkemnek.*

*Whenever I meet a lovely girl,  
 I bury my cares in a deeper grave  
 and look into the depth of her eyes  
 like a star in the calm of a lake.  
 My songs which are created then  
 are wild roses of my loving soul*<sup>23</sup>.

And when József laid books and violin aside and turned the lamp down low, he may have indulged in a little thinking about Life.

History had never been an easy subject for him, and teaching it must have bolstered his conviction that history was filled with lies, written to suit the rulers of the moment. No, only science was truth, and mathematics its essence; these for him were the subjects worth teaching.

And to teach—to be a teacher—to be called *Ehrlich úr*, “Mr. Ehrlich,” and see the youngsters stand when he entered the classroom, and get them to understand and remember their lessons—to help the slow learners too, teaching them simple tasks such as how to tie their shoes or comb their hair—this was the life for József. Teaching would be his life’s work; he would take his college degree and teach as long as he lived, or at least as long as they let him.

József’s ideal world would be a meritocracy, where anyone (even a half-orphan) could become a gentleman. It was all a manner of being properly taught: provided not only with education but encouragement as well. A tutor in Petőfi’s *Az apostol* (“The Apostle”) was the first to sympathize with the Oliver Twistlike foundling Szilveszter, even giving him a parting gift of money so he could continue his studies; and Szilveszter had dedicated his life to serving his fellow men.

Well, perhaps some of József’s pupils would go on to do great things, and come back to visit the old school and tell the boys how, if not for *Ehrlich úr*, they would never have mastered their fractions.

And perhaps someday he might meet his own lovely girl with eyes like stars in the calm of a lake, and she would return his love. They would be married and have children, a

---

<sup>23</sup> From “Dalaim” (“My Songs”), written in 1846; translation © 1973 by Anton N. Nyerges.

family that would stay together; and he would come home from school in the evenings and play with his sons and daughters, tell them stories, watch them growing up. His children in their turn would attend the university, become teachers or doctors or scientists; they too would marry and have little ones, grandchildren who would be brought to visit József and his wife all the time, to be played with and told stories just as their parents had been.


A splendid dream...

And there was really no reason why it should not come true (assuming the right young lady came along), for the future seemed very bright.

Even in July 1914, when war broke out between the Empire and Serbia.

Even when, within a week, Russia and Germany and France and Great Britain all got involved as well.

Not to worry: Hungarian military obligation did not begin till the age of twenty-one, and József was still only twenty. He would certainly be able to complete his final year of college and take his degree, since this war was supposed to be—as wars are always supposed to be—over by Christmas.



But the Imperial generals insisted on a bravura fighting style that was not simply outdated, but suicidal: the elite cavalry was sent charging into machine gun fire. An expedition sent to punish the Serbs, “those dirty Balkan shepherds,” lost 40,000 men; an invasion of Russian Poland was hurled back at the same time, and by late September the Empire’s easternmost province of Galicia had been lost, along with 350,000 more soldiers.

So for Austria-Hungary the first months of the war were an appalling all-around disaster. By October its trained officers were virtually wiped out, and the army was forced to mobilize more men as the catastrophic Galician casualties mounted. Exemptions were eliminated, physical requirements lowered, and military obligation extended to those aged eighteen to twenty-one.

And József Ehrlich was promptly called up.

There exists a photograph of him taken at this time. Fastidiously dressed in suit and tie, complete with wing collar and breast-pocketed white handkerchief, he is seated in a chair with a magazine or newspaper held open on his knee. His hair, blond in childhood but now

brown and wavy, is parted precisely in the middle. And on his face and in his bright blue eyes is a pensive expression verging on the wistful.


Since he was a *Gymnasium* graduate, József was sent to a reserve officers's training school. In peacetime his being Jewish would probably have prevented this, but the desperate need for officers was now overriding, and after a reduced training period he was hastily shipped out to the front.

In November 1914 the Austro-Hungarians invaded Serbia again. A month later the furious Serbian counterattack drove them into a headlong rout, slowed only by mud and exhaustion, and another 100,000 men were lost. Germany was openly disgusted at the performance of their fellow Central Power: "We have shackled ourselves to a corpse," one German general snorted.

As for József Ehrlich, he had been wounded—shot through the left foot. It was going to be amputated ("That was the way they treated wounds") but József told them, "No you don't!" and with his other foot he kicked the medic across the room. So instead they cleaned the bullet hole—by pulling a cloth straight through it.

Along with his older brother Sándor, who had suffered injuries from shrapnel, József was sent to convalesce at a mineral-water summer resort that had been turned into a hospital for officers. It was near Lake Balaton, "the Hungarian Sea," but this held little charm in January.

On crutches and with his leg in a cast, József went back to Budapest. He called on his mother, who had moved there from Győr; and one Saturday afternoon, perhaps urged on by Sarolta, he paid a visit to his Aunt Hermina and cousins Ilona and Rózsa, whom he had not seen for four years. When József arrived he found that they already had a caller that afternoon: a strikingly attractive and elegant-looking young lady with black hair and black eyes, who happened to be a visitor from Transylvania.





József Ehrlich, circa October 1914<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Marked "1916 III" on the verso; was this given to Matild in March 1916?





Matild Kohn in 1915



## Appendix A: Ehrlichs—The Previous Generation

Among many vital records at the JewishGen.org website are databases of births, marriages, and deaths in Győr during the years 1846-1895. From these, along with the Hungarian census of 1869 (also available at JewishGen.org) and a few FindaGrave.com entries, I have assembled what appears to be two previous generations of Ehrlichs:

**Samu/Samuel Ehrlich** (born 1826) married **Regina Grunhut** (born 1830s<sup>25</sup>, died January 16, 1898). In 1869 they lived in household 356 in Győr's Belváros district (inner city, downtown). Samu and Regina had at least ten children:

1. **Ignac/Ignatz** (born 1855; present in the 1869 census; died March 18, 1929)
2. **Ida** (born 1857; present in the 1869 census; also in the marriage database, where she wed **Alexander Deutsch** in Győr on May 20, 1877)
3. **Mór** (born 1859; present in the 1869 census)
4. **Simon** (born May 27, 1860; absent from the 1869 census, but appears in the birth database)
5. **Mathias/Matthias** (born September 3, 1861; absent from the 1869 census, but appears in the birth database—twice: as both “Mathias” and “Matthias”)
6. **Arnold** (born December 30, 1862; present in the 1869 census [born “1863”])
7. **Risa** (born November 1, 1864; died July 19, 1869; absent from the 1869 census, but appears in the birth and death databases)
8. **Gizela/Gizella/Gisella** (born February 10, 1867; died November 27, 1881; present in the 1869 census [as Gizela], the birth database [as Gisella], and the death database [as Gizella])
9. **Osskar** (born June 27, 1870; died January 4, 1891; too young to be in the 1869 census, but appears in the birth and death databases—though parentless in the latter)
10. **Richard** (born July 23, 1873; too young to be in the 1869 census, but appears in the birth database—with his mother's maiden name truncated to “Grun”)

(Also living with the Ehrlichs in the 1869 census was Leny Spitzer, aged nineteen;

---

<sup>25</sup> In 1839 according to the 1869 census; but her partly-indecipherable gravestone carving includes a “67,” which if her age in 1898 would mean a birthyear of 1830-31, closer to Samu's 1826.

possibly a maidservant.)

Half of these ten Ehrlich children are evidently buried in the Győr-Szigeti Temető cemetery: Arnold (grave A1-3-17), Mór (grave A1-2-4), Gizella (grave A1-18-49), Ignac (grave B1-2-11, with his wife beside him in B1-2-12), and Oszkar (A1-19-50). Their parents may also be here: a Samu and his wife are buried in graves O-1-6 and -5 respectively, and there is also a Samuel Ehrlich in grave B2-20-40. The cemetery list and photographs of some gravestones are available at the website [GyorJewish.org/clist/e.htm](http://GyorJewish.org/clist/e.htm); a couple of others, including Regina Grunhut Ehrlich's, appear on [FindaGrave.com](http://FindaGrave.com).

Mór Ehrlich's gravestone is especially unhelpful, looking rather like masonry discarded in the corner of a yard. Nor do the JewishGen databases shed further light on Mór, his wife or family, other than a single entry in the birth database and another in the death database:

**Ehrlich, Samu** (son of Mor Ehrlich and Sarolta Rottman [*sic*], born May 20, 1892—but “entry has a strike through line”)

**Ehrlich, Iren** (daughter of Mor Ehrlich and Sarolta Rothman [*sic*], died September 17, 1895 at the age of ten)

These unremembered children would appear to be two of the four older siblings whom József never knew. (If Mór did name a son Samu, that would imply that his own father Samu Ehrlich had died by May 20, 1892—given the Judiac tradition of not naming children after living ancestors.)

What about Mór's sister Hermina Greenhute, with whom Józsi lived in Budapest circa 1907-11? “Greenhute” was how József's wife would spell the surname many decades later. But Mór Ehrlich's mother's maiden name was Regina *Grunhut*; and a Hermine Grunhut (aged 22, daughter of Elias Grunhut<sup>26</sup> and Mari/Marie Reichenfeld) appears in the Győr marriage database, wedding Max Forst [*sic*], son of Adam and Eva Forstner, on February 28, 1875. In the Győr birth database we find Hermine and Max Forstner having three children: Aladar Forstner on May 27, 1876; Theodor Foustner [*sic*] on December 31, 1878; and **Hermine Forstner** on December 31, 1880. But just twelve days later, “Hermine Forst” (née Grunhut, wife of “Miksa Forst”) appears in the Győr death database—having

---

<sup>26</sup> Elias is listed in the Győr death database as dying December 17, 1887, aged 79. His birthplace is recorded as Kiszpecz, later known as Kajarpec, which is in Győr county.

died on January 11, 1881, aged only 28. She was buried in the Győr-Szigeti cemetery (grave A1-11-36).

Could Regina Grunhut Ehrlich have been the aunt of Hermine Grunhut Forstner, born 1852/53 in “R Szigett” [marriage database] or “Gyorsiget” [death database]? If so, we might further speculate that Regina took in and raised her late niece’s newborn namesake in 1881; and that young Hermina Forstner was living in Budapest by 1907. If so, József Ehrlich might very well have regarded her as an aunt, rather than his father’s cousin; and she might very well have been willing to offer young Józsi room and board for several years. Whether (as the mother of two daughters in 1915) she could have been surnamed Grunhut/Grünhut/“Greenhute,” or would simply be *remembered* as such by Józsi’s wife, are questions without answers<sup>27</sup>.



Mór Ehrlich’s gravestone in Győr-Szigeti Temető cemetery  
courtesy of GyorJewish.org

---

<sup>27</sup> An undocumented family tree at Ancestry.com states that “Hermin” Forstner, born Dec. 31, 1881 in “Gyor” to Miksa Forstner and “Hermin” Grunhut, married Lipot Rona (born 1880) in Budapest on March 25, 1906; and that her older brother “Tivadar” died in Budapest in 1936. However, there is no mention of Hermin and Lipot having had any children.



Regina Grunhut Ehrlich's gravestone in Győr-Szigeti Temető cemetery  
courtesy of FindaGrave.com

*Áldás és béke hamvaira!* = "Blessings and peace to the ashes!"

## 2

*Matyu*

Transylvania, “the Land Beyond the Forest,” was a very real place and not the invention of Bram Stoker, who based his novel *Dracula* on extensive and thoroughly conducted research. It is seldom remembered that Stoker’s character Jonathan Harker described the Transylvanian countryside as being

*full of beauty of every kind... Before us lay a green sloping land full of forests and woods, with here and there steep hills, crowned with clumps of trees or with farmhouses... There was everywhere a bewildering mass of fruit blossoms—apple, plum, pear, cherry; and as we drove by I could see the green grass under the trees spangled with the fallen petals*<sup>28</sup>.

Of course the Borgo Pass was a different story.

The thriving city of Kolozsvár (Klausenburg in German) was capital of Transylvania and heart of the country. Here in 1440 had been born Matthias Corvinus, Hungary’s most celebrated king: a renowned warrior against the Turks and one of the foremost patrons of Renaissance art and learning<sup>29</sup>. A bronze equestrian statue of Matthias sat atop a castellated pedestal in front of the Church of St. Michael in Kolozsvár’s great public square.

Transylvania was a Hungarian province at the turn of the 20th Century, and Kolozsvár’s people were described<sup>30</sup> as the most charming in Europe. Strolling through the streets, you might encounter not only cosmopolitan folk dressed in the latest continental modes, but “shaggy peasants” from the surrounding mountains, and colorful groups of Gypsies.

---

<sup>28</sup> *Dracula*, Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co., 1897.

<sup>29</sup> It might be noted that Matthias imprisoned the original Dracula, Vlad the Impaler, in 1462; but by 1474 Vlad had become Matthias’s brother-in-law. Though Matthias died in 1490, he lived on in popular folktales of a king wandering in disguise to bring justice to his peasants—whom he had heavily taxed in real life.

<sup>30</sup> By Walter Starkie in 1933’s *Raggle-Taggle: Adventures with a Fiddle in Hungary and Roumania* [sic]; “Everything in this city predisposes the stranger in its favor.”

Matild Kohn was born in Kolozsvár on September 2, 1895. Her father Móric Kohn had come here<sup>31</sup> as a young man and become a well-to-do *árverési becsűs*, an appraiser of goods for auctions<sup>32</sup>; he often dealt with antiques, and the Kohn home was full of period china and furniture.

It was also full of children, for Móric had twelve: Fáni, Hermina, Dezső, and Márton by his first wife; and Náthán, Margit, Milli, Matild (or “Matyu”), Jenő, Rózsa, Elza, and Ilona (always called Ili or Ily) by his second wife, Berta Schwartz.

“We were a large and very happy family,” Matild would recall, “eight girls and four boys, I was smack in the middle of them.” Despite their vast age-range, the children were so close that Matild was almost grown up before she realized they had not all been born of the same mother.

Matyu enjoyed a loving childhood, proving to be an apt pupil not only at school but in the fine arts of sewing and cooking and baking. She learned how to prepare dishes such as *cholent*, the beans-and-barley Sabbath meal; *paprikás csirke*, the famous Hungarian “chicken paprikash<sup>33</sup>,” served with dumpling-like egg noodles; *gyümölcslevesek*, Transylvanian fruit soups, served cold in summertime; and what Matyu would always call “fancy cookies”—pastries like *díós kalács* and *mákos kalács*: walnut rolls and poppyseed rolls.

The Kohn home was near a college<sup>34</sup>, and Matyu watched its students going to and from the dormitory “around the corner from us and over the bridge” across the River Szamos. She learned to ice skate on this river, and all the Kohn children were taught to swim there—except Matyu, who “always sank.”

And her mother Berta taught her to be a lady. In this too Matyu took her lessons to heart; all her life she would try to live as ladies were supposed to live, and act as ladies were

---

<sup>31</sup> With his brother Geza from Temesvár—now Timișoara, Romania—approximately 300 kilometers (200 miles) to the southwest.

<sup>32</sup> Known as a “broker” in Victorian England—e.g. Mr. Brogley in *Dombey and Son*, and one of the Bellman’s crew (brought “to value their goods”) in *The Hunting of the Snark*. Like pawnbroking, this was traditionally associated with the Jews and often the subject of Jew-baiting caricature. (Lewis Carroll objected to the first illustration of his Broker as too “aggressive.”)

<sup>33</sup> In *Dracula* Jonathan Harker is served “paprika hendl” at his hotel in “Klausenburgh.” He calls this “a chicken done up some way with red pepper, which was very good but thirsty.” Matild/Mathilda would bring her own imported paprika to cook with when visiting us in Kansas City MO (whose hilly terrain reminded her of Kolozsvár).

<sup>34</sup> Actually Franz Joseph (Ferenc József) University, as it was known from 1881 to 1919. Today it is the Babeș-Bolyai University, largest in Romania, with 50,000 students.



supposed to act. From quite an early age she definitely expected to be treated like one.

In Hungary there was a May Day custom that a sixteen-year-old girl's beau was to serenade her late at night. In 1912 Matyu's sweetheart came to the Kohn home with a group of musicians and duly serenaded her. She was not allowed to show herself at the window, but her father appeared and lit matches to acknowledge that the young man's efforts were heard and appreciated<sup>35</sup>.

Matyu's beau left for America in search of work, corresponding with her while he got himself settled and established. He then asked Matyu to come to America and marry him, but she considered this a most unladylike course of action; her beau should return to Kolozsvár and marry her there, after which they could go to America together. Her young man lacked the money to return, and against his wishes their engagement was broken. Eventually Matyu lost all track of him.

As it happened, the Kohns already had relatives in America: Móric's brother Samu and his family had left Temesvár in 1907 and emigrated to Chicago. Before departing, they'd come to visit Móric's family in Kolozsvár, and Matyu had been introduced to her *Samu bácsi* and *Jenka néni* (Uncle Sam and Aunt Jenny) and their three children: lively Rózsa, mild-mannered Margit, and taciturn little László<sup>36</sup>.

Fascinating as faraway America might be, it could not compare with Transylvania "where the countrysides were dotted with the old ruins of a thousand years's story we'd learned at school," Matild would say. "Wars and Turkey's occupation, which were just stories to us, and didn't interest anyone but us youngsters. It was very picturesque and we loved to show it off to visitors, and we used to get together picnicking with friends there."

Idyllic it might well have been, for this was the Golden Age for Hungarian Jews. It was a time of *Interessengemeinschaft*, a friendly cooperative "commonality of interest" between the Christian gentry and the Jewish middle class who helped them run Hungary, and were accepted—almost—as equals. A month after Matild was born, the government had

---

<sup>35</sup> A similar scene takes place in Chapter 1 of *Csardas*, where the Ferenc girls's stern father "could accept the compliment to his daughters as it was given in the traditional manner"—but only after he was assured the girls had not encouraged their serenaders with "forwardness."

<sup>36</sup> Four of these Kohns arrived in New York on November 6, 1907, aboard the *President Grant* out of Cuxhaven, Hamburg: "Jenni" aged 38, "Roza" aged 9, Margit aged 8, and the unaccented Laszlo aged 3. Whether Samu/Sam preceded or followed them there, or appears elsewhere on the ship's manifest, has not been determined.

declared Judaism a legally recognized religion; and in the 1910 census Jews were officially counted as *Zsidóvallású Magyarok*: “Hungarians (Magyars) of the Israelite faith.”

Transylvania outdid the rest of Hungary in religious toleration, but anti-Semitism was not unknown here. The Jewish response was to emphasize their having overwhelmingly and wholeheartedly identified themselves as Hungarians, adopting the Magyar language and customs with “spontaneous eagerness.” It was not at all uncommon for people with German or Slavic surnames to change them to Hungarian ones, saying “Now I am Magyar!” with a tremendous feeling of nobility.

One of Matild’s brothers changed his name from the German *Kohn* to the Hungarian *Kun*, and Berta then had the rest of the family’s names altered to match.

---

“We were all doing what came naturally,” Matild would remark, “until the war started and dumped us all in a sad situation.”

At first it seemed anything but sad: the Dual Monarchy was going to teach the Serbs and Russians a proper Imperial lesson, and the crowds cheered and threw flowers and waved flags and played jolly martial music as Hungary’s young men marched off to the front.

Dezső, Márton, and Náthán Kun were called up and sent to be trained, while their sisters and girlfriends began their share of war work at home, sewing shirts and socks and comforters for the soldiers. But the war was brought home, all too quickly and in all its reality, when Náthán went missing in action during his first week in Galicia.

As the Austro-Hungarian army was hurled back from Russian Poland and started to retreat, autumn rains turned a hundred miles of heavily-trodden Galician roads to mud. Laden with weighty backpacks, the troops slogged back till they reached the slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, fording the swollen Rivers San and Wisloka. Náthán was an excellent swimmer, but disappeared during the river-crossing and was never seen again, nor was any trace of him found afterward.

“We all felt heartbroken,” Matild would say, “but Mother couldn’t accept that and wouldn’t give up the search as long as she lived.”

It became painfully evident that the war was not going to end by Christmas. “Eventually life quieted down and we all hoped our men would come back home, but it took a long time. So we tried to live as best we possibly could.”



Berta wanted all her girls to have a respectable trade to fall back on if necessary, and suggested that Matild, now nineteen, might earn her living as a *kalaposnő* or milliner. In January 1915 Matyu was sent to stay with Berta's brother Áron Schwartz in Budapest, and there "learn at a famous place how to make ladies's hats, and to be a good business lady as well." Before Matyu left, her brother Márton's wife Sára ("we called her Serena") mentioned that she had cousins in Budapest, and asked Matyu to take them a letter when she got there.

"It was winter, after the New Year and very cold, and soon I was enrolled to learn the business. It was interesting and I enjoyed it while it lasted." Matild spent a month at her Uncle Áron's and had a wonderful time, but for several weeks she hesitated to intrude upon her sister-in-law's relatives. "I dreaded the thought, and carried the letter in the my purse until the last week before it was time to go home. But time was nearly over for me in Pest and about a week before my return I had to go and take Sára's letter to her cousins.

"I still remember so well, it was a Saturday afternoon when I went up to the third floor walkup after an appointment was made to meet them and to give the letter, which was to get me acquainted with the family sooner. Well, I found the two girls lovely and their mother very nice too. I was there just a short time when a young cadet walked in on a pair of crutches and one leg in a cast. The family jumped up and greeted him as a long-lost brother, telling me they haven't seen him for several years, and he is a cousin who used to live with them as a young boy going to school in Pest."

His name was József Ehrlich.

"Later in the afternoon his mother also unexpectedly stopped in for a visit, and she and her son fell in love with me at first sight. Later on I found out she told her son she'd be very happy to have me for a daughter.

"When the time came for me to leave, he offered to escort me home and I said OK. We walked downstairs and I wondered how could he walk with crutches in the snow-covered grounds? First he stopped nearby at a candy stall, to buy some mixed chocolate bonbons for me, also hot roasted chestnuts. Then he hailed a horsedrawn carriage with rubber-covered wheels.

"My young escort was nice, and lots of fun, but very soon we were home. He took me to the door, as it was too late to come in, and watched until I got in the house—but not

before he would ask me if he could see me again. I told my relatives about it and they were happy to know I didn't have to come home alone at night, and we all thought that was the end of that. I'd had a good time with him and his cousins, but didn't expect to see any of them anymore."

Two or three days later Matild received a large box of candy, mailed by József with a polite note enclosed. On this note his brother Sándor scribbled "Greetings from your brother-in-law." Matild, ever the proper young lady, took this as an insult: "I got angry and hurt, I thought they were just making fun of me, and told my aunt I'm not going to see that cadet if he comes."

That cadet, no doubt, had raved to Sándor about having met the girl of his dreams—beautiful *and* well-bred—and how Fate must have brought about their encounter. Sándor's mischief-making now threatened to jostle Fate's hand.

"Sure enough he came to the house, but my aunt, amused by it all, told him I didn't want to see him and why. He begged to see me, and when he did he assured me he didn't know about the note, and please to forgive it. He would tell his brother off for writing it, and that Sándor was teasing him, not me."

Matild left Budapest at the end of the week, having forgiven József but not expecting to encounter him again. Her parents, however, heard from József just before Easter 1915: he wrote to say he was back in the war, on the Polish front, and would they have any objection to his writing their daughter?

"My father answered him, saying he had no objection at all. So my young soldier started to write to me, and my mother made me answer each letter. The more letters I got, the more I started to enjoy them, and soon the letters were coming and going, and we both started hoping he could come to see us.

"I was surprised at my mother, as I was the third daughter from the oldest at home. The two oldest sisters were married, but I had two sisters older than me still single. At that time in Europe, the younger sisters had to stay in the background until the older ones got married, or at least engaged to be married. I guess the war and man shortage had to change that custom too."

Even before customs changed, Matyu had been doing pretty well for herself; when she first met József, she already had "three other boyfriends at the same time." And she was

definitely not being kept in the background; when she returned to Kolozsvár, her parents “fixed up for me a beautiful salon all furnished with period French furniture with a floor-to-ceiling mirror, and I just had to go in and start my new millinery business.”

The fashionable hats of the day were deep-brimmed and trimmed with ribbons and flowers. They were worn along with matching gloves and parasols, lace collars and cameos pinned to one’s dress: all the accoutrements of a lady.

During the winter of 1915 the Cossacks continually threatened to force their way through the Carpathian passes; but the Austro-Hungarian army, broken and humiliated though it was, managed to withstand the Russians and prevent invasion. Then in May the Germans spearheaded an offensive that smashed through the Russian line, driving the enemy east and north; by September Galicia was recovered and all of Russian Poland taken as well. Following this victory the Central Powers swarmed over Serbia, knocking it out of the war for the duration. All things considered, 1915 ended much more promisingly for Hungary than it had begun.

And for József Ehrlich, 1916 held even more promise. Around March, after nearly a year of correspondence, he wrote Matild that he was now a lieutenant, due for a furlough and wanting to come visit Kolozsvár.

“He got his first leave from the trenches and instead of going home to his mother he came to see me and to meet my family. He had a month’s leave and decided to come spend two weeks with us and get acquainted. Well, when he got there, it was mutual love at first sight—the whole family liked him very much, and fell in love with his charm before I did.”

Matild’s oldest sister Fáni and her husband, upholsterer János Fruchter, invited József to stay with them “as they had an extra bedroom and lived within walking distance of our home, and so he didn’t have to stay in a hotel. But he spent the days at our house.”

“He was full of life, and my mother loved him. He used to read out loud to us. He was the one to introduce *The Three Musketeers* to us, and Dostoyevsky, and several classics, and we loved him for it, and loved to listen to him. He bought for us season tickets to our theaters, and we went every week to see everything shown. We all had a beautiful time together.”

József must have been delighted with Kolozsvár. There were the theaters, the opera, and museums among the arches and battlements and ancient palaces of the Transylvanian

nobility. Kolozsvár boasted an enlightened university whose foundation had largely been due to the labor of another József, Baron József Eötvös (1813-1871), the author and progressive statesman who had done as much to improve Hungarian public education as he had toward achieving emancipation and equal civil rights for the Jews.


The banks of the Szamos were bordered by gardens pleasant to walk through, in which military bands and Gypsy musicians often played. Matild always greatly enjoyed going out for strolls, and with József “wherever we went, we were going together, visiting relatives and friends, and having a good time. He marveled at how large the family was—several aunts, uncles, dozens of cousins, and not one who didn’t get to like him. Already it was taken for granted by all that he belonged to our family, and was treated as one of us. He received two more weeks’s extension of furlough, and in that time we got to know each other well, and we fell very much in love.

“But as usual everything has to come to an end. The time flew and he had to go back to the war, but first he went home to see his mother in Budapest. I was afraid she’d be angry or hurt for his spending his time with us, but later on she wrote to me and the family thanking us for giving her son such a nice time.”

József went to Budapest not simply to see Sarolta, but also to get a ring from her. Though most of her jewelry had been sold, she did have a ring to give him, and this József offered to Matild as her engagement ring.

“He asked me to wait for him until the war was over. He had a definite idea about one thing: if he got shot or crippled, he didn’t want to hold me to my promise to marry him out of loyalty. Naturally I promised him whatever he asked me to, just to put his mind at rest. When the time came for him to leave, we parted sadly, but promised we’d write to each other faithfully, and kept the promise. But we got engaged officially too.”

A formal photograph was taken of the newly-betrothed couple. József, wearing his officer’s uniform, sits in a plush chair, on one arm of which Matild gracefully perches, wearing her ring and smiling slightly. Her dark eyes are fixed on an imaginary point a little to the photographer’s left; but József is looking directly at the camera, with an expression of mingled pride and wonderment.



Házasági ügyek bejegyzése

Sz. 67 1918  
anyakönyv.

**KIVONAT**

A kolozsvári Orth. Izr. anyakönyvi kerület születési jegyzékéből.

A IV betűs könyv 152 lapj 162 sz. á. az 1895 nyolcvár-  
tízévről a következők foglaltatnak :

Az újszülött neve Matild  
születésnek ideje 1895 Szeptember 2-án  
:  
neme <sup>(fiú)</sup> nő  
származásának minősége <sup>(törvényes)</sup> Szívinyes  
Az atya neve, állása vagy foglalkozása Kohn Lőrinc  
és születésének helye Aranyosi bécsi St. Pállya  
Az anya családi s egyéni neve Schwartz Berta  
és születésének helye Kolozsvár  
A szülők lakása Kolozsvár B. körút 4. 1902.  
és a gyermek születési helye  
A bába neve Hardman Ján  
Fiuknál : a körülmetélő neve                       
és a körülmetélés ideje                       
Leányoknál : a névadás napja 1895. Szept. 2-án Kálm. Farkas által  
A koma neve, állása vagy foglalkozása és lakása                       
Jegyzet :                     

Kelt Kolozsvárt, 1918 évi Szept. hó 17 napján.

A kolozsvári orth. izr. rabbiság,  
mint ker. anyakönyvi hivatal.

Flórisz László  
főrabbi és anyakönyvvezető.

Matild Kohn's Birth Certificate, 1895







above left: Matild Kohn in June 1912——above right: Matild in a hat (of her own making?), 1916

below: The Kohns in Cluj, 1925  
L to R: Móric, Ily, Jenő, Elza, Rózsa







József Ehrlich in 1916





The engaged couple, 1916



Their engagement ring (held by great-granddaughter Amber Joanna, 2014)

## Appendix B: The Kohns/Kuns in Kolozsvár

In May 2009, József and Matild's youngest grandchild Matthew Ehrlich visited Kolozsvár, or Cluj as it is currently known. Its streets and other features now have Romanian names, and over a century has passed since Matyu and Józsi got engaged; but Matthew found the city center still built around a public square: "the Piata Unirii with St. Michael's Church in the middle. The square also features the famous statue of the 15th Century Hungarian King Matei Corvin astride his horse... The statue is a popular meeting place for locals who supposedly agree to rendezvous at 'the horse's tail.' Unfortunately, the square and the horse's tail were closed for renovations...

"Cluj's Central Park is a short walk away, featuring a pavilion popular for weddings and a lake fronted by what now is a casino. According to a guidebook, 'The centennial shady trees of the park cast their crowns in a vault over the heads of the passersby, be they calm or melancholic adults, dreamy lovers or restless youngsters'... Bordering the park on the north is the Someșul Mic River"—formerly known as the (Kis-)Szamos. "Just across the river is Fortress Hill, which affords a fine view of the city; my grandmother spoke of playing and picnicking with her friends among the historic locales outside the city center, and this seems likely to have been one of them... North of the river not far from Fortress Hill is the Neolog Synagogue. It dates back to the 1880s, but was destroyed by an anti-Semitic mob in 1927 and then, after being rebuilt, severely damaged by an Allied air raid against the nearby rail depot in 1944. Rebuilt once more, it now stands as a memorial to the 16,000 or so Jews of Cluj who were deported and killed at Auschwitz. Before all that, however, this may well have been where my grandparents were married. There was a different synagogue closer to where they lived (it's now been redeveloped as a university arts center), but my grandma spoke of being married in her temple's large back yard, which the other synagogue seems less likely to have had (it was smaller and built right against the river). Much of the grounds behind the Neolog temple are now taken up by a music school, but there's a small garden that may be right about at the spot where the Ehrlichs took their vows in 1918.

"My great-grandmother's death record<sup>37</sup> had listed her address (and that of the house

---

<sup>37</sup> About which see Appendix C.

where my grandma had grown up) as 7 Rózsa Street. The problem was that Cluj streets had changed their names frequently over the years as control of the city shifted back and forth between Hungary and Romania and then from Communism to post-Communism. I was told that Rózsa Street had become Fulicea Street, which was just around the corner from Casa Matei Corvin. Number 7 on that street turned out to be abandoned and in disrepair. That wasn't what bothered me, though: it simply didn't look big enough to accommodate my grandmother's large family plus their business.

"I closely examined my grandparents's wedding certificate [confirmation], which hadn't been prepared until 1922—after the Romanians had taken over from the Hungarians and presumably renamed certain streets after their national heroes. It gave the pre-nuptials address of my grandmother as 7 Samuil Micu Street, a different street altogether that was a few blocks away near the university. I could find no clearly marked #7 on that street, but there is a house that seems to correspond to that address. Unfortunately, it's not much more prepossessing than the abandoned house on Fulicea Street. But this house is much larger and appears far more likely to have been my grandma's actual family residence. It also looks as though it might have been a handsome home in its time, with a floral motif above the windows that possibly was in keeping with the original name of the street (Rose)."

---

In 2024 Matthew used Google Street View to find "7 Strada Samuil Micu" in Cluj, and decided that the Kohn/Kun house was in fact next door to the one he'd photographed in 2009. "Good to see, anyway, that the graffiti that used to be there is gone, or at least was gone as of last summer." Both houses are pictured on pages 41-42.

---





top: St. Michael's Church in Cluj's Union Square (Piata Unirii), 2009  
center: The Someșul Mic (or Kis-Szamos) River, 2009  
bottom: The lake at Cluj's Central Park, 2009

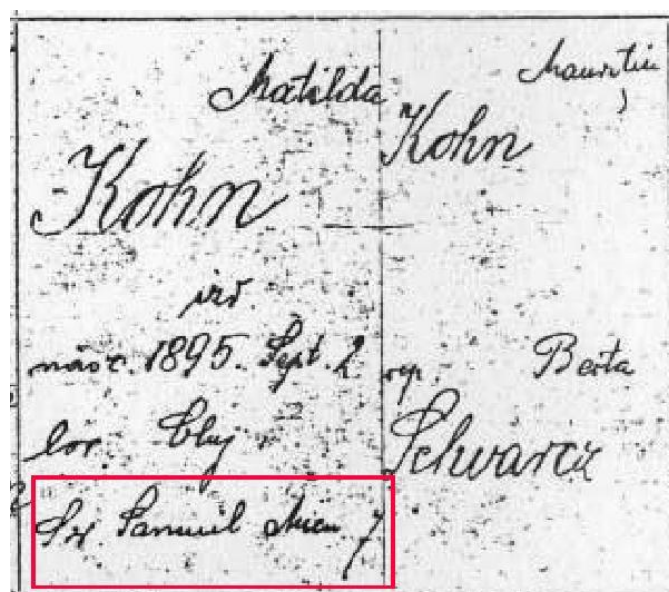


top: Cluj's Central Park, 2009

bottom left: Cluj's current Neolog Synagogue, 2009

bottom right: The garden behind Cluj's Neolog Synagogue, 2009

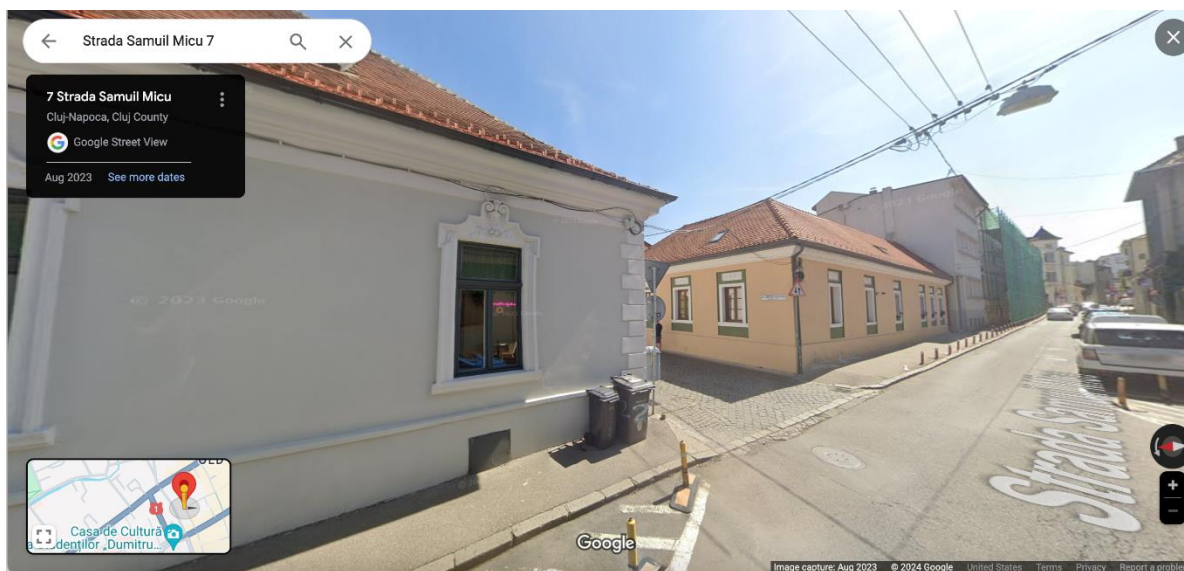




top: The house Matthew thought might be the Kohn (Kun) home in Cluj, 2009

Copyright © 2009 by Matthew C. Ehrlich

bottom: Its address on the Ehrlichs's 1922 wedding certificate confirmation



top: The house Google Street View identified as the Kohn address, 2023

bottom: That house and the one earlier thought to be the Kohn home, 2023



## 3

*Apart and Together*

After József returned to the Polish front, Matild settled down to her millinery business “and pretty soon I was doing real good in it, and trying to save some money for our future.” Józsi sent her part of his military pay to add to their nest egg. In her spare time Matyu worked on her hand-embroidered trousseau, all cutwork linens, and tried to keep her fiancé’s morale from flagging. On one occasion she baked “fancy cookies” and sent them to the front; but their delivery was delayed so long they arrived moldy, and József was terribly disappointed.

“We wrote quite often, especially me,” Matild would recall. “I had the time, and he needed encouragement.”

By the spring of 1916 the Central Powers had been blockaded by the British navy for almost two years. Meat and bread were inadequately rationed in Hungary, food queues were growing longer, and inflation had sent real income plummeting to half its prewar level. Add to this the tremendous losses in dead and wounded, and Hungary—enthusiastically bellicose at first—was beginning to succumb to war-weariness.

Events of that summer did nothing to cheer Hungary up. The Empire had taken the offensive against Italy, who appealed to Russia for help. The regrouped Russians attacked Galicia, intending simply to divert the Austro-Hungarians, but caught them completely by surprise and sent them into full retreat. Russian General Brusilov continued the onslaught and made a spectacular advance, taking 200,000 prisoners in the first three weeks and another 200,000 by summer’s end. Among those captured were Matild’s brothers Dezső and Márton; while József Ehrlich was wounded again, this time by a nearly-spent bullet in his side. Russia’s tremendous breakthrough had been entirely unexpected—not least by the Russians, who had enjoyed little success in the war up to now and were unsure how to exploit their triumph. Germany, though fully occupied with “bleeding France white” at Verdun and anticipating a major Allied offensive on the Somme, quickly collected fifteen

divisions and sent them east to reinforce the staggering Austro-Hungarians, partly by putting their army under the command of German officers.

Encouraged by the Brusilov offensive, Romania—neutral till now—took the plunge when the Allies guaranteed Romanian takeover of long-coveted Transylvania. France was eager for Romania to begin an offensive immediately, hoping this would be a mortal blow to Austria-Hungary; but the Romanians delayed making their move till the end of August, and only made it then because of a threatening ultimatum from Russia.


Transylvania, defended by no more than a few gendarmes, was invaded by the Romanian army of half a million “sturdy peasants.” They proceeded fifty miles, but lack of leadership and stiffened Hungarian resistance brought them to a standstill in mid-September. Forced into retreat and driven out of Transylvania, Romania was itself invaded by the Central Powers and largely vanquished by December 1916. Its demoralized government fled from Bucharest and was given shelter by the Russians—after a fashion: one general sneered that if Tsar Nicholas ordered him to send fifteen *wounded* soldiers to Romania’s aid, he would on no account send a sixteenth.

But Russia itself was nearly burned out. Brusilov’s brilliant offensive had exhausted its supplies and ammunition by the end of September, and men were not only fighting without weapons but having to tear down barbed wire with their bare hands. Over a million Russians had been lost since June, then another million (mostly deserters) by wintertime; Hungarian POWs had to be put to work to keep the Russian economy creaking along.

1916 was a year of hideous slaughter on every front. On the unquiet western front, huge armies had squandered each other’s lives fighting for bits of bloody ground at Verdun and the Somme—fighting and dying in vain, since victory seemed impossibly far from anyone’s grasp. No one seemed to have a clue how to bring the war to any kind of conclusion; so they all kept on losing.

As 1916 ended so did Franz Josef, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, who at the age of 86 died thoroughly disillusioned with life. At the same time, the power behind the Russian throne—Grigori Rasputin of notorious legend—was murdered, but that did not save the Tsar’s throne from toppling: revolution followed in March 1917 and Nicholas was forced to abdicate. Kerensky’s provisional government pledged to carry on the Russian war effort and General Brusilov tried to launch another offensive, but his motley army would not fight;


when Germany counterattacked, they threw down their arms and quit. In November 1917 the Bolsheviks swept Kerensky aside and established a Soviet government, suspending hostilities with the Central Powers. Hungarian POWs were repatriated, including Dezső and Márton Kun; but fear that the ex-prisoners might spread Bolshevik propaganda led to their being quarantined for weeks and “re-educated” by clergy. Most did not return home even then, but were shipped back to the front.



Berta Kun had never given up the search for Náthán, her firstborn, and József tried to help: “He used to ask around wherever he was, looking for someone who might know him or something about him, but never found anybody.” And it was not long before the months of worry and grief took their toll on Berta.

“Mother became very ill, and her heart gave up. At the age of 52 she died<sup>38</sup> of a massive stroke, leaving our two-year-old baby sister Ily behind, not to mention all of us, and my poor Dad. It was terrible, even now it makes me cry to think of that, and the war was still going on.”

József’s mother Sarolta came to Kolozsvár for the funeral. By this time she had lost a leg in a streetcar accident; but she cooked and cared for the Kuns during their *shivah*, the seven days following the funeral when mourners were to remain at home, doing no work. “Our house was sad,” Matild would say. “Our dear Mother was gone, and our Dad tried his best to keep the family together.”



Starting in November 1917, all available German divisions were shifted from east to west for what was planned as the decisive offensive, one that would overwhelm the French and British before their new American allies could arrive in strength. As the spring of 1918 approached, the Germans outnumbered the Entente on the front line; but they had next to nothing in reserves, and little to hope for in the way of reinforcements.

Franz Josef’s successor as Emperor-King of the Dual Monarchy was his great-nephew Karl, no friend to Germany. He refused to send any Austro-Hungarians to the spring offensive, other than a few divisions (not of the most sparkling morale) and some heavy

---

<sup>38</sup> About which see Appendix C.

batteries (which he requested that the Germans pay for).

Which is where, in a minor yet fateful way, József Ehrlich came in.

Since he could speak German, he was made a liaison officer aiding the transport of Hungarian troops to France. The Hungarians, accustomed to wider-open spaces, were confronted by a densely bewildering mass of trenches on the western front; and many would panic at their first sight of those metallic behemoths known as “tanks.”

While in France, József acquired a cherished possession: an embroidered lithograph of what appears to be a winged woman and her bubble-blowing child<sup>39</sup>. “Time went by and he started to get more impatient with each month,” Matild would say. “The war was fierce and he was in the thick of it all.”

Beginning in March, three massive German attacks pushed the front line west through Picardy and Flanders; by the end of May the Germans had reached the Marne and were less than forty miles from Paris. They had also reached the limit of their impetus, and opposing them now were the Americans—“ice cream soldiers” as the Hungarians called them, but unlike friend and foe they were fresh, confident, and eager to make their mark. They prevented the Germans from crossing the Marne; and the Yanks kept coming.

During the spring of 1918 there was a mild worldwide epidemic of influenza—“mild” in comparison with the dreadful pandemic later that same year. But it afflicted more than a few on the western front, and among them was József Ehrlich.

“I was notified that he was very ill with the very first influenza we’d ever heard of,” Matild was to recall. “He was in a hospital where I couldn’t go, near the fighting, and the orderly who was assigned to him and was looking after him kept me posted. It took several weeks before he himself could write to tell me about it. He’d been left with a bad cough, and was sent from hospital to hospital until he was sent back to Kolozsvár to get well.”

This was a lucky break for József. Many wounded Hungarian soldiers, even invalids, were being recycled straight from the hospital. Getting leave home was a precious thing, not least because “it seemed the war would last forever.”

At this time Matild’s sister Margit married her childhood sweetheart Imre Ladner, whom József had met on the eastern front. József “kept saying, soon as he feels well, he

---

<sup>39</sup> See the Afterward for a photo showing this on the Ehrlichs’s granddaughter’s living room wall in 1991.

doesn't want to wait any longer either. So we decided to get married, and set the date."

On July 21, 1918, József Ehrlich and Matild Kun were married in Kolozsvár "in the lovely large back yard of the Temple," under the traditional canopy. "Mine was a real fairytale wedding. I had six bridesmaids, three of my sisters dressed in pale blue dresses, and three girlfriends in pink. After the ceremony and dinner for a large company and friends, [József] and I took the train to Budapest for our honeymoon and to visit his mother who couldn't come to our wedding. Only one older brother of his was there, his name was Sándor. But he traveled with us back to Budapest on the same train. [József] and I had a room reserved in Budapest at the Royal Hotel, an elegant new place<sup>40</sup>, and very nice."

In their wedding picture Matild wears her white gown and gloves and veil, her bouquet displayed on a stand nearby. József is in dress uniform, complete with flower in his buttonhole and sabre by his side; he would later take the gold tassel from Matild's bridal outfit and sport it on the handle of his sabre.

József also sported a new moustache on his upper lip. "He raised that moustache while he was in the service," Matild would sniff, as though referring to a pet ferret. "But I didn't like it<sup>41</sup>, so then he shaved it off."

---

Six days before the Ehrlichs's wedding, Germany made a supreme effort to win the war. For a couple of weeks beforehand this had been the subject of extravagant gossip—so extravagant that the Allies had gotten word of it, and made certain it stalled after three days. Then the Allied counteroffensive was launched, led by hundreds of tanks. By August the Central Powers were ready to seek peace—mostly at each other's expense—but their feelers were ignored as the Allies kept pushing onward, throwing the Germans back, breaking through the Hindenburg line in late September.

Order and discipline vanished. The Hungarian army began deserting en masse, every man for himself; most wanted only to make it home as quickly as possible, crowding the

---

<sup>40</sup> Possibly the Grand Hotel Royal on Elizabeth Boulevard, designed in the French Renaissance style and opened for the Magyar Millennium in 1896. (A 22-year-old hotel in Budapest would be probably be considered "new" in 1918.) Badly damaged during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, it was restored and reopened in 2003 as the Corinthia.

<sup>41</sup> Matild/Mathilda made no secret of her disapproval when I myself grew a moustache in 1974 and added a beard in 1979; though the latter gave me a quasi-rabbinical appearance.

roads and packing the trains. “Soldiers were coming back one by one or in groups,” Matild would recall, “bringing their guns and thousands of ammunition with them. A complete chaos. But no one knew what to do or where they should go. It was unbelievable what was going on.”

József, still in Kolozsvár, felt it his duty to return to the front. Matild said no, and he agreed when the Hungarian soldiers began to mutiny and shoot their officers, killing anyone they held responsible for the war. So József bade farewell to arms, removing his lieutenant’s insignia and hiding his sabre in the cellar.

The Empire began to disintegrate as its defiant ethnic minorities seceded: the Czechs and Slovaks declaring united independence, the Croats and Slovenes joining Serbia in a new nation of southern Slavs. Romania plunged back into the war so as to get its crack at Imperial spoils. “The whole country was in a torment,” Matild would say. “Every small national started to grab some part of the country that used to be one great place under King Ferenc József. Now there started to be Yugoslavia, or Czechoslovakia, or whatever.”

A virtually bloodless revolution swept Budapest, with the jubilant city cheering as idealistic Count Károlyi and his “bourgeois radicals” proclaimed the Republic of Hungary. To show off their new sovereignty, they insisted (despite Károlyi’s misgivings) on a separate armistice with the Allies.

All of a sudden, the war was over.

Or so it seemed.

November 11, 1918 saw Matild being photographed out in the garden, with her brother Dezső—in civilian life a *bon vivant* singer-dancer-actor á la Maurice Chevalier<sup>42</sup>—crouched behind her, peeking out from behind flower pots.

Around the same time, Romanian troops began reentering Transylvania. They were authorized to go only so far as the River Maros, but by the end of the month they had crossed that river and come to Kolozsvár—or, as they called it, Cluj.

“The loveliest part of all Transylvania became [part of] Romania,” Matild was to say, “and we all hated that. Seeing those raggedy Romanian soldiers walking or marching into our lovely city, guns in hand, and we the people just looked and couldn’t do or say a word.

---

<sup>42</sup> Matild/Mathilda’s son George would recall seeing a photo (later lost) of Dezső surrounded by depictions of himself made up in various roles.

The next day they went from house to house confiscating all firearms our soldiers brought back with them from the war, even for keepsakes like a sword.” (Thus the sabre-with-the-gold-tassel was lost.) “Well, they managed to make our life miserable at all times.”

The Allies informed Hungary that, despite its protests and pending the final border settlement, they had decided to authorize Romanian occupation of Transylvania. Romania had already occupied Bukovina and Russian Bessarabia, and was faced with uniting these annexed provinces into the dreamed-of Greater Romania. In attempting this, the government (now back in Bucharest) was hardly inclined to accommodate non-Romanians—particularly such “resident aliens” as the Jews.

Not even Tsarist Russia had matched Romania in virulent anti-Semitism. For forty years the issue of Jewish emancipation and citizenship had been haggled over, and in December 1918 the Jews were holding out (despite government threats) for naturalization *en bloc* where everyone would declare that he or she had been born in Romania and held no foreign citizenship.

Under no circumstances would this have included the Győr-born József Ehrlich; but he at any rate had no plans to live in Transylvania. József’s intention was to take Matild back to Budapest and there resume his teaching career—after things settled down a bit, and it seemed safe to travel. Until then the Ehrlichs remained in Kolozsvár and stayed with the Fruchters, Fáni and Jani. “Paychecks still came, but we didn’t know where from, so we took and cashed them to live on.”

---

The world had fought a war intended to end all war, but in early 1919 the question of establishing peace with Germany was hardly discussed at the Paris Peace Conference. Instead, the Great Powers had to deal with the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and all its resulting problems and quarrels. Among these was a possible new war over Transylvania.

In March Count Károlyi was handed an Allied ultimatum: his troops were to be withdrawn west of a neutral zone entirely in Magyar territory, intended to separate Hungarian and Romanian forces and so keep order. Károlyi’s government opposed this ultimatum but lacked the power to defy it; so they took another way out by resigning. Power was handed over to the Communists.

“There was a shooting uprising and Communism started already,” Matild would say. “The revolution started in Budapest and we couldn’t go back, and wouldn’t have wanted to even if we could go there, and we didn’t know what to do. But we were happy when I found we were going to have a baby, and a few weeks later my sister Margit and her husband Imre had the same news to tell to our family.”

Now that a child was expected, it seemed the wisest thing for the Ehrlichs to simply stay put, sit tight, and see what would happen. Here at least they had family and friends and a means of supporting themselves. Matild taught József millinery work: “We had no choice but for me to teach him how to use the machines, and to sew straw hats, and how to press and block them. He was a good student, and learned quickly, but the damp steam and fumes of the hat pressing made his coughing worse, and it was pretty bad for him for awhile.”

The Ehrlichs got a place of their own in the Belváros district downtown. “Our new ladies’s hat shop [was] right next to the very ancient birthplace and museum of an early king, Mátyás who made history for us interesting through the years.” The hat shop’s address was Number 5 King Matthias Lane, and Number 3 next door<sup>43</sup> was indeed the house where Matthias Corvinus had been born. It was now a “charming little museum” featuring Hungarian pottery, embroidery, and woodcarving.

Behind their store József and Matild had an apartment. On its walls they hung an enlarged and tinted reproduction of their engagement picture, and József’s French lithograph of the winged woman with her bubble-blowing baby.

---

The leader of Soviet Hungary was named Béla Kun. Any connection with Matild’s family was unlikely, and certainly would not have been acknowledged by Matild. But Béla Kun was also Transylvanian-born and of Jewish background; he had even attended the University of Kolozsvár for a semester in 1904. During the Brusilov offensive he had been taken prisoner, and in Russia he became acquainted with Lenin. After Kun took over Hungary, he established secret telegraph communications direct to Moscow—often asking Lenin for money but seldom listening to his advice.

When Kun demanded that the Romanians withdraw back to the Maros, boasting he

---

<sup>43</sup> About which see Appendix D.



could get the Russian Red Army to come to Hungary's aid, Lenin was alarmed and warned the overconfident Kun not to indulge in "leftist deviation." Kun replied that Hungary was already so far to the left it *couldn't* deviate further.

In May 1919 a scraped-together Hungarian Red Army went on the offensive—not against Romania, but the weaker Czechs to the north—and by June it invaded Slovakia. The exasperated Great Powers ordered Kun to cease and withdraw to the new Hungarian borders, promising that Romania would then withdraw from occupied Magyar territory. The Hungarians reluctantly retreated, but the Romanians refused to budge; they were determined to keep hold of Transylvania.

Soviet Hungary's position was now desperate. Béla Kun, always rigidly doctrinaire, launched a Red Terror campaign to "suffocate counterrevolution in blood." He only further alienated his people, including the peasants and even the industrial workers. Kun decided he could only restore his regime with military victory, and ordered the Red Army to force Romanian withdrawal.

The Great Powers sat on their hands. No one was proud of this, but they lacked the mobilized manpower to do more than urge the Hungarian people to overthrow their repressive government. The Romanians, for their part, were only too eager to march further into Hungary. Béla Kun made a last-ditch appeal to Lenin, who replied that no help could be expected from Russia; a day later, Soviet Hungary collapsed. Three days after that, on August 4th, the Romanians occupied Budapest.

Then a Hungarian counterrevolution began. Some of the old Imperial officers, led by Admiral Miklós Horthy, had formed a White Army to oppose the Red; and "officers's detachments" started persecuting those they accused of being Communists—the peasants, the industrial workers, and especially the Jews. Kun and his comrades had escaped, so the White Terror targeted the Jews who remained behind. These were mostly middle-class and had overwhelmingly opposed Kun. "All around us sprang up Communism and we did not like it," Matild was to say. "Boys were drafted or put in prison for no reason at all."

Vainly did the Jews of Hungary point to their long record of fervent patriotism, the many times they had sided uncritically and even chauvinistically with the Magyars. Now they were considered alien and disloyal, accused of war profiteering and revolutionary agitation. The prewar *Interessengemeinschaft* had evaporated. The Great Powers were told

that the White Terror was “restoring order,” and since Horthy’s officers were Christians determined to purge Hungary of Communism, the Allies bought their explanation.

In Kolozsvár, amidst all the rumors and counter-rumors and fearful speculation, never too sure what was actually going on around them, József and Matild stayed put—sat tight—and awaited the birth of their child.



Matild and József with Matild’s sister Margit, 1917(?)<sup>44</sup>

Matild in March 1918

---

<sup>44</sup> Though labeled “1917,” we have no indication József had a furlough to Kolozsvár that year; so the photo was more likely taken in 1916 or 1918.



Matild and József on their wedding day: July 21, 1918





## Appendix C: Berta's Death and Resting Place

In the 1970s, Matild/Mathilda would state firmly that [a] her mother was fifty years old when youngest child Ily was born; [b] Berta died “at the age of 52... leaving our two-year-old baby sister Ily behind”; [c] Ily was eighteen years younger than Mathilda (born in 1895); and [d] six years older than Mathilda's daughter Martha (born in 1919). We could thereby calculate Berta's vitals as 1863-1915—except that Berta was still alive when József first visited Kolozsvár, circa March 1916. When I first compiled *To Be Honest* I tentatively placed Berta's death in mid-1916, but then my brother Matthew turned up new evidence during his May 2009 trip to Kolozsvár/Cluj:

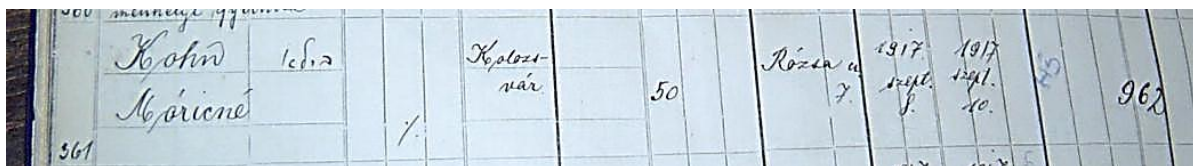
“Rares Beuran, a professor at the local university... was kind enough to link me to friends of his, a videographer and a television producer, who had ties to the local Jewish center. I was told that the Jewish community in Cluj has dwindled to a few hundred with an average age of 70. The center had no records of those lost in the Holocaust, but they did have an old record book that apparently survived World War II in a cellar; it listed deaths in the Jewish community from roughly 1915-1935. For a small fee, a center official searched for records of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother Kohn. A fair number of listings by that name turned up (each marked by a dramatic exclamation of “KOHN!” by the gentleman doing the searching), but nothing corresponded to my ancestors. Finally, though, we made a discovery.

“Record #361 listed my great-grandmother Berta, listed as Mrs. Móric Kohn... According to the record, she died September 8, 1917 at age 50, and was buried two days later. An address also was listed, #7 Rózsa Street in Kolozsvár... And there was a number for her grave marker in the Neolog Jewish cemetery in Cluj: #962. That in turn prompted a trip to the cemetery with Rares and his friend to see if we could locate the marker. The Neolog Jewish cemetery turned out to be padlocked, but my hosts knocked on the gate and we were admitted inside... The cemetery contains graves of those buried as recently as 1990, but nevertheless is marked by disrepair and overgrowth despite the caretaker's efforts. (When I asked why, one of my hosts replied by rubbing his thumb together with his index and middle fingers.) That is regrettable, particularly given the excellent condition of the

main city cemetery next door. However, it does give the place a certain lyrical and haunted quality. Wild cherries overhang the graves, which in places bear testimony to the calamity that befell Cluj's Jews when the Nazis executed their Final Solution in Hungary in 1944<sup>45</sup>.

"Other graves—including presumably that of my great-grandmother—are marked not by headstones but by simple numbered markers, in accordance with custom. One had to get down on hands and knees with brushes to scrape dirt off and uncover the numbers, which unfortunately did not seem to be in any sort of logical order. I gave up quickly, but my steadfast hosts persisted until I finally persuaded them to stop. The only payment they accepted was a lemonade afterward, bought and drunk at the local shopping mall outside the city center."

Given that Móric (Morris/Maurice) Kohn is not the most uncommon name to be found in a Jewish community, the lady who died aged fifty on September 8, 1917 *might* have been someone other than Berta. But the address on Rózsa Street shares a "7" with Matild/Mathilda's address on her 1922 wedding certificate confirmation. The street by then had been renamed after Romanian theologist Samuil Micu; and its close proximity to Casa Matei Corvin ("it's just west of the main city square whereas Casa is just north") leaves little doubt that we do indeed have a record of Berta's death and burial. Assuming there was no bureaucratic error in dates of death and burial, we can only conclude there *was* one in Berta's age—or that Mathilda's firmly-stated recollections were slightly awry<sup>46</sup>.



Record of Berta (Mrs. Móric) Kohn's death and burial, September 1917

Copyright © 2009 by Matthew C. Ehrlich

<sup>45</sup> About which see Chapter 14.

<sup>46</sup> In 1974 Mathilda told me "[Your] Aunt Martha was born in the same year we were married, about three or four months later. Wait a minute..." (Pause as she reconsidered this statement's accuracy.)





above and below: Two views of Cluj's Neolog Jewish Cemetery, 2009

Copyright © 2009 by Matthew C. Ehrlich



## Appendix D: Casa Matei Corvin—and the House Next Door

In 1933 the travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor<sup>47</sup> began trekking across Europe, reaching Cluj in July 1934. As he would describe half a century later:

*It was Cluj to the Rumanians [sic], Klausenburg to the early Saxon settlers who founded or re-founded it, but, inexpugnably and immutably to the Hungarians, Kolozsvár... The town wasn't as perilous as it would have been in the winter season, with its parties and theatres and the opera in full blast... The old city was full of town-houses and palaces, most of them empty now, with their owners away for the harvest. Thanks to this, István [Fermor's traveling companion] had telephoned and borrowed a set of handsome vaulted rooms in one of them, not far from the house where Matthias Corvinus was born<sup>48</sup>.*

By then the Ehrlichs had been gone from Cluj for over a decade. Not till 2009 would their grandson Matthew come to explore Matei Corvin Street, “just north of the city square in the oldest part of Cluj. The street is named for the house where the Hungarian king is said to have been born in 1443. That house is at the end of the street and is marked by a plaque the Romanians put up after they assumed control of Transylvania from Hungary. Some have interpreted the plaque as a dig at the Hungarians.”

ACCORDING TO HISTORICAL TRADITION

THIS IS THE HOUSE WHERE

**MATTHIAS CORVINUS**

THE SON OF THE GREAT VOIVODE OF TRANSYLVANIA

**IANCU OF HUNEDOARA**

WAS BORN

THE ROMANIAN MATTHIAS CORVINUS IS CONSIDERED

THE GREATEST OF ALL HUNGARIAN KINGS

---

<sup>47</sup> Whose 1996 obituary would call him “a cross between Indiana Jones, James Bond and Graham Greene.”

<sup>48</sup> From *Between the Woods and Water*, Penguin: 1987, pp. 143-144.



## DUE TO HIS ACHIEVEMENTS DURING HIS REIGN

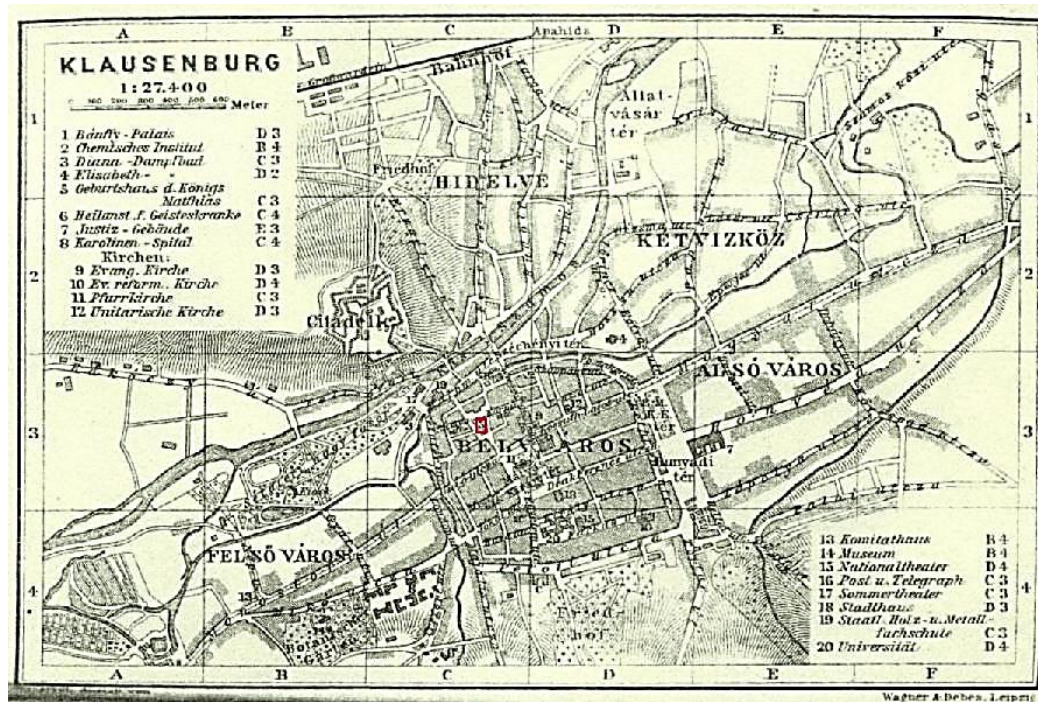
1456-1490

“My real interest, however, was in the house next door—where my grandparents lived and had a millinery business in the years just after World War I, and where my father’s sister Martha was born. As it turns out, this house is now home to a bar catering to the local college crowd. It’s called the King Club, with the regicidal-sounding website [www.clubtheking.ro](http://www.clubtheking.ro)<sup>49</sup>. The club is in the basement and features regular live bands... One shouldn’t get the idea that the area has become seedy. Looking back up Matei Corvin toward the city center, one sees shops and restaurants, and in the middle of the day, the streets are full of people. The king’s birthplace is now home to an arts school and has a small sculpture garden in back. The building next door where my grandparents once lived now seems to host a variety of apartments and offices in addition to the bar. There’s an outside stairway accessing some of the apartments. From the top is a good view of the Franciscan Church in nearby Museum Square; it dates back to the 13th century.”

Matthew’s reflections at the close of his tour: “My grandparents never returned to Cluj or the old country. I was the first family member to visit in 86 years. Everything my grandparents had known here—their language, culture, and religious tradition—was utterly foreign to me. Had they been able to accompany me on my trip, they too would have found much that was foreign and probably not to their liking, including their home turned into a bar. But to me, it all feels appropriate. My grandparents, like other immigrants to America, went in search of a better life for themselves and especially for their children. Despite bumps in the road, they found it. They left behind a city where because of their religion and my grandfather’s ‘alien’ (i.e., non-Transylvanian) status, they were not allowed to live in tranquility. After they left, the city saw pogroms, warfare, and genocide followed by more than 40 years of Stalinism. Now young people fill the streets and drink and dance in the clubs, and Cluj—apart from the revelry—is at peace. And that, at least, would please my grandparents immensely.”

---

<sup>49</sup> This website would be gone from the Internet by 2024. Ironically, the bar appears to have been replaced by a Bistro Vienna—“authentic foods from Austria”—whose address is #3; but Casa Matei Corvin’s is now #6. (The Ehrlichs’s daughter Martha would be pleased by Bistro Vienna’s inviting patrons to bring their dog: “we will welcome it with open arms and fresh water.” See more at <https://bistroviena.ro>.)



above: Map of Kolozsvár (Klausenburg): from the 1905 *Baedeker's Austria-Hungary*  
with "Geburtshaus d. Königs Matthias" marked in red

below: The birthplace of Matthias Corvinus (Casa Matei Corvin), 2009

Copyright © 2009 by Matthew C. Ehrlich







above: Another view of the birthplace of Matthias Corvinus (Casa Matei Corvin), 2009

below: The House Next Door (where the Ehrlichs lived and had their millinery shop), 2009

Copyright © 2009 by Matthew C. Ehrlich





Matthew Ehrlich outside the House Next Door, 2009

Copyright © 2009 by Matthew C. Ehrlich

## 4

*Mártuka*

Márta Ehrlich was born on September 27, 1919; but since her birth was not recorded till the following day, her birthday would eventually be celebrated on the 28th.

It was József's idea that he and Matild should keep a diary for Márta, and they got a hardbound quadrille book to do their recording in. On its title page József wrote, in carefully-drawn block letters, the eloquent if uncharacteristic sentiment *ISTEN NEVÉBEN KEZDEM MEG: In God's Name I Begin This.*

For the first three months of Márta's life virtually nothing got recorded. During the next three months, though József and Matild would each make many Diary entries, their observations were in no way unusual or extraordinary for new parents with a firstborn child. "Tomorrow you will be six months old," József might remark. "Let's see how much you developed since last I wrote in this book," and he would go on to describe what Márta ate for lunch, or how much she enjoyed rocking herself back and forth on all fours. Matild might mention taking the baby in her buggy out for a walk every day, and how Márta loved going out just like her mother: "Now all day long you say 'bye-bye, go bye-bye.'"

"Márta was our whole life at that time," Matild would later remark. "We loved her very much, and watched her grow and develop beautifully."

---

In November 1919 the Romanians withdrew from thoroughly-plundered Budapest, and Admiral Horthy led in his army, telling the Lord Mayor that "we shall forgive this criminal city."

The Budapest Spirit was the White Hungarians's whipping boy: Bolsheviks, organized labor, Freemasons and Jews were all prominent on their hit list. Miklós Horthy, admiral in a country that now lacked both navy and seaport, was named Regent for the King who remained in exile—and Karl was forcibly kept there too, even being shot at by Horthy's troops when he tried to reclaim the Hungarian throne.

For awhile, ironically, the situation in Romania was different. Rather than agree to the Peace Treaty's minorities clause, which explicitly obligated Romania to recognize its Jews as citizens, Prime Minister Bratianu resigned; but a conciliatory coalition took power, signed the treaty and agreed to observe its provisions.

However much the Transylvanian Jews might despise Romania and long to be reunited with Hungary, it must have seemed—could it be possible?—that things might actually be working out, after all, for the best.

Then in March 1920 King Ferdinand dismissed the coalition and had it replaced by a strong authoritarian government, one which rejected social reform and denounced the opposition as “Jewish-dominated leftists,” alien and pro-Communist. In Transylvania there was no immediate change in Jewish status, though the government and bureaucracy had undergone wholesale Romanization. But the Transylvanian Jews, with their historic and cultural ties to the hated Magyars, were suspected of “irredentism”; and their lives and activities were very soon to be restricted.

---

*Extracts from Márta's Diary, translated from the original Hungarian:*

**1920 April 5.** Last week for one day you ran a temperature and we were worried, but thank heaven nothing worse developed. You have a habit, my little girl, the only way you can sleep in your little bed is if you lay on your tummy with your face buried in the little pillow. Sometimes we try to turn you over on your back, but you put up a fight and start to holler, so we have to let it go. I think, my sweet, that's why you never had a stomach ache... [József]

**1920 April 10.** Yesterday you were a naughty little girl. Sorry I have to say such a thing of you my dear. We went for a long walk, the three of us, and by late afternoon we got home. As soon as we stepped into the house, you started to scream and cried as hard as you could. Mommy picked you up and took all your clothes off to see what's wrong, found nothing. She tried to feed you, but you wouldn't take anything, so back you went in the buggy and we had coffee and cake, and you just hollered while we ate. So out we went for another stroll in the park, and lo and behold our daughter stopped crying and started to laugh and be happy. Well, wasn't that naughty?

Tonight you put your toes in your mouth. We put you to bed, it was time to go to

sleep, but you promptly sat up and started to cry and with your eyes full of tears looked up at me wanting to be picked up. I am so sorry for you my little girl, you are so much alone, but we are busy all day making a living. We have a millinery store and small shop in front, and the apartment is in the back. But sometimes we even forget we have a baby, you are so good. Sometimes I see you look so sad sitting in the corner in your little bed playing. I wish times will get better to your Mommy could stay with you all day. [József]

**1920 May 16.** It's a long time my darling baby since we played together. But at last I got away today so I could record your progress. It is over a week since you started to hold onto your crib and walk around in it. You are such a sweetheart my baby, and you perform like that and catch us watching, you start calling "Mama—Mama." Your teeth started to show, but we have to look real hard to see them. But when you eat we hear it on the spoon. Hardly can wait to see how pretty you will look with teeth. You are a fighter all right, fight with everyone. Today you were at your cousin Bébi's<sup>50</sup> house, and you slapped her face. She really loved you, but after that she didn't even want to look at you anymore. Lots of time you hit Dad and me, but you think it's just playing, because you clap hands and laugh. So we haven't punished you yet for it, but are trying to correct it some other way. [Matild]

**1920 June 6.** Your only tooth is out good, so we can see it, and you can pull your bread to pieces with it. You eat everything now except meat, and love it. You can crawl on the floor very fast and when you reach a chair you grab hold of it and stand up without any help from us, and can walk around it holding on. And if we put your back to the wall you can stand alone. It will be fun when we could take your hand and go walking. You can say a few words already: Mama, Papa, bye-bye, dolly, and a few others. When years later you grow up and want to know what kind of baby you were, well, my sweet, you are just the loveliest and most perfect little girl. You are for us, but everyone who sees you tells the same to us...

Your hair is brown; your eyes? I can't tell really, some time it is blue, some time green, and at other times grey. There is a novel by a famous Hungarian, Mór Jokai, the name is *The Lady with the Ocean-Blue Eyes*<sup>51</sup>. That's you, baby. You have a lovely cream-and-

---

<sup>50</sup> Bébi ("her real name is Violet"), six weeks younger than Márta, was the daughter of Matild's sister Margit and her husband Imre Ladner.

<sup>51</sup> *A tengerzemű hölgy* (*Eyes Like the Sea*), which won the Hungarian Academy prize in 1890. Mór Jokai (1825-1904) was not only a popular novelist and dramatist, but a leader of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution.



peach complexion, and you are very well developed for your age. I am pretty sure you will be a smart girl. It is 10 PM and you are fast asleep. Funny how you are always sleeping on your tummy, whenever we turn you to lay on your back, in an instant you are back face down and fast asleep again. Good night my Mártuka, sleep well. [József]

**1920 July[?]** This week we got your first spanking from your Mother. For why? I can't tell in this book, maybe your husband-to-be will read this some time... Day by day you are more darling, but more spoiled too. You slap everybody, playfully that's true, but just the same it is a slap. [József]

**1920 August 11.** We came home from the country resort<sup>52</sup>, its name is Kolozs and it has a natural salty lake for bathing. You are one kilo heavier, but it seems you grew rather than gained. You are tall for your age, and developed a lot while in the country. You understand every word spoken to you. You are a little timid, not afraid of people but of things. For instance you are afraid of shoes. It happened in the country yet, you were sitting on the floor and glanced down at your feet, when you saw the shoes on them you started crawling just as fast as you could, then stopped to take another look and got startled again and tried to run away from them.

There was another instance, your Mommy and I were reading and you were playing all by yourself. All of a sudden we heard you holler "Mama, Mama" and when we looked up, we saw you holding in your hand far away from you a small paintbrush, you got scared of it. You couldn't throw it away, but started to crawl as fast as you could holding it away. You were so comical my dear that we both laughed at you... You can walk now for short times, as long as you can touch objects you even try to run. I think it won't be long now before you really could walk. [József]

**1920 August 21.** Yes, my little daughter, now you know how to use your legs, you really can walk. Naturally you fall a lot yet, but get up again and start out anew. You even can manage the stairway, only four steps up, but it is enough for a start. When you fall down, you always sit up and spank the floor saying "da, da<sup>53</sup>," at least you speak some words too.

[József]

---

<sup>52</sup> Where they had gone for a month's vacation.

<sup>53</sup> Interpreted as "bad, bad"—possibly derived from *daci*, Hungarian slang for a bad mark in school.

---

“We did very well,” Matild would say of their millinery business next door to Matthias Corvinus’s birthplace, “but the Romanian city officials who were officiating this part of Hungary were a mean lot and couldn’t let us alone. They thought no one who wasn’t born in Transylvania belonged there, and the police started to come to let us know it, hounding us until [József] started to give them money which seemed endless blackmailing. A large part of our earnings went to the blackmailers, for bribing several of them just to let us live, until [József] was seeing we couldn’t live this way much longer.”

In later years it would always be said that the Ehrlich millinery had been “lost.”

---

**1920 September 27.** This is a very pleasant date for us Mártuka, today is your first birthday. All that happened with you in a year we tried to record here for us all. We are very satisfied with your progress. You are tall and very pretty, and mostly very bright. Once somebody asked if you were at least two years old? although you were not even one year old at that time.

We hope we can give you the upbringing we both wish to. It is very hard my dear, lots of difficulty lies before us. You will think it was impossible when you are old enough to read this book. Hope you never will have to know the terrible things that are going on in this world today. We had to move in with your Aunt Fáni and Uncle János, and all we have is a bedroom, and we have to use the kitchen together. But we are not discouraged, we know it will be different and better some time. Mártuka, you keep us going, and we are hoping we can keep you protected always from unpleasant things.

I can only say nice things about you. You are sweet and good and you understand every word we speak to you, although you can’t talk much yet. You are taking your afternoon nap now, you talk a lot in your sleep. After you wake up we will take you to have your birthday picture taken at a very good photographer. [József]

---

The Fruchters, Fáni and Jani, were a childless couple and treated Márta very much as their own. “They both worship you,” József would write a couple of years later, “but especially Jani. He is a very nervous man, when he is in a bad humor no one dares speak to him, not even his wife Aunt Fáni. But you don’t understand things like that, and you go to

him and he just melts away, and does your bidding. Even goes on all fours and takes you for a ride on his back and forgets he ever was mad for some reason... It's every day that he sits down to play dolls with you and does whatever you tell him to do..."

Both of the Fruchters made entries in Márta's Diary: "I must add to your nice remembrance," Fáni wrote, "so when you are old enough to read all this I am remembered also." And Jani hoped that "when you are grown years later, and you will read this book, you will remember your old Uncle Jani, if not personally, then from hearing your Dad and Mommy talk of me to you."

Domestic help was inexpensive and the Ehrlichs hired a nursemaid to look after Márta while Matild and József were at work. Matild's younger brother Jenő and at least one sister (probably Margit, a dressmaker) had a "big ladies's tailoring shop and salon" at the Kun house, with twenty people working there—now including the Ehrlichs, doing millinery.

József's job prospects were otherwise bleak. "He couldn't find work because he wasn't born in Transylvania," Matild would recall. "He was declared an alien and eventually would have to leave the country where I was born." But even were they to return to Budapest, things were not likely to be any better. Five days before Márta's first birthday, the first major anti-Semitic law in postwar Europe was adopted in Hungary: a *numerus clausus*, restricting Jewish enrollment at institutions of higher education.

---

[Photo: Márta in a playsuit, standing on a bench]

**1920 October 12.** Hope you like your picture? It isn't a bit posed, just as you stood he took it, very natural. There isn't much news to tell, you talk very little yet, but the things you do are more grown up, and there isn't a word you don't understand. When you see fresh fruit, you offer to kiss anyone, that means you want some if it too. You love to play, especially ring-around-the-rosy, with other children. And you can, and like to, fight. Especially with your young Aunt Ily. She is only six years older than you and loves you very much. You like to pat her, then when she stoops down to kiss you, you hit her and say "da, da."

You like best to eat, and ask for food several times a day. You love very much to play hide-and-seek, you think if you close your eyes no one can see you either, then open them and say "*kukucs*" ["peekaboo"] which means we find you. When you get something

new you say “pretty?” You have a new white fur coat which you love to pat, but when you see a dog you are afraid to touch it. You like very much to listen to stories for hours at a time, and when I tell you the girl spanked the Teddy Bear, you too say “da, da.” You are walking fine now. I had to buy the third pair of shoes already. You never cry when you fall, just reach out and spank the floor or ground saying “da, da.” And that seems to satisfy you for the bumps. [József]

**1920 November 25.** Today you got a dish from your Uncle János and a small spoon, so now you eat all by yourself. It seems you know too what progress you are making, you are just as happy as can be. Aunt Fáni is teaching you to dance and you seem to be a very good pupil. Fourteen months old, and you get hold of your skirts with both hands and just start to dance. Naturally you fall, but that doesn’t seem to bother you, you start all over again. But you don’t want to start talking yet, just a few words that you said a month ago. [József]

**1920 December 5.** The last few days you spoke new [*sic*] words: Daddy, Baby, Mommy, apple, and milk. I think this is the time you’ll start talking a blue streak. If you are not behaving, we put you in a corner which makes you a very sad little girl. You respect me very much, I have to tell you only once to do something and you do it promptly. If your Mommy puts you to bed at night, you stand right up and start to cry. But if I just look at you, you lay down and put your little face in the pillow and I hear you are crying your little heart out. I feel like crying with you my dear, I am so sorry for you. But one of us has to be strict even if it hurts us both. Today your little cousin Bébi was here, but she was naughty and cried. You teased her and imitated her crying. [József]

**1920 December 24.** My darling little daughter, you are getting sweeter every day and smarter too. Understand everything and can make conversation with me or anyone else. Your Aunt Fáni went to the Market and I asked her to bring us some apples, and all morning you were trying to tell me “Aunty bye-bye, bring baby apple.” Yes, my sweet, we could chat together now and we both have a lovely time together. You still like to play hide-and-seek, and when the children say “I find you,” you say it too...

While I’m writing this you sit in Daddy’s lap, he is telling you a story about a frog who fell into a deep well. You like stories the best and sometimes you say something in between too. I wonder my darling what will you say when you will first read this book. Will

you like it? [*Matild*]

**1920 December 28.** Three new words again, your Aunt Fáni taught you how to say them, you are so happy when you learn new things, and always smiling when you say them. Christmas Eve the neighbors asked you to go in and see their Christmas tree, which you liked a lot, saying “Pretty,” and you wanted to touch things on it, but I didn’t let you because there were real candles on it and I was afraid you’d get burned by it. They offered you some bonbons from a dish but you wanted them all. When you dipped into the dish and saw the dark chocolate, you didn’t want it, shaking your head and saying “dirty” and putting it back too. You love sweets and the neighbors always bring you cookies just to see how glad you are when you see them. Lots of times my little girl embarrasses me, because anyone who comes to the house to see us, you are asking for food or something to eat. [*Matild*]

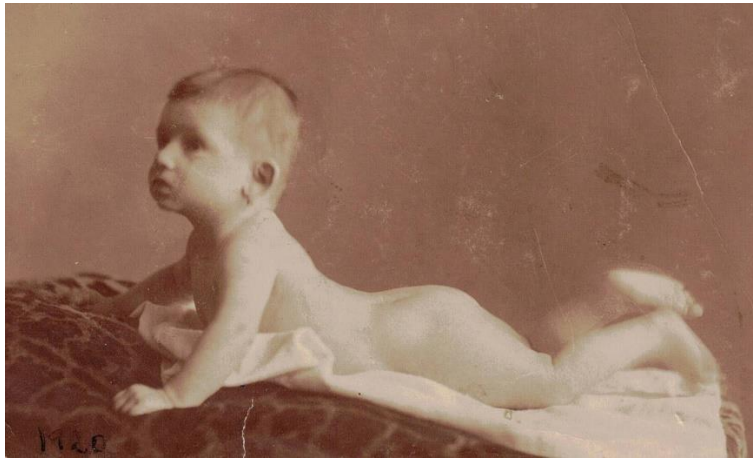
**1920 December 29.** It’s over three weeks since I wrote to your book, always waiting for something important to happen. Your vocabulary is large, every day some new words. Today it was “raining outside.” Most of the words only Mom and I can understand, you talk so funny. Only when you want something to eat, or when you are mad for some reason you talk quite plain. But still you like to fight and hit people. You can slap real hard, your Mommy thinks it’s amusing, but you never do it to me. Once you were crying and I imitated the way you cried. You got mad at me and lifted your little hand to hit me, but when you saw me looking at you, you came to kiss me instead. Otherwise you seldom cry, when you fall and hurt yourself you just ask us to kiss wherever is hurting, and won’t do anything else, just a kiss, then everything is all right again.

Still love to hide, right now you are playing with Mommy and you are under the table waiting to be found. Next best is ring-around-the-rosy, anybody in the room has to play it with you, if there isn’t enough people then you take your teddy bear too. You love your teddy bear, go to sleep with it, feed it, and even put it on the potty. Mártuka, you are a very dear little girl, you give us lots of pleasure and help us to forget our troubles with your sweetness and laughter. Sometimes you do things you shouldn’t, then I try to be serious and correct you, but in the middle as I look at you, I start to laugh, and have to hide my face so you can’t see it. You think I am crying and you say “Daddy, no, no.”

I would love to make lots of pictures of you, but it is very expensive. But next spring

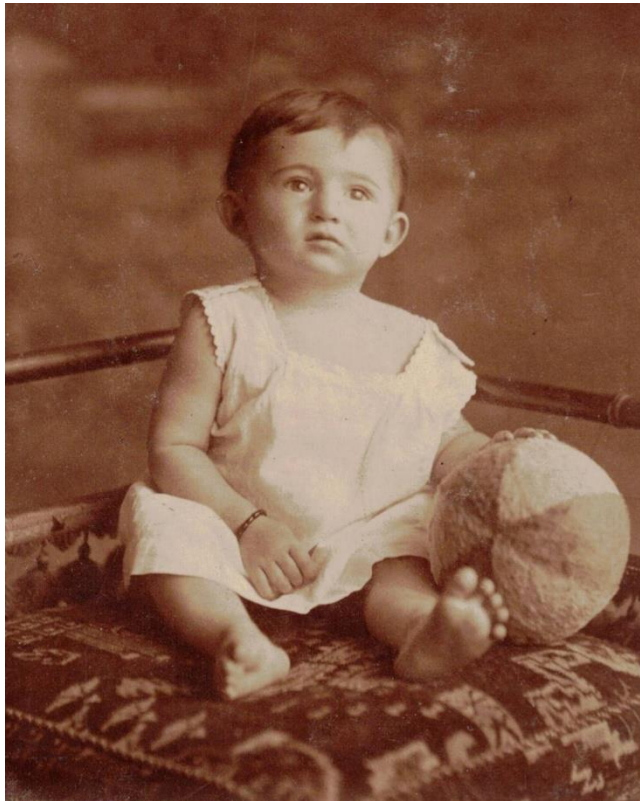
we will have a family picture for you. I lift you up in my arms in front of the mirror, Mommy stands next to you, that's how we practice, and that is lots of fun for you too. You dark-eyed little monkey, now your eyes have changed to dark brown. Right now I hear you are spanking someone, saying "da, da." I see it is your teddy bear, it probably hurt you someway, that's why. Now you talk all the time, saying "naughty doll" and running all over the house all day. [József]

---



Márta in January 1920 (above) and June 1920 (below)





Márta in September 1920



## 5

*Episodes and Happenings*

*Extracts from Márta's Diary, translated from the original Hungarian:*

**1921 February 20.** At last you assure us you belong to the female species: you are talking constantly. In the last weeks you learned a lot of new words. I noticed those words we taught you before come harder to say now, than the ones you are learning alone... You already can count and if I ask you how much one and one is you say two, or even five and five, ten. Sometimes you get a little mixed up, but that doesn't count yet. At seventeen months old we think you are doing fine. Wonder when you are seventeen years old if you will understand what five times five means? You like singing and dancing, have a few favorite songs, and even now you ask me to sing one of them to you. I tried to sing a different one, but you stop me every time, till I sing the one you asked me to.

If we are busy and can't play with you, you climb up everywhere or turn your buggy over till some of us notice what you are doing. You can open doors all by yourself and go out and close the door after you by the knob. Then you start in there doing everything you shouldn't. Want to wash dishes or clothes or mix cookies, whatever anyone's doing you want to do it too. You carried the coffee pot already to Mommy, then a bottle of bluing which naturally was spilled over your dress. You are everywhere you shouldn't be. The only thing you are very much afraid of is the stove. When you were six months old and you were crawling on the floor I took you close to it and let you touch it very lightly. Ever since that happened, you are making wide circles around it, which was exactly what I aimed to have you do. I did the same with the cigarettes also, because you always wanted to touch them.

The most interesting thing is, you never cry when you fall, although it happens a lot. Mostly you cry when you are mad for some reason, you do have a temper. But you are sensitive too, when we play and I hit you hard you just laugh, but if I am sore at you for some reason and spank you just a wee bit, you cry like you never could stop. But when you

do something you know is wrong, you come to me and turn your back saying “Spank?” I never can spank you then, you are so sweet I just kiss you. So far you called yourself “Buba,” but tonight your Aunt Fáni asked who do you like best, and you promptly said “Mata.” Another new word in your vocabulary. You will think I am silly to write all this down, but everything you do or say fills me with happiness, and maybe sometime you will enjoy to read it and see what kind of a baby you were. [József]

[Photo: Matild with Márta]

**1921 March 29.** The photo on the next page was a surprise, you Mother had it done for my birthday. You can imagine how happy I was to get it. Now we will have to have one soon of the three of us too...

One evening I was counting the day's receipts and you saw it and said “Lots of money.” You like money too, once we were walking and you saw some oranges in a store window. You stopped and hugged my knees and asked for money to buy oranges. Eighteen months old and already you snatched an apple. Your Aunt Milli took you shopping and while she was facing [a] different direction from you, you took the apple and took a big bite out of it. It's quite early in life to start taking things, don't you think? You don't eat very well lately, I think teething is to blame. In front all your teeth show, but molars are hard on you.

My dear little girl, we sure are neglecting you lately. But believe me we can't help it, we have a lot to do as we are having our season<sup>54</sup>. Sometime Mother and I can only see you at noon and suppertime. You are so happy when we get home, you hug and kiss us and can't let go, don't know what to do with us first. It worries me at times that at least Mother can't stay home with you my dearest. But we have to work and think for the future too. My dear little girl, these are hard times, you start your life in these difficult times, have to go without some luxury which you could have in ordinary times. It is hard to go to our shop and leave you at home, sometimes you cry so hard, you want to go bye-bye with us, and we can't take you. Don't worry my darling little girl, there will come a time when we won't have to do it anymore, then you will be compensated for everything. [József]

**1921 April 2.** It isn't so long since I wrote in your book, but your progress in vocabulary is

---

<sup>54</sup> Easter bonnets, etc.

so remarkable I just have to note it. You understand every single thing spoken to you, and answer in full sentences. I told you, “Márta, don’t be naughty,” you answer, “Get spanking?” When you see me wind my watch, you say, “Tick-tock watch on my neck?” I can’t even list all the words you can say, even asking for two lumps of sugar in your milk, and can count to ten. I am sorry to tell, as young as you are you already show nervousness. You leave one plaything and start another, even when you talk sometimes it shows you are nervous. You love to play with your little pillow, always carrying it around and kissing it sometimes. The next time you spank it or try to bite it, then get mad all of a sudden and throw it far away from you, which all shows your nervousness. Soon you ask for it to be given to you to play with.

Sometimes you are hardheaded, or stubborn is the right word for it. I am trying to correct it if possible because I am afraid it is in the family, you probably inherited it from me, I am stubborn too, and according to my experience you will have lots of trouble because of that, and I’d rather you didn’t have it, my dear. You respect me very much without being afraid of me. Whenever you are crying, I only have to look at you and you stop it. You have lots of good traits and when you grow a bit older and can understand better, I am sure you will be a very good little girl, with proper guidance and love, to make sure you see what is right and wrong.

Everything you have [when] someone asks for it, willingly you give it up. If this will cause you in later life some disappointment, don’t mind it dear, be glad to share your things if you have more than some of them. You love cleanliness too, every speck has to be removed each time your hand gets soiled, and when I come home from work you look me over and if you see my hand has a dark spot you pull me to the washbowl and say “wash.” Now I will say bye-bye for awhile, till some new and nice thing happens to write in again.

[József]

**1921 April 15.** I can write again about you, there isn’t a word you can’t repeat after only one hearing. Lots of short stories and poems I used to tell you, and now when I say them, you help me out. Some of them you even can tell with very little help from me in places. Your Aunt Fáni loves to sing, she has a good voice too. You enjoy it very much and you learn it from her. There is one song you learned and are singing it all by yourself now. That

is the kind of a girl you are, talk all day long, now that it is easier for you to imitate everything you hear. If you are mad at someone for something, you say “stupid” and hit her or him. That is why I have to be a bit strict with you, which makes you respect me more. Any other person is stupid, and gets spanked by you... [József]

[Photo: Matild standing, József sitting beside her with Márta on his lap]

**1921 April 23.** Well, dear, our first family portrait is made. When you will see how many pictures we took of you in eighteen months of your life, you will think your parents were extravagant. It may be right, but this is your Dad’s only costly hobby and I wouldn’t give it up for anything. I like to have them all through the years, so I could always look back and be able to reminisce, and maybe wish the long-past years back. But now that you are growing up, we will have just birthday portraits of you, and some home made snapshots to keep up the record of your progress. Well, how do you like it? Your lovely rosebud lips were worthwhile to have for posterity, don’t you think? [József]

**1921 April 30.** My darling little girl, how sweet you are, I can hardly express it with words. But you can feel it when I hug you sometimes too hard to my breast, and you laughingly say, “Mommy you silly.” Your best place to sit is in front of the vanity, so I sit down with you there and play *csipi csóka*<sup>55</sup>. It is a game, I pinch your hand on top and you pinch mine, and when the short ditty is over we spank each other’s hand. Naturally you like best when we get to the spanking part. Your Daddy says you will be just like me, I used to like to play spanking a lot, but all in fun and play. But now since I am a mother, it doesn’t look dignified to be too playful except with you.

My darling baby, wonder if you will laugh when you read these lines years and years later when you will read all these little things we jotted down? But everything is very dear to our heart, and we are hoping when you read them it will make you happy too. When you could read between the lines how much we love you. Both your Dad and I love you more than we can tell, and all our hope is to see you grow up healthy and a very happy person. Today was the first you said “Kiss your hand,” but anyhow there isn’t a word that you can’t repeat although sometimes no one else but Dad and I can understand it. [Matild]

---

<sup>55</sup> Various translated as “Jackdaw Peck” and “Little Kiss.”

[*Eight photos of Márta*]

**1921 May 29.** These last few days I made several snapshots of you. I can tell you it was a chore, you just can't stand still for a second. I tried to bribe you with candy; if I showed it, you fidgeted for wanting it; and when I gave it to you, it was more important to eat it than to pose. Naturally your Dad is just as much to blame, but for once it is more simple to blame it all on you. Too bad it will be all faded out by the time you will see them, but I hope it will remain clear enough to see how sweet and pretty you were. Got tired by the eighth snapshot and were crying, but said with tears in your eyes, "Mata won't cry," and that's how I snapped you here.

Mártuka in these hard times you are the only thing in the world who can give me some pleasure out of life. You passed twenty months old, and can say every word. Yesterday you asked [me] to give you a book; when I gave it to you and asked where are you going? you answered "to school." What do you study? You said "algebra." You have a good memory, anything you hear once, you can remember it. Love to learn poems and you do know several and say them all the time. I bought you a picture book which you like a lot. Now when you see the pictures you start to tell the story or verse under it. If you see a picture about things you have too, right away you say "Mata has a ball," or a little bed too. I couldn't even tell anymore all the things you can say, but sometimes you say things so humorous we all start laughing. [*József*]

**1921 June 16.** Nothing new to say, except the sentences you mix up when you say something. I am telling you to come to Daddy, you say "I am busy, not go to Daddy." Then said, "Mommy buy red ribbon to Mártuka." You can say everything, just the sentence is put together every which way... and then even you are laughing about it. You have a toy jack-in-the-box which we call Paprikajancsi<sup>56</sup>. You try to say it but can't pronounce it right except Paprika—but the "junchy" comes out "jutchny" and you don't like that at all. No matter how many times you try it, it just never sounds right to your ears. I noticed you dream when you take a nap. The other day from a sound sleep you woke suddenly, sat up and called "Daddy, Daddy." I picked you up and held you in my arms and you said, "Teddy Bear don't hurt Mártuka." Till you were one year old you loved animals, but for some

---

<sup>56</sup> Hungarian equivalent of Punch: "cs" pronounced like English "tch."

reason you are afraid of them now.

My darling baby, I have to excuse myself here for being so strict with you. I mentioned several times how much you respect me but I am afraid sometimes you are even afraid of me, although you have no cause for that. When you cry, I ask, “Does Dad like it when you cry?” Then no matter how hard you are crying, with tears streaming down your tiny face you start out laughing and crying at the same time. My dear little girl I am so sorry for you when I see that, I could cry with you. But someone must be strict or you would be too spoiled for words. When some friends offer you something to eat, you won’t take it till you look at me. If I nod, you take it, and say “Daddy let me.” I am the only one in the family who can hold you in line. You could twist your Mother and everybody else around your little finger. If you feel in the mood, the two of us start to play by the hour, then you seem to forget all about me looking at you very sternly sometimes, you just climb up on my lap, hug and kiss me and say, “I love you Daddy.” I am really sorry lots of times, but it is my sincere belief I am doing a lot of good to be strict and make you mind me. This way you learn to keep your temper in check. It hurts me when I see you are afraid and run from me if you do wrong. If you only knew my sweet little daughter how much I love you, and what a joy you are to me always, you never would run from me even if you think I look at you sternly. I do love you more than I ever could show or tell you. But if no one will be stern with you, no telling what you would grow up to be. Mommy can’t be strict, she lets you do whatever you like, she never scolds you or spansks you, just loves you as you are.

When I come home at noon you run to me, hug my legs and want to kiss me and tell me that Márta played. Mommy tells what you did play at, going out to the kitchen and mixing up everything you can reach, dishes, water, food, everything. But the maids don’t mind, they love you too much... Anyway you are 83 centimeters [2’8½”] high, sweetie of a daughter, and I love you. [*József*]

**1921 July 15.** It is worthwhile to jot down this little episode that happened today: you hit your Uncle Jani hard, and I saw it and said after I spanked your hand, where did you learn such things? You promptly answered, “In school.” I couldn’t look stern or you cry longer after that, I had to laugh out loud, it was so surprising. It is interesting to hear people telling us you were not pretty before, but you are now. For us you always were pretty. Your mouth

is well-formed and sweet, your eyes are lovely dark and large and your complexion is what they call rose-petal. It must be true because when I take you for a stroll everybody stops to tell me what a lovely little girl I have. Which makes me a very proud papa. But to me it is more important that you are an exceptionally bright child, you learn everything very easily except you have no ear yet for music. All the songs you learn quickly, but you have no melody, it all sounds the same, but you seem to enjoy them just the same although other kids your age can sing better. I aim to start teaching you the violin starting at five years old. But that is a long way off yet, and by [that] time I am sure your ear will be better for the music.

Your favorite soup is cherry soup so far. Next week we will take you for a long trip to Budapest, your Grandma Ehrlich lives there, and she never saw you yet. Wonder how you'll react to travel on the train and to all the new things you will see and hear? We are not taking this book along with us for fear they will take it from us at the border. You see, Márta, B.Pest is in a different country now since the war ended; our part where we live belongs to Romania, and Budapest is still Hungarian. When we cross the border everything has to go through customs inspection, all reading material is taken away to see no important documents are among them. I wouldn't for all the world want to give up this book of yours.

[József]

**1921 July 16.** First time today we took you to the show, I proudly can say you were behaving like a little lady all through the picture. You enjoyed the part most when there was a fight, and whenever someone went out a door you hollered "bye-bye." There was kissing in it too, then you said "How many kisses?" When the man went to bed, you said "He's very sleepy." So this was your first show. [Matild]

**1921 July 20.** Tomorrow we will leave for Budapest. Wonder what your Grandma will say when she'll see you first? I was telling you stories about our impending trip and about the trains; you liked best of all to hear about the whistle of the train and you tried to imitate it. As I said before, we'll leave your book at home, I would hate to lose it. [József]

**1921 August 2.** July 31st was the day we got back from our trip. You were such a good little girl all the way, although it was an all-day travel, you slept most of the time and when awake you liked to look out the window. But in the city it was a different story, you were very cranky and restless all the time. But I think the intense heat made you that way, we



suffered a lot from it too. And the strange surroundings and people did have a lot to add to your discomfort, it was a heat wave all right. But you liked your grandmother and she adored you. She gave you lots of toys, some little furniture very old but perfect, some toys that once we played with as children, and brought back memories of my little sister Eszter who died very young. One day Grandma offered some apple to you, but you didn't take it, saying "Daddy don't want me to take apple," but you wanted it anyhow, so you told her, "Please put it in my lap." After she did that, you picked it up and ate it. So my smart little girl can help herself, and I don't need to worry what would you do if an emergency arises in your young life. [*József*]

**1921 September 10.** It's quite a long time since I wrote in this book but I am hoarding it so I could write more on your second birthday about what a little imp you are. Over a week ago you had an unpleasant illness, a mouth infection which seems contagious, lots of other children have it. But thank heaven you are all right now, but it was not easy to get rid of it. We had to paint inside your mouth several times daily with iodine, which was a bit harsh treatment for a baby your age. We were terribly sorry to do it, you were so afraid of it but we had to in order to make you well again. We both, Mother and I, wanted the other to do it because we were so chicken-hearted and didn't want to see you suffer while doing it.

The worst thing was that you ran a temperature and couldn't eat solids, just liquids. You lost some weight and got terribly cranky and naughty; you cried a lot and got cross easily. Even at me sometimes, and told me "Go away, I don't like you," and to everyone else who went close to you, you were hollering "Go away you stupid ugly thing 'cause I don't like you." I had to spank you for saying things like that, even though I felt sorry for you. But I couldn't let you continue such language if I wanted you to be the nice lovable little girl you were before you got sick. Once after a spanking you came to me crying hard, but hugged my neck and said, "Please Daddy don't spank me anymore, it hurt so." Believe me darling I can cry with you when it happens, but sometimes you are getting out of hand. And even if I spank you now and then, I have to because I don't want you to grow up a problem child, and I love you the more for it. [*József*]

**1921 September 11.** My dear sweetheart, today's the first time you went to a real theater with me, to see "Red Riding Hood," and I was very well satisfied with you there. You

enjoyed the story, even made comments on some parts, saying “Mata not afraid of the old witch<sup>57</sup>.” And you clapped your hands every time the curtains went down. When we got home you started to tell Daddy the story what you saw, with your eyes wide and your arms uplifted and closed too sometimes; you were so cute and sweet while you told the highlights of the show, we could just eat you up. Now you are disturbing Mommy, you’re shaking my arm and saying, “It is Mata’s book, when Mommy through Mata write too.” You are a very sweet little tot, honey, and your Mommy loves you a lot. [Matild]

**1921 September 27.** We have celebrated your second birthday which is always a holiday for us. Two years is a long time, but it flew just the same. My only prayer is that all the coming years would be as sweet and nice for us as these two years were. Which we could thank you for, my dear little daughter. We went through a lot in those two years, but even then, we loved it because of you my dear baby. Just to watch your dear little face light up when you were happy for something, and to see you develop day by day, made us forget our troubles. You made us very happy, Mártuka. We will try to give you a picture what kind of a child you were: in this book we will try to write down as close as we can, episodes and happenings we think will interest you when you are older and can read it for yourself.

In a few days your birthday picture will be ready so you can see how sweet you were at two years old... Your hair is a very light brown, naturally curls up at the ends, but a bit thin yet. Your eyes start to look more like your Mommy’s eyes, very dark brown and very nice indeed. You are very mischievous, a regular little imp, but in a nice way. Sometimes I have to spank you, which believe me honey hurts me more than it hurts you. Once I had to tie you to the leg of the table with a string of thread because you always were out at the neighbors, which I don’t want you to do. Naturally you don’t like that, but it had to be done to keep you at home. You have a strong will, and are quite stubborn at times, which I hope will change in time.

Now you can say everything already. Just to show you what a little imp you really are, here are a few things you said. You always like to climb up on chairs, and once I got scared and said to you, “Oh, you’ll fall down, honey,” which you answered, “I won’t fall

---

<sup>57</sup> Either a mistranslation of “the old wolf,” or perhaps the witch strayed in from a production of *Hansel and Gretel*.

down, honey.” When I said, “I won’t give you any cake,” you said “I don’t want any.” Then you said, “Oh Daddy, the ducks are barking.” And to your nursemaid you told, “Don’t pick your nose.” When you got sore at her the other day, you told her, “I will spank you, honestly, and will tell your mother on you.” Then you asked me “What are you playing on the violin?” I answered H minor, you said “What H minor<sup>58</sup>?” Then you asked your Mommy “How much is one times one?” When I lit a match, you tried to blow it out. Once I did the blowing out, but you said you did and insisted if Mata said she blew it out, then she did blow it out. One night we came home from a walk kind of late, the moon was up and you asked, “Daddy, what is that?” and I told you, then we rounded a corner, and you happily said, “There is another moon, Daddy.” You were evidently thinking about it, because after a few seconds you told me, “A candle is lit up in the moon.”

From a two-year-old baby that’s pretty good, and it isn’t just conversation always; you think things out by yourself too. For instance, you said, “We went to bed yesterday and we are going to bed today too.” You love to sing, quite off tune too, but no one cares about that. You learn lots of songs, especially from the maids, but sometimes you sing a melody and make up the verse for it as you sing. When you are very happy, you even talk to us singing, just as in an opera. You love to play dolls, but not with a real dolly; you take a piece of wood or stick and you dress it up or cover it with a blanket, and sing to it hugging it close to you. Then you really love to hear stories, any kind, just as long as it is a story. But your favorite ones are “Little Red Riding Hood,” “The Seven Dwarfs,” and “Jack and the Beanstalk.” [József]

[*Same day*] My sweet little darling, this is the most joyous day of our life. Your Daddy and Mommy are terribly happy to reach this day, your second birthday. Everybody was nice to you, and you got lots of presents. Your Aunt Fáni bought you a doll, Aunt Milli a toy dish, your little cousin Bébi some chocolate cake slices, which you like very much. Even the neighbors brought you all sorts of good things, chocolate and candy. One girl came over with a box of candy. It was funny, you didn’t want to say hello to her, but when she showed what she got for you, then you didn’t just say hello, but even kissed her. You don’t know my

---

<sup>58</sup> H (pronounced *ha*) is German for B natural. Music in the “H minor” key includes Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony, Chopin’s First Scherzo, and Menelssohn’s *Capriccio Brilliant*.

dearest baby how much everyone loves you. The whole neighborhood thinks you are cute and sweet. We both are so proud of you and no word could express how much we love you. My only wish on this day is that you will be happy for the rest of your life. Lovingly, your Mother. [*Matild*]

[*Birthday photo: Márta with an enormous bow in her hair*]

**1921 December 8.** It is a long time since I wrote last, but there was nothing much to record as we are so used to hearing you talk a mile a minute, so now we only hear it when you say some cute words. You learned words from the maids, [words] we don't like, scolding words mostly. Sometimes we hear you tell them, "Oh you stupid monkey, I will slap your face till you'll cry!" For this you get spanked, and you don't like that and try not to say it anymore, but sometimes it just happens again and you get scared and look at us [wondering] what will happen. We both are trying very hard to make you see how bad it is to say things like that, and I am sure when you are a little older you won't do it even when you get temperamental, as you are so many times now. You have a very good mind, and learn very easily. Only once you hear a poem or a song and you can repeat it. Your singing is still very much out of tune, but that doesn't bother anyone, especially you, and you keep singing just the same.

I am teaching you now the times table up to thirty, and you can say it every which way already; it happened you embarrassed your Aunt Ily with it, and she is six years older than you are. Today I showed you how to write the number 1, and you did it right away alone, but I think because you liked the sound of the way I said "up and down" while you did it. You are asking questions all the time. For instance: "Daddy, why do we have to go to bed?" I answer, "So we can sleep." "Why do we have to sleep?" "Because we are sleepy." "Why are we sleepy?" And so on all the time. I tried to answer all your questions, but it seemed you never will get tired of asking, so I just walked away from you. You're even stopping people to ask their names. You talk very plainly now, only the R doesn't come out plain yet. When you start to say something you talk very fast, which if it persists I will have to slow you down. If anyone else talks fast, right away you tell them, "Not so fast—not so fast."

The kitchen is the best-liked place for you, there you love to be and naturally you are in everything, and if anyone tells you to leave it, they have a hard time making you do it.

But we have to keep you out as you break a lot of glasses and small dishes. And when laundry day comes, you are there too to help wash. But now I will let your Mommy write more of your escapades. [József]

**1921 December 26.** Sure I will do it, my sweet. I have to tell that St. Nicholas was here already. You were waiting for him anxiously because when you were naughty we told you he will bring you some switches, but if you are good then you will get some nice things. Before you went to bed, you had to shine up your shoes to put them on the windowsill to be filled. Dad gave them back to you several times, saying they weren't shiny enough, and you were so serious when you took them to make them look shinier. When they were very nice you put them on the windowsill hoping St. Nick would be good to you, asking for a doll and for some chocolate.

You woke very early next morning, and the first thing was, "Did St. Nick come?" Dad picked you up and took you to the window to see. I can't describe the joy in your eyes and face, my dear baby, when you saw in one shoe a big clown with a bell on his long cap, and in the other shoe the chocolate. Your Aunt Fáni fixed up a little basket with lots of nice things; when you saw it you clapped your hands and said "How pretty." You were such a darling when you said that we almost smothered you with hugs and kisses. You like your clown very much, carry it around with you all day long. That is the best thing in you, my darling, that no matter how small a present you get it makes you very happy every time.

[Matild]

[Photos: Márta with her clown, and with four other children in a sleigh in the snow]

**1922 January 8.** I was trying to take some snapshots of you. I thought that would be the best way to show you later what kind of baby you were. But sorry to say they didn't come out good. It isn't your fault, my dear, you stood very nice and quiet this time. Even if they aren't good I am going to put them in your book, you might be able to see them yet... In the picture in the middle you are holding your clown, which you don't want to put down for a second. One evening we came in from a walk with you, and when we stepped in the doorway you started to cry with big tears. When I asked "What's wrong?" you pointed at the table where your clown was, and said, "I forgot to take my Jancsi for a walk with me." You were crying and kissing him for a long time after that, saying, "Sorry, I forgot to take you

Jancsika, but I won't do it anymore." You love to play with dolls and go to sleep with them if we don't watch out. You like to wash things out, and also to draw on paper.

Tonight we were sitting in the kitchen, all of a sudden you asked me, "Please Daddy, go in the other room." I asked why? You just wanted me to go out, but when I insisted on knowing why, you told me you wanted to wash dishes with Zsuzsi, the maid. You were very happy when I told you, "All right, you can wash." Then you like next to draw pictures, any kind, as long as you can hold a pencil. Here are the things you draw, you call them "palika," and you can make a number 1 very nicely. [*Followed by a page of Márta's "drawings"*]

When you finished drawing, you said "It is all done." But you were pouting when I didn't let you draw all over the book. I made you very happy when I bought you your first toothbrush; every half hour you went to brush your teeth, and all of a sudden you started sweeping the floor with it. The other day you had a bright saying which no one taught you to say: to the maid you said, "Berta—you are very pretty, but a little bit dumb."

Your only bad habit is to climb up on chairs and from them to the table. Our constant fear is that sometime you might fall and break your bones. You did fall several times but so far we are lucky you didn't hurt yourself much. The worst thing is that you must be spanked for it, and you are very much afraid of spanking, but we hope to make you realize we don't like you to climb on things. Yesterday you did climb up on the chair and fall off again. You knew spanking will follow that, but you were a little smarty, though you hurt yourself. You said, "Daddy, I didn't fall, I just climbed down," so I had nothing to spank you for. Now when you fall you get up quickly and say, "Playing soldier." You say it so you shouldn't be spanked, and try to smile it off.

I think you are a bit afraid of me, I only have to look at you when you're doing wrong and you are scared. If only you knew, my darling, even though I look sternly, how much I love you. But I can't tell you now, you'll have to find that out when you are older and will read this book yourself. [*József*]





top: Matild and Márta in March 1921

bottom: "Our First Family Portrait," April 1921



## 6

*Kivándorol Amerikába*

*Extracts from Márta's Diary, translated from the original Hungarian:*

**1922 April 19.** It is a long time since I wrote last, but this was a very hard winter for us all<sup>59</sup>. You were sick so much with bad colds, running high temperatures most of the time. Nothing definite, just colds one after another with coughing spells. We and the doctor too think it's whooping cough, that's why it lingers on so long. You didn't change, though, except you grew a lot, and if it is possible you are more mischievous than ever before. Especially if you are in the mood we have lots of fun with you, singing the songs you learn from the maids, and army songs too. For a few days we noticed your eyes get cross<sup>60</sup> sometimes, so I am taking you to the eye doctor today, maybe he can help do something to correct it. I told you you will have to wear glasses, which pleased you a lot, because you will look like your Grandpa, he too has to use glasses. [József]

During the spring of 1922 Sándor Ehrlich came to visit Kolozsvár. Sándor, a teacher, "turned up his nose" at brother József's making hats in a ladies's tailoring shop; according to Matild, this was not "arrogant enough" a line of work in Sándor's opinion. "But we have fun otherwise too," he wrote in Márta's Diary:

**1922 April 19.** "Márta, come here, you little imp." You would not come, but if I say "Don't you come near me," then you quietly get around my back and hug me. Then the sport starts, trying to find out if my feelings are hurt or not? or if we still love one another or not? Did you sleep well? What did you dream? And, bashfully, is your sheet dry? For the last question we almost always get the right answer, and we all are very happy about that...

Last night your Mommy was mending and Dad was ripping up straw hats. You

---

<sup>59</sup> Decades later Matild/Mathilda would confide to her son's mother-in-law, Ada Louise Smith, that she suffered a miscarriage between the births of Márta/Martha and George. Mention of a "very hard winter for us all" might include an allusion to this, since three-and-a-half months had passed since the previous Diary entry.

<sup>60</sup> As an adult Martha would attribute her eyes crossing to this bout of whooping cough.

pulled up your little chair next to me and we started on discussions of different things, but mostly of the value of money, and in the end you decided you will buy clothes for yourself when you have money, instead of candy, although you do like to eat candy a lot. You love to be outdoors, and when I take you to the park to see the swans glide on the lake you are happy. But you always want to go on a rowboat too, which we can't take you on, my sweet, you are too young for that kind of sport yet.

You embarrassed me once very much: while we were in the park you got friendly with a general and were talking to him nicely. But all of a sudden you asked him if he had a horse and when he said yes, you wanted to know if he fell off of it sometimes?... [Sándor]

**1922 [May?]** Sorry to say you were sickly again these last few weeks. Sometimes we had to call the doctor to see you. First thing you started to bargain with him that you would open your mouth, but he didn't need to look into your throat with a spoon, and you both stuck to this bargain, although you kept your eyes on his hand, to be sure he wouldn't use a spoon. But my dearest the days are not always going this smoothly; sometimes I find you crying when I come home and you tell me you got spanked because you were naughty. You quarrel a lot with Uncle Forgacs<sup>61</sup>, and when you can't do a thing with him because you are too little, then you tell him, "My Uncle Sándor will fix you." You think I am the strongest man, and can do anything to protect you... [Sándor]

[Two formal photos of Márta]

**1922 May 12.** Don't get vain, my dear, but you had a very good portrait picture made by a good photographer. You tried to make all sorts of faces in between, but even so, you look darling in them. We noticed in it you look a bit cross-eyed, but the doctor said you will outgrow it and we think it is getting less noticeable already...

Something interesting to jot down: we are sitting in the yard together, and you see a cat walking on the roof. You watch it for awhile, then ask, "Daddy, is it permitted for a cat to walk on the roof? Won't it fall down? Can children do that too?" Which I promptly denied. Well, you just sit for awhile thinking over what you heard, and all of a sudden you say, "Daddy, I like to be a cat so I could too walk on the housetops." Yesterday when Mommy and you were out walking, you saw a donkey pulling a cart, and you said you'd like

---

<sup>61</sup> Nephew of Uncle János Fruchter.

to be a donkey too. In that we are the same, because when I was a boy I too wanted to ride on a donkey, but never did.

We watch you very closely always for fear something might happen to you. I myself grew up on the streets and other children in our neighborhood are always out alone. But not you my baby, we don't let you out alone. Although sometimes I think maybe it would be better if we don't watch out so much for you, but to let you learn to take care of yourself alone. But you are too precious for us, and we can't bear the thought of something happening to you. [*József*]

[*Seven photos of Márta and friends*]

**1922 June 11.** I was extravagant again, and tried to do something I don't know much about. But I am glad I did get seven snapshots of you, which were taken at home in the yard. These are more natural than the first bunch was. We got you a wagon of clean sand to play in; you have lots of toys, but let everything lay, you just want to be in the sandpile every minute of the day and without shoes too. You were pouring it on your legs and playing store and selling it by the pint, for eight cents a pint<sup>62</sup>. Since you have it, you don't even want to put on shoes to go for a walk. So that is why we had to make the pictures barefoot, but we had to coax you to pose even that way, and your Mommy had to hold you tight so you couldn't run back to play in the sandpile instead. One of the snapshots is with the two maids whom you like so well, but even so, sometimes you quarrel with them and call them names, and we have to spank you for it. But sometimes you are real good and tell the girls, "You are very lovely," or "You are beautiful, my girl." Naturally they get a kick out of whatever you tell them, and laugh at your sayings. They love you, and teach you lots of nice folksongs which you learn quickly.

The other pictures are with your Aunt Fáni and Uncle Jani... I get into lots of differences with [Jani] because of you, honey. He can't see me be strict with you; no matter how bad a thing you do, he always says, "Oh, she's only a baby." But you are smart, and I know you understand what is good or bad. But he thinks whatever you do, we are to be blamed. He is already complaining what will he do without you next month when the three of us will go on our vacation and leave him at home. The snapshot with him is the best...

---

<sup>62</sup> "Cents" and "pint" in the English translation.

You like to pick your fingernails which you are not allowed to do, and sometimes you hide behind things so we don't see you do it. When we don't see or hear you for awhile, then we know what's happening; if we are quiet we look and catch you picking at your fingers. So while we took the pictures I let you do just that, which kept you so quiet it was easy. We try to correct your cross eyes, the doctor gave us instructions to tie one eye up [in a patch] and to change it next to the other eye. But if it doesn't get better, he'll have to give you glasses next year...

Then one more picture which isn't so clear, showing you and your little cousins and your Aunt Ily who is eight years old. It's hard to take pictures of four little children, but I wanted to have them for you, so when you are older you could see what you all looked like [when you were almost] three years old. [József]

**1922 July 10.** My darling little girl, it is quite a time since I chatted with you here. But I am always tired lately and when I come home late have no ambition for anything, just looking how fast I could go to bed and to sleep. Seems as though I always have to argue with you, because since we bought the sandpile you never want to go for a walk anymore with me, just want to stay home in the sand to play. I am glad you like it, it is healthy to play in it, but sometimes I like to go to the Park with you at least. Daddy doesn't like walking much<sup>63</sup>, and so I have to stay home also, or go all by myself, which isn't fun at all. Now you are so used to us going every day to the shop that you never cry anymore when we leave. Sometimes Dad tells you, "Take care of the house, kitten," and when we get back at night you run to greet us, and happily say "I did take care of the house all day." You like very much if we give you some work to do... You are a bright child, pay attention to things told to you to do, and do them well. The other day the girl brought you to the shop and right away you asked for work; when the people asked you why do you want to work, you answered to have a lot of money; and why do you want money? "So I can buy some chocolate and pretty clothes." So my dear baby you learn early enough in your life to appreciate work and money, and to understand you can't have it without working first, so you can have money to buy whatever you need.

Sometimes I feel heartsick about you, my sweet, to be so little with you at home.

---

<sup>63</sup> Some toes on József's wounded left foot had fused and become rigid, and he was hampered by a slight limp.

You see, darling, our shop is away from our house and we both go away early to work each day, and we can't help it yet. But we can appreciate you even more when we come home evenings. You are so happy to see us, and start to talk a mile a minute and tell everything you did all day, and which child came to play with you in the sandpile. Dad and I have such fun with you every night, it is a pleasure to watch you perform for us. You sure are a darling, and we both love you very much. Last week you got ill on a Saturday when we both were home with you. We got frightened when you threw up everything you ate. Thank heaven it didn't last long.

The next morning your little friend Erzsi came and as soon as you saw her you started to make funny faces and started laughing together. After that you ate breakfast and kept it down and all was well again. You like to eat carrots, every day you eat a couple but just raw. Vegetables are only eaten by you when the doctor tells you to eat them. But if I cook some vegetable the doctor forgot to mention, you have the best excuse not to eat it: "The doctor didn't tell you must eat that one." That's the kind of a girl you are, but just as sweet as can be just the same. Everybody loves you, but best of all your Grandpa loves you. If we don't take you over one day, the next he comes to see why, and gets peeved at us over it. [*Matild*]

**1922 July 22.** Now, my pal, I've got you again and I will gossip about you. You are standing right next to me with your little cousin Bébi, and so sweetly impish but also intelligent. You are improving your mind greatly, you learn lots of things to brighten up your future life. The things you learn and do are fascinating to watch. So in singing, screaming, climbing, and even in fighting you are a wonder. The highest record would be in fighting, but in all you sure are an imp, my pal. There are several songs you ask me to sing with you, they are the silliest sounding things, but we do it together and have a whale of a good time all the while we sing. You wouldn't mind if I would do it all day; we are very good friends, and it sure hurts to think we soon have to part...

Anyway you love quite a few new language twisters. Probably a new Webster is lost in you. But, my dear, life isn't always this simple, there are lots of things beside fun and play. One thing is you always want to go visiting the neighbors at all hours of the day, and we can't make you understand that they are busy and have no time for you. Once your Daddy tied you to the table with a long thread just to make you stay at home. I think it

helped in a way. My heart was bleeding to watch you sit there, but even so, I was glad you understood what it was all about. You did learn to go visiting only when they ask you.

Mártuka, I am going away tomorrow, I feel sad to leave you behind because I love you very much. You reminded me of lots of things, and gave me lots of pleasure with your sunny smiles when we played together. Lead a happy life my dear, and after many years, when we meet again, you will be a young lady already. I will always love you, and I am taking a photograph of you with me, and when you will write to me, then I will feel the happiest. [*Sándor*]

**1922 August 3.** My dearest little girl, your Daddy is away for the last ten days. He is in Pest to see your Grandma and also on business. This is the first time since you were born that we have been left alone, just the two of us, for such a long time. Two or three days were all he ever went away before. You miss him very much and always talk about him. You sometimes get mad and say, “Why does he stay so long? I want him.” But he promised to bring you a small violin, and when I remind you of that, then you are all right again for awhile. Since he is away you lavish all your love on me and I am happy with you. Hope you will always stay as you are now, very sweet and good. Since we are alone without Daddy, I am taking you everywhere with me, even to the market, because I am afraid to trust anybody to take care of you. Yesterday you got tired walking the markets, and got cranky. I tried to amuse you every way, but you were not interested at all, so I got sore and told you, “This is the last time I ever will take you.” But today again very sweetly you asked me to take you. I was very firm and sounded gruff, “If you will whine I’ll spank you.” But you promised you wouldn’t cry, just take you along too.

But my sweet you did get tired again and started to cry a bit. So I told you like I was mad at you, “What did I tell you I’d do to you if you started crying?” Then my dear baby you were such a darling, through your tears you started to smile and said, “Mommy, I am not crying, see, I am smiling, it was just a little bit.” I had to stop right there on the street to hug you and assure you there would be no spanking needed. Tonight we had supper at Grandpa’s, and coming home they all were walking back with us for company. We were talking and you were bargaining with me to change beds. You wanted me to sleep in your little bed and you in my big one. So I said OK. You were talking about how it will be when

you grow up and I will be a baby. You can't imagine that we both could be grown up sometime. Then you said, "I will do all the work, cook dinner, and you will ask me to feed you." You were so cute that the whole family was handing you from hand to hand, kissing you and loving you, how smart you are. And your Mommy was very happy and proud of you.

When I put you to bed, you could not fall asleep, as your Uncle Jani was having a loud discussion with his nephew Forgacs. You were turning and tossing for awhile till you got tired of it all, then asked me to tell them to keep quiet so you could go to sleep. I said, "Sorry, darling, but I can't do that, I can't tell them what to do." Then you were so sweet again and told me, "All right, Mommy, then I will stop up my ears so I won't hear anything." You have lots of good sayings like that, especially daytimes, but I have so much on my mind and have no time to jot them down, and by the time I have a chance to sit and write in your book I have forgotten most of it.

One more thing, since Daddy is away you love and respect me more, and you try to obey and do what I tell you to. I'm very proud of my little girl and happy to see you can mind me too if necessary. But I want you to love me rather than be afraid of me, and hope that's the way it will be, my darling. [Matild]

**1922 September 17.** Nothing happened till now that was worth writing about, but last week we enrolled you at a nursery school close by in a convent. When I took you there first, you liked it and you liked your teachers; they were nuns and you thought it was fun and said they were "brides" because they had veils on their heads. The first day was fine in school, but second day you started to cry before we started out to go and didn't want to go at all. But we took you anyway because we know it is good for you to be with children there. The sisters were very nice to you, they gave you a doll right away to play with, a little crib and lots of doll clothes to dress the doll up. So you forgot by then that you didn't want to go, and played happily with your cousin Bébi who goes to the same school with you. Sometimes don't even want to come home, except when I tell you we will take the bus home, you like to ride on it very much. [Matild]

**1922 September 27.** I just noticed it is three months since I wrote last in your book. But today is a day we can't forget, my darling. You are three years old today, it is a long time,



and I can't even think back to the time before you were born. It seems we always had you for our own baby. [You] don't even surprise us when you say or do something new and smart. It is very natural to hear you sing and tell poems or even stories. I even forget to jot down your bright sayings, because we are so used to hearing them all the time and you are a big girl, already three years old. But with all your smartness we couldn't talk you into continuing with the nursery school. You put up such fuss every time that we all were nervous by the time you were dressed. So after two days, we had to let the money we paid for a week for you there be wasted, and keep you at home again. After that when I wanted to scare you into doing something you didn't want to do, I just told you I'd send you to school. That was enough and you behaved for the time being.

I noticed you don't like a lot of children together, you can play the best if you only have one child to play with, then all is fine. But when several kids come to our yard to play, you stand away and just watch them. You probably inherited this from me, it might be a good thing in later life if you could stand aside and choose your friends carefully. I had lots of disappointments in so-called friends; now your Mommy and I live for each other and for you. Your smiling face and chatter are all we want, you are our whole life and we will try to see you grow up as happy as possible. I want to show you a goal for your future life, and hope you will keep it in your mind and keep that goal for yourself, to make a nice future that will make you happy and satisfied. I will try to teach you that a good book or a good play is worth more than silly friends or a dance.

I see already that you are a serious little girl and hope you grow up that way. I can just look at you and you know what I like you to do, and do it. Maybe, my dear baby, sometimes you will think I am terrible, but believe me I would do anything to make your later life free of unhappiness when it really will mean something to you. When I took you to touch the hot stove, I didn't do it for fun, I did it to teach you to know that is something to be afraid of, and to be able to remember when I won't be close by, to avoid anything that could hurt you. I hope a year from now I could still write just nice things in this book of yours. Now I will leave some room for our first family portrait at the time you are three years old.

*[Photo: Márta, Matild, and József]*

You can see how pretty you are in it, but looking older than your age. I think you

even are going to be glad to see how your parents looked when you were three...

I am going to jot down a few things you have said lately. For instance, “Mommy, you are an anti-Semite<sup>64</sup>.” Or “Mrs. Ehrlich, you sure have a big girl.” Then you’re telling me you go to school, and I say don’t be silly, you never even saw a school yet. Your answer is, “Yes I did, in the funny papers.” You think you are not pretty because your eyes get crossed sometimes. Once a lady talked to you on the street and was telling you she has two pretty daughters, and you wanted to know if they too have cross eyes?

You like money already; in my work I use a starch that smells bad and you come to the shop and tell me it stinks. But if I promise to give you a dollar<sup>65</sup> if you smell it closely, then for the money you do it, and happy that you get so much money. That’s the kind of a little imp you are, you *Harám-basa*<sup>66</sup>. This word caught your fancy and makes you laugh very hard. [József]

[Photo: Márta in nightgown]

**1922 November 18.** I have to tell you, my dear, you’ve got eyeglasses which you wear all day long and every day we have to put a dark patch on one eye for exercise. Hope it will help to correct it in time. As your picture shows with you in your nightie, your eyes aren’t bad, you even look cute with it, but even so we hope it won’t show when you grow older, and glasses will help it. The doctor took a long time examining your eyes and made you count dots over and over. You counted a couple of times up to seven or eight very nicely, but when she started again and showed you two more dots. you got sore and said thirty. With the prescription I had to go to the place to get the glasses for you, which cost a lot of money, and I told the man that’s too much. So he said to go home with your little sister and ask your father if it is all right. He couldn’t believe I was your father, he thought I looked too young for that. How do you like that, my pet? They even think I am your Mother’s younger brother, although I am almost two years older than she is. I hope they won’t think you are my Mama now that you have to wear glasses.

<sup>64</sup> “*Anyukám te antiszemita vagy*” in the untranslated Diary.

<sup>65</sup> “Dollar” in the English translation.

<sup>66</sup> Most Hungarian dictionaries and online translators exclude this, but Google Books twice interprets “*te harám-basa*” in Ignác Kúnos’s 1893 novel *Köroglu* as “you bastard.” This translation must reflect artistic license, since the literal Hungarian equivalent of bastard is *fattyú*, and József would hardly have used such language around his toddler daughter. A closer counterpart to *harám-basa* would probably be “scoundrel.”

But you take everything in your stride, happy and enjoying every day as it comes along, doing everything you want, washing dishes and clothes with the maid, and being as mischievous as possible. You have a pet, a little chicken which you call Janka, you feed her from your hand and give her a drink of water too. She even flew up into your lap to be played with, but when you get mad you throw her down. You like to keep her in the kitchen, but that's hard because she isn't housebroken. When she does something on the floor you grab her up, scold her and put her on the potty and are disappointed when nothing happens and scold her some more. You are so cute when you do these things, we could hardly keep a straight face.

[A page of Márta's scribbles]

You think your drawings are good and represent dolls, Teddy bears, and dogs. They all have eyes, noses, ears, hands and legs, and it takes you only seconds to draw them. When you saw a donkey on the street you wanted to draw a picture of it when we got home. You told me, "Daddy, I am going to draw a great big donkey just as big as you are."

Mártuka, it seems you will be an American little girl by next summer. [József]

---

Life for the Jews in Romania was not on the upswing. During the past three years there had been a constant increase in anti-Semitism, flaring particularly at high schools and universities in Bucharest and Jassy; in December 1922 the *numerus clausus* was proclaimed, and there were Jew-baiting student riots.

"We had no choice but go somewhere, but where could we go?" Matild was to say. "How long could a decent person go on like this? We had to do something drastic and we tried."

After Matild's Uncle Samu and Aunt Jeni Kohn left Europe to go live in Chicago, they had remained in touch with the family in Kolozsvár. Jeni and Matild's mother Berta had corresponded, and the energetic Jeni had come back to visit almost every year before the war. She was always encouraging her relatives to join the Kohns in the United States.

With this connection in mind, the Ehrlichs were "debating and seriously thinking" they might *kivándorol Amerikába*—emigrate to America. They wrote to the Kohns in 1922, "asking them please help us by sending us an affidavit so we could come to America, promising that we never would be a burden to them if they would just help us with this

paper. We waited a long time before we heard that they'd try. But finally Aunt Jenny and Uncle Sam sent us the papers to start our long journey on its way to America. While we waited and hoped, we still kept up our shop at my folks's house and went to work daily, but it was hard to get the permit to emigrate just the same..."

Realizing that Ellis Island was jammed with newcomers, Congress in February 1921 had rushed into law an emergency measure intended to restrict immigration. Each European country was assigned a quota based on 3% of its nationals residing in the United States in 1910. This cut immigration back from over 800,000 a year to under 260,000; more significantly, it reduced the number of incoming Russians, Italians, and Austro-Hungarians from two-thirds of the total to less than half. And the 1921 Immigration Act was only a temporary stopgap, unsatisfactory to restriction advocates but allowing them time to draw up a more permanent policy that would freeze out eastern, southern, and central Europeans altogether.

Caught half-aware in this historical pinch, the Ehrlichs were "waiting endlessly to hear from the American Consulate in Bucharest... and it was very hard on us."

*[Passport photo of the three Ehrlichs]*

**1923 January 21.** Here is another picture of us all, but this one had to be made for our passport... It will take quite a few months before we will be able to really leave for the States, but we made our minds up already and, my dear, you will be an American miss after all. You can see from this picture your hair is cut short again, it was so thin and was falling out in bunches so we had to cut it. Your face is so small and your tiny ears look big, but it will grow back again and we are hoping it will be real nice this time. You are sturdy and healthy and that's the main thing for us. Also, even though you are not a genius, you are quite smart for your age. Hope by the next time I write in this book for you, I could tell you the date of our trip to the new country of ours. *[József]*





top left: Márta in May 1922

other four: Snapshots of Márta, featuring Fáni and Jani and the two maids: June 1922



above: The Ehrlichs in September 1922

below: Márta in her nightgown, November 1922







Passport photo, January 1923



## TWO

### CHICAGO

*Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience... Let diaries, therefore, be brought into use.*

—Francis Bacon, *Essays*



## 7

*Departure and Arrival*

*Extracts from Márta's Diary, translated from the original Hungarian:*

**1923 March 10.** We don't know the date yet, but it is sure now that we will go some time this summer. It is terribly hard to get visas and we can't go without them. Even you take it naturally that we will go, and talk about what you will do when you are in America. You love to hear stories, you don't care what it is as long as I talk, and start "once upon a time." You can hardly wait till summer's here and every once in awhile you ask me, "Please Daddy, tell me when the flowers will be in bloom and will you tell me when I will be able to play in the park?" Best of all you love to walk barefoot in the sand, and want to know when will it be warm enough for that too.

I feel so sorry for your Uncle Jani, he feels terribly lonely already when he thinks you will leave him to go to America. He is even thinking of following you there. He loves you so much. I am afraid he'll really be heartbroken after you are gone from him. But you also love him a lot and will miss him too. You are a generous and good-hearted little girl.

[József]

In April the Ehrlichs got their passport, which was in both Romanian and the "language of diplomacy," French:

*Au nom de sa Majesté  
FERDINAND I-er  
ROI DE ROUMANIE  
Délivré à M. Josif Ehrlich  
Né à Győr  
Domicilié à Cluj  
De profession ouvrier  
Voyageant Amérique  
Délivré à Bucarest  
Le 12 Avril 1923  
par Minister de L'Interieur  
et valable pour une année*

**1923 June 20.** All we are thinking about lately is our coming trip to America. Thank God we can really go this year. We will leave Kolozsvár on August 27th to go to Bucharest where the American Consulate is, and there's where we will get the visa to enter the U.S.A. From there we take a train to Constanța where we board our boat on the Black Sea on September 4th. You too talk about it all the time and when you want something and we say we can't or we haven't, your answer is, "OK, I'll get it when I am in America," and I am hoping you'll be right.

Today your Aunt Margit and her little daughter Bébi left for Paris, France, where their husband and father's waiting for them with a ready furnished apartment. Hopefully to have a better life there, just as we hope for ourselves in America. You and Bébi both cried so hard at the depot, you didn't want to leave each other. I asked you, "Why do you cry, Mártuka?" You said, "I am crying because we are never going to see one another as long as we live<sup>67</sup>."

... You love to play, but with one playmate at a time or all by yourself; don't like crowds. When there's several children in the yard you let them play, and you stand away and just watch them. I feel very sorry already when I think you will have to adjust to a whole new way of life and language too in America. Especially the nursery schools where you will have to go while Mommy and Daddy go to work at first. You seem to grow up to be a good little housekeeper; we were without a maid for a spell, and you said you wanted to help, and started to wash up the breakfast dishes, and did it really beautifully, every piece. I think you will be very handy around the house, more probably than in book learning, which I will be sorry for, but it won't make any difference with me. One day you asked me, "Daddy does it mean work when we eat?" When I said yes, you were happy and told me, "Then I am working too." I am glad you can draw conclusions already, it means you are using your brain to figure things out for yourself. I wish we were in America already. [József]

Matild too wanted to write once more in Márta's Diary while the Ehrlichs were still in Kolozsvár, although she was very busy preparing for the journey to "our new country

---

<sup>67</sup> In 1966 Márta/Martha's brother George visited their Aunt Ily, then living in Paris, and there "met Baby (Violet ? [sic]) who is a first cousin. Indeed, the *first* first cousin I have ever met. She is the daughter of Margaret, an older sister of my mother. Baby is perhaps 58 [actually 47] and a wide, voluble, loud Parisian who spoke in three languages more or less at once. Ily at 52 is her aunt, and much nonsense about that."

America.” For the past few weeks she had stayed home to make Márta new clothes for the trip—several dresses, underwear, “and even a coat because you outgrow them too fast.”

[undated] Your Dad still goes to the shop to finish off things he has, and to see all’s taken care of. But you my darling and I are at home with your Aunt Fáni, and very happy together, as I had very little time before to spend with you. You aren’t used to having me too to talk to and watch your doings. While I was sewing you were playing ball, hitting it to the floor several times without letting it fall, and wanting me to watch too. When I told you how good you were doing and said I was glad, you told me “I am glad too that I am such a big girl already.” So my little kitten you feel all grown up. I guess my sweetheart this will be the last time I will write until we leave. I have a million things to do, and must gather things we have to take with us. [Matild]

“As I think back on all the blunders we made with our packing what to bring to America,” Matild would say, “it’s sad and at the same time laughable... We packed up the silliest junk to bring. Besides all the new clothes we made for our little girl to look elegant, there were feather beds, linens, pillows, and on top of all that junk we packed cooking pots and pans, instead of one suitcase and all the cash possible. It was really pitiful.”

But it took all the cash possible for the Ehrlichs to buy third-class passage for three to the United States. In the end József had to sell his Omega pocket watch and “two rings he’d bought instead of money savings, it was surer than cash at that time in Europe.” These and Matild’s jewelry brought \$450, sufficient to pay for passage, but “I don’t like to think of the heartbreak of giving our things away or trying to sell some of them,” Matild was to say. Among the items sold were diamond stud earrings József had given her for an anniversary present; and Matild would refuse to ever wear another pair of pierced earrings.

**1923 August 16.** You could see from your diary when you can read it, that your countless friends, aunts, uncles, and cousins are saying farewell<sup>68</sup> to you, because we will leave very soon now on the 27th of this month. For you, my dear, it won’t mean too much of a change

---

<sup>68</sup> Numerous relatives and neighbors wrote their goodbyes in Márta’s Diary, including Matild’s sister Rozsi, “your Aunt Milli’s husband, your Uncle Mendy,” and the Tothfalussy family (“our neighbors”) who painted a beautiful rose. But Matild/Mathilda would skip two full pages of these messages in her 1953 translation of the Diary—possibly by accident, but more likely because it was so painful to remember those left behind who were later lost.

as long as we will be with you. But to your Mother and for me it will be terribly hard to leave our family behind. But even you feel the hardship of leaving, especially your Uncle Jani. You look at him so sadly, and pat him and kiss his balding head and face. We all feel bad that we have to part, but this is for our future, we must do it. We can't help it, my dear, and we are hoping we can do a lot better there [in America], as Europe still is under the hardship of a world war[‘s aftermath]. Naturally you feel just as good here too, as we did try very hard to make you happy and give you all the things we think a little girl of [almost] four years old ought to have to enjoy life... Now I hope the next recording in your book will be on the boat when we cross the ocean. Hope it will be soon now. [*József*]

**1923 August 23.** My little one, this is the saddest time of our life. Going around to our family, saying our goodbyes to everyone. I took you out to the cemetery to say goodbye to my dear Mother, who was your grandmother, and we both cried, it was a sad thing to do. When I asked you “Why do you cry?” you said “I feel sorry for poor Grandma.” You are so sweet and very sensitive, which I hope won't cause you much heartache later on... We are starting on our trip in five days. You are counting it by how many times you have to go to sleep... [*Matild*]

On the 27th the Ehrlichs bade farewell to “Kolozsvár, or Cluj as it is called now”:

I won't say much of our parting from the relatives; it was hard. Everyone loved you and was sorry to part with you. Especially your old Grandfather; who knows if we will ever see him again? He cried like his heart was broken. And Grandma [Ehrlich], who is left all by herself now. But the hardest thing was for you to say goodbye to your Uncle Jani. He loved you so much, couldn't have been more if you'd been his own little girl. He will try to follow us out to the U.S.A., just to be near to you again.

[*József*]

The Ehrlichs arrived in Bucharest and stayed in a hotel for “several days that seemed endless until we could get the visa to freedom that we all hoped for.” Since József had not been born in Transylvania, “we were worried that might change our luck of getting the visa if the Consul started asking questions, and we wondered what we'd do if he said no.”

On August 29th the Ehrlichs's name was called at the Consulate. József started

walking up the marble stairway “and at the same time a big husky older Romanian woman started to push ahead of him.” When the officials discovered she was not supposed to go in yet, they “got so furious they gave her a push and she started rolling down those stone steps screaming bloody murder because she got hurt, poor thing. But that upheaval caused such commotion...”

In the midst of which the Vice-Consul asked József, “Where were you born?”

“Győr,” József answered.

“Is that far from here?” asked the Vice-Consul.

And József, who never in his life could tell an outright lie, replied: “Not so *very* far.”

The Vice-Consul, still angry about the upsetting incident on the stairs, “just put a big loud stamp on a paper,” noting 3 (*three*) in the space marked *Persons born in Romania*; and József “was so surprised and dazed that he grabbed it and hurried out and down those stairs fast as he could before the Consul could come to and stop him. God, what a relief it was, not just for us, but for all these new friends we made while we waited for this unbelievable happy, happy day. It took days to believe and slowly we realized our dream was coming true.”

On September 2nd, Matild’s twenty-eighth birthday, the Ehrlichs took an express train to Constanța “where are the docks of the Black Sea,” and the next day they boarded the S.S. *Constantinople*<sup>69</sup>. “Wonder what you will think and say when you first see the ocean and boat we have to board?” Matild had written in Márta’s Diary. Matild would leave no doubt what she herself thought: “When we paid for our tickets, third-class, we were promised a single cabin for three. But when we got on, we all had to take what they gave us. So we ended up three families in one large cabin. Could you believe it? The only privacy we had was when everybody went up on deck.”

On the ship’s manifest, the Ehrlichs are entered as husband **Joseph**, height 5’7”, occupation “hater” [*sic*]; wife **Matted** [*sic*], height 5’4”, occupation “housew”; and child **Mrata** [*sic*] height 3’0”, occupation “baby.” All three are said to be Romanian citizens, born

---

<sup>69</sup> According to [www.EllisIslandRecords.org](http://www.EllisIslandRecords.org), the *Constantinople* was built in Danzig in 1897, with room for 2,330 passengers: 230 first class, 250 second class, and 1,850 third class. Originally called the *Bremen* and laid up during World War I, it was given to Great Britain as reparations in 1919 and renamed the *Constantinople* in 1921. Efsthathios Theophilatos was Master or Commanding Officer during the Ehrlichs’s voyage. A year later the ship received its final name, the *King Alexander*; it was scrapped in Italy in 1929.



in “Gyo,” and of the Hebrew “race or people.” The adults are able to read the language of “Ungary”; their nearest relative back home is “his father in law Mooz Ehrlich [*sic*],” and they are going to join “his cousin Marcus Tener [*sic*] of 1024 Irving Park Buler” [*sic*] in Chicago. All three intend to seek American citizenship; none is a polygamist, an anarchist, an advocate of overthrowing the United States government by force or violence, has been in prison or an almshouse, treated for insanity or supported by charity. All are in good health, none deformed or crippled—but a handwritten addendum notes a medical certificate for “Mrata’s” bilateral strabismus convergent, i.e. crossed eyes.

Early on the morning of September 4th, the *Constantinople* left harbor. “We all were out on deck when we started,” wrote József, “and I never will forget the feeling when we saw the shores slowly disappear from our view.” Matild had intended to keep up Márta’s Diary “and write down every interesting moment on the way to America,” but she was seasick for nearly the entire voyage “except when I lay flat on my back on my bed. It was the most miserable time in my life.”

Márta did not succumb to *mal de mer* but was very much afraid of the daily medical examinations. “Such hardships we’ve gone through already in these few days are too much even for an adult,” her father wrote, “but your concern is only, ‘Do we have to go for a checkup again?’”

The *Constantinople* had two thousand passengers, “mostly Russian Jews who all were chased out of the Ukraine. They are a funny lot, and we and a few Hungarian families get the same rough treatment from the crew because they don’t see we were a better class of people.”

Always very class-conscious (in the sense of knowing who conducted themselves as ladies and gentlemen and who did not) József and Matild could nevertheless sympathize with the Ukrainians:

They said everything they had was confiscated... We are sorry for ourselves, but more sorry to watch them fight for everything they need. People with little money have to suffer for reasons they can’t help. Seems poor people are treated badly everywhere and they are used to it by now, but we hate to see the cruelty and heartlessness of the crew. It cost even more for them, and they were worse off.

Matild would later write that the *Constantinople* was “a Greek boat, and every sailor or worker on it was the same, and no one as far as I can recall spoke any other language on it either... We heard later on that if we’d taken any other line but Greek, this wouldn’t have happened. Well, we just didn’t know. For another hundred dollars we wouldn’t have had to suffer at all. We thought we’d saved money.”

**1923 September 8-9.** ...When we got to Constantinople [the city] we all were under quarantine, and our clothes had to be fumigated before they let our boat pass through the Turkish harbor. I hope it won’t happen again, we certainly will get dirtier, not cleaner after such an ordeal. We also have a hard time keeping ourselves clean as we travel... In the morning we have to line up for our baths because there are too many people and not enough bathrooms, but we want to keep ourselves as clean as we possibly can... We found out (and we saw them too) that in steerage were some of the Russian aristocracy, who stood in line with us for their baths also, which didn’t help either of us... We needed a little fortune to buy our passage, but this [trip] won’t last long and after we get to our new home I am very sure everything will be all right. Today we passed over the Dardanelles and our boat is heading toward Greece. We will have a couple of days’s stop in Piraeus for food and water. The sea so far was very calm, and our food passable, but the extra food we brought from home comes handy and tastes good for snacks... We only worry that we don’t get enough milk, except one glass for you at breakfast, and we must buy some canned milk and they charge a lot for it. [József]

Having sailed through the Bosphorus and the Mediterranean to reach the Atlantic, “if all went as it should have we [would have been] in New York in ten days. But in a few days, the engine broke down somewhere in the nowhere, and nobody knew where any of us were. As we found out much later, none of our mail was ever forwarded and the whole bunch of us was out of touch with the world. We never met or saw another ship on our voyage.”

The Ehrlichs had figured on their money lasting until arrival in Chicago, but the trip took so much longer than scheduled they had to spend much more than they had planned<sup>70</sup>:

**1923 September 18.** Food’s getting less and less. Also quite bad and no milk for even the

---

<sup>70</sup> The *Constantinople* manifest reports that the Ehrlichs were in possession of \$30 when they boarded.

children. It's the third [second?] week we are drifting and we can't find out how long we'll be traveling this way and your Mother stays in bed, she takes the sea quite hard. Wish it was over. [József]

The voyage that was to have taken ten days ultimately went on for twenty-seven, and Márta's fourth birthday was noted (if not celebrated) on the 27th<sup>71</sup>. At last, early on the morning of Monday, October 1st, the *Constantinople* arrived in New York harbor. József would later write:

"Finally when we could see the Statue of Liberty, we couldn't express our feelings. Impressive, it was a very good and happy sight. [The next day<sup>72</sup>] we were taken by small boats to Ellis Island and we had a nice warm meal and were told after we finished to wait. So we did just that. We had to. As we found out that we were short five dollars for our tickets to take the train to Chicago, we didn't know what to do. I knew I had an aunt in New York, she was the sister of my father<sup>73</sup>, and I had her address with me. I asked her to loan me the five dollars until we got to Chicago, and I would send it back the very next week. After several hours waiting, no answer came<sup>74</sup>. We just didn't know what to do. But all of a sudden a nice-looking man came over asking if I was Ehrlich? When I said yes, he gave me the five dollars and his name and address and said to send the money back when I could. So we started on our trip home to Chicago."

The loan had come from a traveler's aid society in return for József's promise to pay it back as soon as possible, which characteristically he was to do. A dollar from the Ehrlichs's meager remaining funds bought a large bag of milk, fruit, "all sorts of cold cuts... enough of everything to last us until we got there." With thirty-two cents left in their pockets, the family was put on the train for a round-the-clock ride to Chicago; Matild "was

---

<sup>71</sup> On the ship's manifest her age entry is "4" typed over "3."

<sup>72</sup> While the *Constantinople* manifest shows arrival in New York on October 1st, the Ehrlichs's naturalization applications would state they'd been permanent residents of the United States since October 2nd: indicating a delay in disembarkation.

<sup>73</sup> I had hopes of identifying this aunt as Ida Ehrlich from the 1869 Győr census who married Alexander Deutsch, since a widowed Hungarian-born Ida Deutsch of similar age (and mother of an Alexander) was found in the 1910 New York City census. Sadly, her 1948 death certificate showed this Ida as having been born a Polecheck. Mór Ehrlich's only other recorded sisters, Risa and Gisela, both died long before 1923.

<sup>74</sup> Months later the Ehrlichs found out the telegram had never reached József's aunt. Years after that, József's son George would meet this aunt's son Frank, a soccer player whose scarred legs were more memorable than his surname. Frank was said to be József's only other blood relation in America.

ill on this trip also and lying down half the way there.”

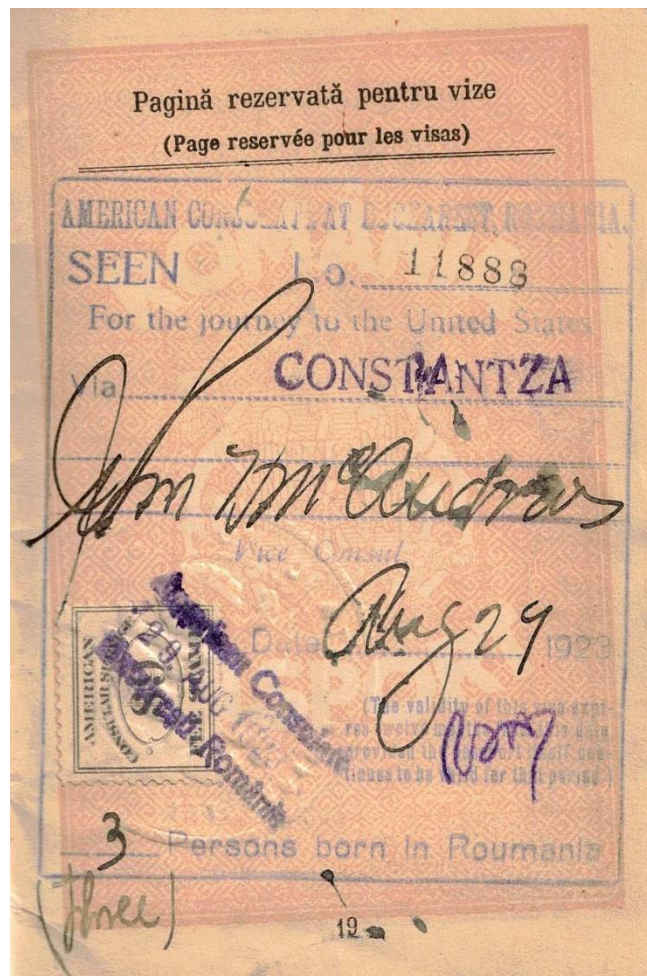
At seven o'clock on the morning of Sunday, October 7th the Ehrlichs were taken by taxi to the home of Sam and Jeni Kohn, a seven-room apartment on Irving Park Boulevard near Sheridan Road, in the northern Lincoln Park neighborhood.

“The taxi driver rang the bell and we all waited for someone to come out. An angry maid came and started to holler at the driver that he’s disturbing the family too early. He tried to tell her we’d just arrived from Europe, and owed him six dollars. So she let us come into the living room and we waited for awhile, the driver too. Our Uncle and family were surprised a bit, as they hadn’t received our telegram yet, so they did not expect us, and didn’t know when we’d get to Chicago, or in fact to the U.S.A. But they welcomed us with open arms and at long last we were home with them, and they were just beautiful, all of them.”

Sam Kohn paid off the taxi driver, and the family took the Ehrlichs in “like their own children.”

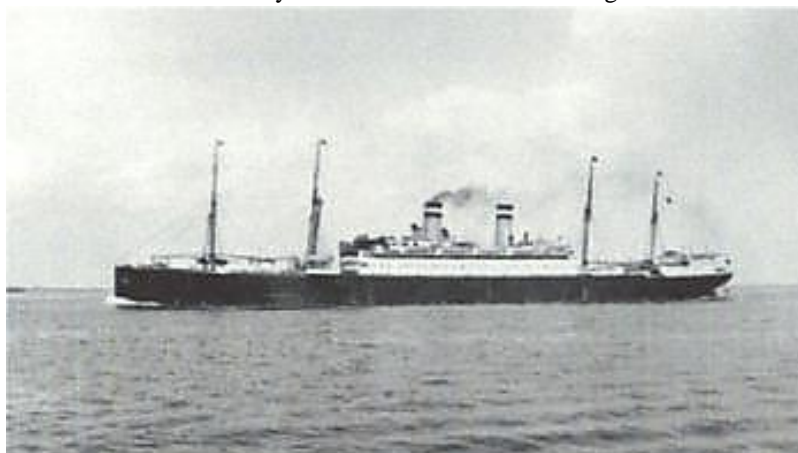
below: The Tóthfalussys’s farewell rose: June 1923





above: Visa: "3 (three) Persons born in Roumania"

below: The S.S. *Constantinople*  
courtesy of [www.ellislandrecords.org](http://www.ellislandrecords.org)





NOTED FOR  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR  
IMMIGRATION SERVICE

List **16**

# LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED STATES

ALL ALIENS arriving at a port of continental United States from a foreign port or a port of the insular possessions of the United States, and all aliens arriving at a port of said insular possessions from a foreign port, a port of continental United States (this white) sheet is for the listing of

S. S. "CONSTANTINOPLE" Passengers sailing from **CONSTANZA** to **NEW YORK**, the 4th September, 1925

19-25

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13			
No. on List.	HEAD-TAX STATUS. (This column for use of Government officials only)	NAME IN FULL		Age.		Sex.	Married or single.	Calling or occupation.		Able to— Read and write language of his country (if not his own).	Naturally, (Country of which citizen or subject.)	Race or people.	*Last permanent residence.  Country. City or town.	Final destination. (Stated from permanent residence.)	
		Family name.	Given name.	Yrs.	Mo.			Inst.	Read what language for his country (if not his own).					State.	City or town.
24		Griffith	Dora	29	5	f	m	hater	yes	yes	Rumanian	Hebrew	Rumania Cluj	his father in law Moos Ehrlich	Ill Chicago
25		Ehrlich	Joseph	29	5	m	m	hater	yes	yes	Rumanian	Hebrew	Rumania Cluj	Str. Samuel Cluj	Ill Chicago
26		Ehrlich	Wladet	27	5	m	m	housew	yes	yes	Rumanian	Hebrew	Rumania Cluj	address as above	Ill Chicago
30		Ehrlich	Marta	3	5	f	s	baby	no	no	Rumanian	Hebrew	Rumania Cluj	address as above	Ill Chicago

Total passengers . . . . .

U. S. citizens . . . . .

\* Permanent residence within the meaning of this manifest shall be actual or intended residence of one year or more.

† List of races will be found on the back of this sheet.

19-25

above: Left half of the S.S. *Constantinople's* September 1923 manifest

below: Right half of the S.S. *Constantinople*'s September 1923 manifest

# STATES IMMIGRATION OFFICER AT PORT OF ARRIVAL

Status, or a part of another insular possession, in whatever class they travel, MUST be fully listed and the master or commanding officer of each vessel carrying such passengers must upon arrival deliver lists thereof to the immigration officer.

Arriving at Port of NEW YORK

OCT 1 1923, 19

List **10**  
The entries on this sheet must be typewritten or printed.

112

14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	
No. on List.	By whom was passport paid?	Whether known to and if not, how known to the United States?	Whether ever before in the United States; and if so, when and where?	If yes— Place of birth.	Whether going to join a relative or friend; and if so, what relative or friend, and his name and complete address.	Person of money in United States.	Whether a polygamist.	Whether an anarchist.	Whether a member of a subversive organization.	Whether a member of a criminal gang.	Whether a member of a political party.	Whether a member of a religious sect.	Whether a member of a secret society.	Whether a member of a fraternal organization.	Whether a member of a labor union.	Whether a member of a trade association.	Whether a member of a professional association.	Whether a member of a business association.	Whether a member of a social club.	Whether a member of a sports club.
30	himself	30	no	his cousin Marcus Tener 10th Irving Park Bldg Chicago, Ill	no	perman	yes	no	no	no	no	good	no	3	wh	br	br	none	Roumania	Valce
31	husband	31	no	Same as above	no	perman	yes	no	no	no	no	good	no	5	wh	br	br	none	Roumania	Gyor
32	father	32	no	Same as above	no	perman	yes	no	no	no	no	good	no	5	wh	br	br	none	Roumania	Gyo
33		33	no		no	perman	yes	no	no	no	no	good	no	3	wh	br	br	none	Roumania	Gyo

Note.—Full text of question 24 is as follows: Whether a person who believes in or advocates the overthrow by force or violence of the Government of the United States or of all forms of law, or who disbelieves in any organization essential to and teaching obedience to or opposition to organized government, or who advocates or teaches the unlawful destruction of property, or is a member of the duty, society, or property of the unlawful seizure or killing of any officer or officers, either of specific individuals or of officers generally, of the Government of the United States or of any other organized government because of his or their official character.



above: Bébi (Violet Ladner) in 1935

photo inscribed *Matyu néninek és Józsi bácsinak* (“To Aunt Matty and Uncle Joe”)



above: Chicago's Irving Park Road (formerly Boulevard) in 2006

*I also walked down Irving Park Road by the intersection with Sheridan, which is about four blocks north of Wrigley Field... Here's a look at one apartment block, looking west down Irving Park from the Sheridan intersection... 1024 Irving Park would be at or near the far left (west) end...*

Copyright © 2006 by Matthew C. Ehrlich



## 8

*The First American Year*

Presiding over the Kohn family in Chicago were *Samu bácsi* and *Jenka néni*, Uncle Sam and Aunt Jeni. Sam Kohn worked as a tailor and “looked like a large leprechaun,” bald and rotund, with a full white moustache and a little fringe of white hair. He was a gentle and self-effacing man, “the universal grandfather,” always making a lap available for youngsters to sit on, always having stories to tell. Jeni was “well-educated and of good family,” tiny and birdlike, with a solemn bearing but extraordinarily active. She did fine quality embroidery, such as handworked monograms on shirts and handkerchiefs, for Marshall Field’s: THE department store in Chicago.

When the Ehrlichs—whom we shall start referring to as Joseph, Mathilda<sup>75</sup>, and Martha—showed up on the Kohn doorstep, it turned out that Jeni was back in Europe visiting her aged parents. In her absence Sam asked the Ehrlichs to stay at the Kohns’s large seven-room apartment until they got used to being in America, and could find jobs and a place of their own.

“We accepted it gladly,” Mathilda would remark, “as we had no money and we did not speak the English language yet. Our Uncle Sam made us feel at home right away and told us we had to rest at least one week before we should try to look for work. But he took us all over to show us the city, and the first thing was to teach us in the middle of downtown how to get to know which was east, west, north, and south from in front of the Marshall Field’s store on State Street, and how to get home on the trollies or cable cars... It was an enjoyable time while it lasted, everyone was wonderful to us and our cousins were lovely.”

These were the same cousins Mathilda had met in Kolozsvár that one time sixteen

---

<sup>75</sup> Over the decades to come, Joseph’s name would often appear as “Josef” or “Josif,” while Mathilda would frequently spell her name “Matilda.” (She signed her 1936 Certificate of Citizenship *with* the H, and its attached photograph *without* the H.)

years before. They were all adults now; Sam was already sharing his Irving Park apartment with younger daughter Margaret<sup>76</sup> and her two sons. Mild-mannered and good-natured, Margaret had married Markus Temmer, a quiet man in the laundry business who'd literally worked his way from the ground up, originally delivering laundry by carrying it on his back, then by horsedrawn carriage. Marcus was to do quite well running a laundry service for factories in Racine, Wisconsin, and later in Kenosha.

The Kohns's older daughter Rose and her family had their own apartment in Chicago, and came over to meet the Ehrlichs that same first Sunday. Rose was vigorous and energetic, and Martha would say that "Rose rather fascinated me, because she was always dressed to the teeth, all the flapper-type fashions or whatever was current at the time, she was at the height of fashion at *all* times." She had married Béla Ruhig, a talkative man in the Chicago fur business. His two brothers were also furriers, but since the Ruhig boys could not get along with one another, each had a separate fur shop. Rose, who "could sell anybody anything," kept her hand in at Béla's.

Then there was Leo (born László), the Kohns's youngest child and only son. He worked at the Nash factory in Racine and lived there with the Temmers for a long time. According to Martha, Leo was so super-quiet you could forget he existed; but he courted a woman named Evelyn for twenty years, and since she was a Catholic and he nominally Jewish, "that was a scandal for twenty years."

The Ruhigs had two children, Evelyn and Ted, and the Temmers had two sons, Ernie and Alex. All four were American-born and a few years older than Martha, who was quickly taken in hand by her little cousins "and you all got friendly together, even though you didn't understand each other," Joseph wrote in Martha's Diary. "For Mother and me it took a bit longer, but the family was so nice, and they talk Hungarian... We liked one another, and we were sure we'd get along all right." Rounding out the Chicago family circle were Béla Ruhig's sister Kati and her husband Stefan Hoyer, a janitor who called himself a building superintendent and whom everybody called "Hoyer." They had two sons, Bill and Ernie, the same age as the Ruhig and Temmer children; Joseph would later give the Hoyer boys violin lessons.

---

<sup>76</sup> Who was most likely there to help look after Sam while Jeni was away in Europe.

This then was the extended family who welcomed the Ehrlichs to America: a group all related by blood or marriage, whose older generation had all been born in Europe, though most had come to the United States while they were still quite young. Joseph would never forget how welcome they made the Ehrlichs feel upon their arrival, and afterwards. He was a proud man, determined not to be a burden to anyone; though he'd already had to rely upon relatives's support in Kolozsvár, and here in the New World it was absolutely crucial. The bolstering presence of friendly family members was to be of great consolation in the days to come.

---

"I fell in love with America the very first day there," Mathilda would say. When she and Joseph began looking for work, Mathilda quickly found a job in a millinery wholesale place. "With my European background and ability, I made good right away... I got all the model hats to copy and could do them all with no effort on my part."

"We both found jobs," wrote Joseph, "but not what we hoped for. But this is America. Here it doesn't count what you think or what you are, as long as you take any job and can earn enough to live on." Despite these brave words, the heartbroken Joseph "saw right away that I never could teach in these United States. So I took the first manual job I was offered, and we both went to work."

He had come to These United States at the age of not-quite-thirty, thinking of himself as a cultured and educated gentleman. He found to his horror that in Chicago, Hungarians were disparaged as "Hunkies" or "bohunks"—crude, uncouth, qualified only for unskilled labor. "A teacher with no trade of any kind to fall back on was very hard up," Mathilda would say, adding that Joseph felt "miserable, he had no experience other than teaching school, which didn't keep him back from trying any and all jobs that were available, though nothing was suitable and nothing that paid fair wages."

For Joseph and Mathilda everything was strange in their new surroundings, but Martha seemed to adapt to her new home straight away:

**1923 November 29.** ...You like it very much that here we have several nice rooms to play in. As I mentioned before, in Europe we lived with Aunt Fáni and all we had were three rooms for the two families together. You like it better here which you tell us often enough.

Surprising how little you mention the family we left behind, but if I start talking about them and name names, you start to cry and we can hardly quiet you down. We have to even keep our mail away from you, and read it when you don't see us. Otherwise you cry just to see we got a letter from home. Although when we don't mention them you seldom think about them and don't seem to miss them at all... [Joseph]

Martha was left at the apartment with the Kohns's maid and the Temmer boys. "Mártuka, you certainly are a good pupil to them, they taught you to be just like a boy, which we don't like, and we can't recognize our little 'lady' daughter anymore. You are just as noisy and boisterous as they are." Joseph and Mathilda would leave for work early in the morning and not come home until just before suppertime, and their Princess who always used to be "watched over all day long didn't think of doing things you shouldn't. But now you too can upset the whole house all by yourself."

The maid was supposed to look after Ernie and Alex and take care of Martha too, but she neglected them and Martha had to dress herself. "We find you occasionally dressed all wrong, your socks the heel where the toe should be, and the left shoe on the right foot. I could cry when I see that, thinking you had to walk that way all day without anyone noticing and correcting it." Martha also had to wash her face alone, but "you are very proud that you can wash all by yourself, and you wanted to show us how you do it. You found a tube of toothpaste and squeezed it all out and smeared it on your face, and were so happy how nice you smelled. I have to tell you that every night we find you looking so dirty like a chimney sweep that Mommy has to dunk you in the bathtub before we can have our dinner, and can hardly scrub it off before she puts you to bed. But you love to have a bath, we have such a nice bathroom here. So to make it easier all around we bought you too some coveralls, just like the boys here wear. This way at least your knees stay clean."

Martha was quickly picking up genuine Chicagoese from the Temmer boys, and "some of the words we hear you say we aren't too happy that you learned... But I have to admit it, dear, your English is getting better each day, and we will try as soon as we possibly can to send you to school somewhere. So far you are too young, and must stay at home with your little cousins."

Joseph and Mathilda wanted to find an apartment for themselves, "knowing that our

Aunt Jeni would be coming home and they would need our room again soon. Besides, it was time for us to start out on our own once more.” (Not least so they could reteach Martha to be a well-behaved little lady.) The Ehrlichs spent some weekends looking at apartments nearby, but discovered they could not afford them.

Around December 1923 Kati Hoyer helped them find a place near “a nice-looking small park, and the place looked freshly painted, and we put a deposit on it. The Hoyers lived a few blocks away, and we thought we did the right thing. We didn’t want to be a burden to our relatives, as we’d promised before we came to America that we never would.” The Ehrlichs’s new home was on the West Side not far from Humboldt Park, several miles southwest of the Kohns’s apartment, and “we were surprised when Uncle got very angry at Kati. He said she was wrong, and he didn’t like for us to live in that neighborhood. But it was too late to change it then.” Joseph had not asked for Sam’s advice, not wanting to “burden” him even in this way.

---

*Extracts from Martha’s Diary, translated from the original Hungarian:*

**1924 February 10.** Our wish came true, we have a home of our own for the last two months now. We have a five-room apartment on 2603 W. Chicago Avenue on the second floor, and you have a room of your own which makes you very happy. It didn’t take too long till we made enough money to buy nice furniture and live by ourselves, although we both had to work very hard and save all we possibly could. But we did it, and now when we look around in our apartment, and see how well we did in such a short time, your Mother and I, we are kind of proud of ourselves and say, “It was hard, but we could do it.”

The only bad thing is that we have to leave you in a day nursery every morning. This is one place you can’t get used to, and you are left there each day crying your little heart out. But what can we do my dearest, we must do it for a little while yet, as we both have to work to pay rent and food. After we leave you start to play OK and there are some children you like but you would like it better if you didn’t have to take a nap after lunch. When Mommy calls for you about five o’clock, she always finds you standing apart from the other children, just watching them but never playing with the crowd. I feel so sorry for you, my dear, but it won’t be too long. I hope Mother could stay home soon with you all day.

You love it so much when all three of us are together at home. Then you play and sing and all is just fine. Too bad I have such little free time to play with you, I'm always busy and have a lot on my mind too. We hope your Aunt Fáni and Uncle Jani will be here soon, it would be so much easier all round. They would live here with us and look after you and the apartment, then you wouldn't have to go to nursery school. Hoping we can help them by next summer to come. Your Aunt Margit with Bébi and Uncle Imre from Paris, France, are also trying to come to America, but it takes time and a lot of money before they can. It's started to be harder for people to get into the U.S.A. It seems that there isn't a thing we can do to help them, but we still are hoping.

Your English sounds fine, now that all day in school you don't hear anything else but English. Even when you talk in your dreams it is only English, no more Hungarian except with us at home. Sometimes you try to teach me too but I am very slow to learn the language. Even Mother is learning faster than I do. I used to learn in school German, Latin, and French, all at the same time, and don't remember if it was ever this hard like now.

You are again the nice quiet little girl everybody loved at home in Kolozsvár. You speak softly and don't whine for no reason at all like you did when we lived with our relatives. You seem to live from Saturday to Saturday. All week, every day asking me when will Saturday be? Because we work just till noon that day, which is a real holiday for all of us to be together. Your eyes are not as they should be, so I took you to the eye doctor to see what can be done to help. The doctor gave you eyeglasses [again] and said you'll outgrow it. Good thing that you don't mind wearing them, and we hope they will help you.

Now we are living a well-regulated life. It is true we work every day and work hard, but at least we can enjoy it because we don't have to be afraid of anyone, not even of the policeman. No one is bothering us here, none of them come around to blackmail us and say nasty words, or demand money to let us live here. We live a comfortable life and we are happy together, we can even save part of our earnings, and don't have to be afraid the government will take it away in taxes. All our family from Kolozsvár would like to come to the U.S.A. too, but it's gotten to be very hard now, they've gotten so strict about giving visas or permits for emigration that hardly anybody has come since we got here. It seems after us the U.S.A. closed their doors to all except the people who have lots of money.

And you my little daughter are hardly ever talking about or even mentioning anyone

from home, not even Janika you loved so much. You love to hear me talk about our old home and relatives, but I see each day you remember less and less about things. Except when you were three years old, you fell in a washbasin of water; that you still remember. I guess soon all will be forgotten, which is really very sad. We still remember very well, it isn't easy for us, and it takes time to adjust our life to our new country, but we are trying.

[Joseph]

Joseph and Mathilda had taken English lessons in Europe, "but they weren't enough... naturally anyone who doesn't speak the language feels lost." At the hat factory Mathilda would write down every new English word she heard, adding to her vocabulary by continually glancing back at the new words while she worked.

For his part, Joseph would read his daughter the Sunday funnies. "Not knowing English did not daunt him a bit," Martha was to say. "One of my favorites in phonetics was 'tsook, tsook, shäry.' Translated, we find a familiar phrase found often in *Orphan Annie*—to whit—'tsk, tsk, sorry!' Truly a man of imagination and resourcefulness."

**1924 June 20.** You can see, Mártuka, how long it's been since I have written in your diary. No other excuse but the usual: I didn't have the time. Our life has changed drastically since we are here... When I leave for work you still are sleeping, and at night when I get home too you are already asleep, so we hardly ever see one another. One morning I kissed you while you slept and woke you up, which made you very happy and you said to me, "Oh Daddy, we saw each other now, didn't we?" And you always are looking forward to evenings, but when we come home we have to clean house, cook our meals, and anyway I am dog-tired from my unusual work and can't play much with you, which makes you a very sad little girl.

All week you are counting the days till Saturday and Sunday, because those days we all are together and we always find some time to play or tell stories. But Sunday afternoon already is a sad time, because tomorrow is another workday, and you also have to go to the nursery school which you still don't like. Although now that you can talk with the other children you don't mind staying to play. Have a few special friends you like better than the rest. You are complaining that some of them are teasing you because of your eyes...

We are moving to another apartment soon, and we think if all goes well next winter, you will have a new baby sister or brother to play with. You were so happy when we told



you, and already you are making big plans about what you'll do, and told me to tell the stork to be sure and bring a little girl, but he could bring both a girl and boy too...

You hardly ever talk about the Old World, and even your beloved Uncle Jani is forgotten. But their letters are still full of love and yearning for you. They were hoping to come after you, but I don't think it can be accomplished anymore. Immigration is tightened up so that hardly anyone is getting the needed permit to enter the U.S.A. Your English vocabulary is getting so good we are amazed, and sometimes you talk so fast we have to laugh at you. There are even some Hungarian words you can't remember anymore...

[Joseph]

---

The Ehrlichs had arrived in America none too soon. The new Immigration Act of 1924 was sponsored by Congressman Albert Johnson, a strong believer in the "superiority" of northwestern Europeans; and it not only cut back immigration quotas from three to two percent of each country's nationals residing in the United States, but shifted the base year from 1910 to 1890, before the great influx of southern and eastern Europeans.


Around August the Ehrlichs moved a few blocks north to 2607 West Division Street, closer to Humboldt Park, and Mathilda began staying home with Martha all day, enjoying "more free time than ever before since we got here." She made a few sample hats and opened a small millinery shop in the new apartment: "It doesn't bring much yet," she wrote in the Diary, "but we hope when people get to know us better we will have more work and can make a go of it. It would be so nice if we could live without worry." Rose Ruhig gave Mathilda a used hemstitching machine which "helps a lot, as this kind of work is new and very stylish on many different things, and it also brings more people to get to know me."

On September 27th Martha's fifth birthday was celebrated, in considerably different surroundings than her fourth had been aboard the *Constantinople*. Her parents "made a birthday party for you, twelve children were invited and everyone brought a gift for you, which made you terribly happy." Mathilda was surprised at "all the practical gifts—a woollen dress, a sweater, silk socks and even underwear, which really is a lot more usable," but "in Europe it would have been an insult—a gift was flowers or a lot of candy, never clothes."

**1924 October 25.** ...We are getting anxious to get our new baby, if all goes on as it should it'll be here in three months's time. You always talk about it and are pestering Daddy to tell you about the stork. I am enjoying listening too, he can talk by the hour and has to invent the story as he goes along... We always enjoy when we hear how you plan what you will do for the baby, and ask all sorts of questions, sometimes hard to answer. Lucky that you still believe the stork brings them...

You hardly ever mention people from Kolozsvár, but if I ask you where you would like to be, here or in Kolozsvár, you proudly answer without hesitation: "In Kolozsvár." If I ask why, you say, "Because I had there Ily, Bébi, Mancsi, Korcsi," and start to name all the rest of your cousins that you had there to play with. We have nice cousins here too, but nobody has time, except Sundays, to visit with them. Yes, my dear baby, I get homesick myself very often and get lonesome for my big family in Europe. But have to be satisfied just getting a letter from them now and then. Who knows if we ever will see each other in this life? We hope sometime we will be able to go for a visit, but it will be a long time because it costs a lot of money, and we are in America only one year... [*Mathilda*]

**1924 November.** We are in American only one year now, and we think we really did quite well for such a short time. But at what price?... [*Joseph*]





above: Jeni Kohn's 1923 passport photo



above: *Jenka néni* with her daughters and niece, circa 1940  
standing L to R: Mathilda and Margaret Temmer  
seated L to R: Jeni and Rose Ruhig



above: *Jenka néni* with her daughters and niece, March 1941  
L to R: Rose, Jeni, Margaret, Mathilda



above: Mathilda and Martha with their American cousins, 1924—back row L to R: Mathilda and Rose Ruhig; front row L to R: Martha, Evelyn Ruhig, Ted Ruhig, Ernie Hoyer



above: The Ehrlichs and relatives in August 1924—back row L to R: Joseph, Jeni Kohn in the Ruhig Buick, pregnant Mathilda; front row (on the running board) L to R: Martha, Ted Ruhig, Evelyn Ruhig



above left: Alex Temmer, Martha, Ernie Temmer  
above right: Martha and Mathilda, October 1924



above: Evelyn Ruhig and Martha circa 1926





above: Joseph, Markus Temmer, Béla Ruhig, and Leo Kohn in Racine: January 1944

below: Jeni, Mathilda, Rose Ruhig, Evelyn Hoffman, and Margaret Temmer in Racine: January 1944



## Appendix E: The American Cousins

Only a few fragments (and those mostly unverifiable) remain of the personal histories of bygone European Ehrlichs, Rotmanns, Kohns and Schwartzes. More can be said about the uncle, aunt, and cousins who welcomed Joseph, Mathilda, and Martha to Chicago—though even those prove elusive at times. (I have been unable to locate either the elder Kohns or the Ruhigs in the 1920 and 1930 censuses, which were handwritten and variably transcribable<sup>77</sup>.) This appendix presents my assembled research notes.

### The Elder Kohns

Samu/Samuel (Sam) Kohn was born in 1867 or 1868, most likely in Temesvár<sup>78</sup> from which his brothers Móric and Geza moved to Kolozsvár. According to the 1910 census he emigrated to Chicago in 1907, though he doesn't appear on the same ship's manifest with his wife and children. In 1910 his family lived at 4203 [South?] Langley Avenue; in 1923 at 1024 Irving Park Boulevard<sup>79</sup>; and in 1930 at 642 [West?] Cornelia Avenue (per a blurry telephone directory). Sam died on July 24, 1934, aged 66 or 67, and was buried in Forest Park's "Northwest Charity Cemetery." (Part of the Jewish Waldheim Cemeteries?)

Jeni (Jenni, Jennie, Jenny, Jenka) Liebmann<sup>80</sup> Kohn was born on June 12, 1871<sup>81</sup>, the daughter of Adolf Liebmann of Temesvár; she married Sam Kohn on October 28, 1893. Jeni and her three children left Europe aboard the SS *President Grant* on October 26, 1907 and arrived in New York on November 7th. The 1910 census indicated that she only spoke Hungarian<sup>82</sup>, whereas the rest of her household could speak English. In July 1923 Jeni applied for a passport to visit relatives in Romania and Hungary, and was evidently sailing there at the same time the Ehrlichs were traveling to America. After Sam's death Jeni lived as a boarder at "3153 Amsley" [West Ainslie?] in 1937; the address in the 1940 census

<sup>77</sup> Even printed documents aren't wholly reliable: newspaper coverage of a 1937 auto accident refers to "Beela" Ruhig, "Jennie Kohn," and "Mrs. Jeane Kohn."

<sup>78</sup> The Illinois Deaths Index shows his birthplace as "Klasenburg [*sic*], Hungary."

<sup>79</sup> Later renamed Irving Park Road.

<sup>80</sup> Her two daughters's death records show Jeni's maiden name as "Liebman" or "Lieberman."

<sup>81</sup> The 1907 ship's manifest implied an 1869 birthyear; the 1871 date appears on her 1923 passport application.

<sup>82</sup> She was in fact the lone *German*-speaker in a Hungarian family circle.

appears to be 3045 Ainslee. She died in 1944, aged about 73, and was buried in Waldheim Cemetery. (Martha Ehrlich's brother George was taught to call Sam and Jeni "Grandpa and Grandma Kohn.")

---

### The Ruhigs

Rózsa/Rose Kohn Ruhig, eldest child of Sam and Jeni, was born on September 1, 1895, one day before her cousin Mathilda. She married Béla Ruhig in Chicago on January 28, 1914. When the Ehrlichs arrived in 1923, the Ruhigs lived at 945(?) Irving Park Boulevard, down the street from Rose's parents. By 1937 the Ruhigs moved to 640½ Cornelia Avenue, close to the Kohns's 1930 address. Rose did not become a naturalized citizen until 1946. She died on October 3, 1990, aged 95, and was buried (as "Beloved Matriarch") in the Columbarium of Graciousness at Hillside Memorial Park in Culver City, California.

Béla Ruhig was born in Szeged, Hungary<sup>83</sup> on November 13, 1887, the son of Kalman Ruhig (1860-1955<sup>84</sup>) and Rózsa Dukesz; he was living in Vienna when he left for Chicago in 1907. Béla's name often got recorded as "Ben" or "Benjamin"—confusingly, since he had a younger brother *Beno* (1897-1964) who was also in the fur business in Chicago; as was their brother *Michael* (1893-1965), all three working separately after failing to work together. Béla became a naturalized citizen in 1926. He belonged to many lodges and favored liberal if not radical causes—owning the complete works of Lenin, declaring he was "opposed to war in general" and should be exempt from the draft, taking out ads in the labor-sponsored "Red weekly" *Chicago Star*, etc. His fur shops were located at 3136 Broadway (1917), 3939 Sheridan (1930), and 734 North Sheridan (1947). Béla died on February 26, 1966 in California, aged 78, and was buried in Hillside Memorial Park.

Violet Evelyn (Eve<sup>85</sup>) Ruhig Sessler, first child of Rose and Bela, was born in Chicago on April 6, 1915; she graduated from Lake View High School in 1934 and was working as a beauty operator in 1940. On January 17, 1942 she married Albert Bela Sessler (1906-1978),

---

<sup>83</sup> Which, unlike Kolozsvár and Temesvár, remained a Hungarian city; yet Béla's birthplace (spelled "Zsegred," "Zsigard," "Isigard," etc.) would several times be listed as Czechoslovakian.

<sup>84</sup> Kalman came to join his children in Chicago in 1925. Besides Béla, Beno, Michael, and Kati Ruhig Hoyer, there were three other daughters: Olga Ruhig Adler (1889-1969), Julia Ruhig Hirsch Goldman (1894-1982), and Margaret Ruhig Rothstein (1899-1978). Beno and Michael would both live in Beverly Hills, while Olga and husband John Adler "made a mint of money" from investments.

<sup>85</sup> Pronounced as two-syllable "Evie."



a painter and decorator of homes. They had three children: Robert/Bob<sup>86</sup> (born 1946), Bertha/Birdie (born 1949) and Sandra/Sandy (born 1955). Eve signed “An Open Letter to President Johnson and the Democratic Party,” protesting the Vietnam War, that appeared in the June 23, 1967 Los Angeles *Times*<sup>87</sup>. Four years later she and Albert encountered George Ehrlich and family in London<sup>88</sup>. Eve died in 2020, aged 105, and was buried (as “Beloved wife, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and humanitarian”) with her husband and parents in Hillside Memorial Park.

Theodore Frank (Ted/Teddy) Ruhig, second child of Rose and Bela, was born in Chicago on March 12, 1917; he too graduated from Lake View High School in 1934<sup>89</sup>, then pursued social work. On June 18, 1943 he married Nancy (Nan) Ingram (1918-2006), a teacher and composer, in an army base chapel in Nan’s native Mississippi. They had three children: Rosemary (born c.1947), Wendy (born c.1953) and Franklin (1958-2001), moving from Illinois to Hawaii, Sacramento, and finally Ohio. Ted was a newspaper columnist, political activist, and leader of the Gray Panthers; besides serving in the California Senior Legislature and testifying before Congress on behalf of reauthorizing the Older Americans Act, he sued the California Department of Aging for age discrimination—and won. Ted died on May 18, 2012, aged 95.

## The Temmers

Margit/Margaret Kohn Temmer, second child of Sam and Jeni, was born on March 22, 1897 and accompanied her mother and siblings from Temesvár to Chicago in 1907. She married Markus Temmer on February 3, 1917<sup>90</sup>; they settled in Racine, Wisconsin, before moving to Kenosha in 1948. In widowhood she and her cousin Mathilda Ehrlich would share apartments in Los Angeles for nearly two decades. Margaret died on July 1, 1987, aged 90, and was buried in Hillside Memorial Park.

Markus<sup>91</sup> Temmer was born February 2, 1885 in Temesvár, the son of Samuel Temmer

<sup>86</sup> Whom George Ehrlich encountered in Paris in 1966: as related at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Navigations\\_Solo-Jaunt.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Navigations_Solo-Jaunt.htm).

<sup>87</sup> Eve’s name was four down from Rod Serling’s. The same letter was signed by her mother Rose.

<sup>88</sup> As related at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/George-and-Mila-Travel-Journals\\_1971-England.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/George-and-Mila-Travel-Journals_1971-England.htm).

<sup>89</sup> In high school Teddy belonged to numerous clubs, like his father, and also served as “Basket Ball Manager.”

<sup>90</sup> Markus’s obituary showed a 1916 date, but 1917 was recorded in the Illinois Marriages Index.

<sup>91</sup> Often spelled “Marcus.”

(1853-1937) and Mary Schlesinger (1857-1937)<sup>92</sup>; he arrived in America in 1904 and became a naturalized citizen in 1913. Markus operated the Racine Towel Supply Co. and, after relocating to Kenosha, founded Temmer Industrial Cleaners. After a long illness he died on January 21, 1956, aged 70.

Ernest (Ernie) Temmer, first child of Margaret and Markus, was born on December 28, 1917 in Racine and graduated from Washington Park High School in 1935. Enlisting for military service in 1942, he spent World War II “island-hopping” the South Pacific as part of the 230th Signal Operations Company<sup>93</sup>. Ernie married Ruth Rachel Gale (1916-2020) on February 5, 1946; they had two daughters, Susan (born 1947) and Marlayne (born 1959). After Markus’s death, Ernie sold the Kenosha laundry business and moved to southern California, beginning the family circle’s exodus from the Midwest. In retirement he was a longtime volunteer at the Little Company of Mary Hospital in Torrance, where he was known as “E.T.” Ernie died on October 16, 1994, aged 76, and was buried in Hillside Memorial Park.

Alexander (Alex) Temmer, second child of Margaret and Markus, was born May 28, 1919<sup>94</sup> in Racine. He graduated from Washington Park High School and earned a degree in journalism from the University of Wisconsin; enlisting in the Army in 1941, he served as an officer in the Intelligence Corps. On December 25, 1941 Alex married Shirley Salochek<sup>95</sup> (1921-2003) of Detroit; they had a daughter Marsha<sup>96</sup> (born 1946). Alex died in Allen Park, Michigan on June 4, 1951, aged only 32, and was buried in Ferndale’s Machpelah Cemetery.

---

## Leo and Evelyn

László/Leo John Kohn, third child of Sam and Jeni, was born on April 10, 1902 in

---

<sup>92</sup> Markus’s siblings were Ethel Temmer Fischer (1882-1962), Bertha Temmer Streissinger (1884-1965), and Charles Arnold Temmer (1887-1949); his obituary also referred to a brother Harold who predeceased him.

<sup>93</sup> George Ehrlich attempted in vain to locate his cousin Ernie during a 1945 mercy mission to the Philippines: as related at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Navigations\\_War-Memoir.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Navigations_War-Memoir.htm).

<sup>94</sup> Alex’s obituary gave a 1918 birthyear.

<sup>95</sup> “Salocher” on her marriage license; “Solacheck” in Alex’s obituary. George Ehrlich visited Alex and Shirley in early 1947 and was fixed up on a blind date with Shirley’s younger sister Natalie Salochek (1925-2020).

<sup>96</sup> Marsha Jo Temmer, generally known by her surname, was part of the 1960s girl group Honey Ltd.; they appeared on numerous television programs, including *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and performed with Bob Hope on a USO tour of Vietnam. When Honey Ltd. first visited Los Angeles in 1967, “they slept on Temmer’s grandmother’s floor” (per [www.furious.com/perfect/honeyltd.html](http://www.furious.com/perfect/honeyltd.html))—which implies at Margaret and Mathilda Ehrlich’s apartment, since Shirley Salochek Temmer’s mother Fannie Becker Salochek Zumberg lived in Detroit in 1964 and died in Florida in 1978, with no mention of a California residency.

Hungary<sup>97</sup> and emigrated to America with his mother and sisters in 1907. He moved to Racine by 1930, when he lived with the Temmers and worked as a machinist at the Nash Motors auto factory<sup>98</sup>. When Leo registered for the draft in 1942 his contact was “Miss E. Hoffman”: Evelyn Antoinette Elvina Hoffman (1905-1986), whom Leo married after his war service with the Quartermaster Corps—also, perhaps not coincidentally, after his mother Jeni’s death. By 1950 he worked for Webster Electric as a parts inspector. Leo evidently took his bride’s Catholic faith<sup>99</sup>: he was a member of St. Mary’s Church in Racine and died December 15, 1953, aged 51, at St. Mary’s Hospital. (“Rosary will be recited.”) He was buried in Marinette, Wisconsin’s Forest Home Cemetery and later joined there by Evelyn.

### The Hoyers

Katalin/Katherine (Kati, Katie, Katica) Ruhig Hoyer, younger sister of Béla Ruhig, was born on February 6, 1892<sup>100</sup> and emigrated to Chicago in 1910. She married István/Stefan (Steve) Hoyer (1888-1982) on March 30, 1912; he worked as a machinist in 1920, an auto mechanic in 1930, and a janitor in 1940. Kati became a naturalized citizen in 1940; she died in Los Angeles on September 5, 1974, aged 82.

William Adolph (Bill) Hoyer, first child of Kati and Steve, was born on January 21, 1913 in Chicago and graduated from the Armour Institute of Technology in 1935. Bill met his wife Harriet Lesniak (1911-1994) as a member of the Chicago Modern Dance Group; they married in 1940 and had a daughter Susan (born c.1944) and a son Peter<sup>101</sup> (born c.1945). Bill was employed at several engineering plants before founding his own consulting firm in 1960<sup>102</sup>. In retirement he not only helped Evanston set up its first recycling program, but became a tai chi instructor and a master weaver of Navajo-style art. Bill died on July 12, 2000, aged 87.

Ernest Carl (Ernie) Hoyer, second child of Kati and Steve, was born on December 6,

<sup>97</sup> His obituary gave a Chicago birthplace.

<sup>98</sup> Nash was based in Kenosha until its 1937 merger with the Kelvinator Appliance Co.

<sup>99</sup> Which probably produced the middle name “John” on Leo’s grave marker.

<sup>100</sup> Some sources give Kati a birthplace of “Joka, Czechoslovakia” or “Gulymesser, Slovakia.”

<sup>101</sup> Recorded in the 1950 census, but unmentioned in either Bill or Harriet’s obituaries.

<sup>102</sup> In the 1970s, Bill Hoyer “invented and then patented for Chrysler Corp. a mass-production method for their cars’s catalytic converters, which filtered the unsafe byproducts of gasoline before releasing exhaust into the atmosphere”: per his obituary.

1915 in Chicago, and became a successful electrical engineer. He married Aviva Silbert (1917-2012) in East St. Louis, MO in 1941; she was a pioneering woman physician and one of the first women to be board-certified as an anesthesiologist. They had four children: Paul (born c.1943), Stephanie (born 1944), Jennifer and Daniel.<sup>103</sup> The Hoyers “became a fixture of the Los Angeles community, supporting liberal and Jewish organizations.” Ernie died on March 4, 2007, aged 91; he and Aviva were both buried in Hillside Memorial Park.



above L to R: Ted Ruhig, Alex Temmer, Evelyn Ruhig, Ernie Temmer: before 1942



above: Steve Hoyer (holding granddaughter Susan), Kati Hoyer, Bill Hoyer: 1944



above, back row L to R: Nan Ruhig, Ted Ruhig, Martha, Aviva Hoyer, Ernie Hoyer; front row L to R: Kalman Ruhig, Evelyn Sessler, Albert Sessler: D-Day, June 1944



above L to R: Ernie Hoyer, Ted Ruhig, Kalman Ruhig, Albert Sessler: D-Day, June 1944

<sup>103</sup> The latter two per Aviva’s obituary; Jennifer and Daniel do not appear in the 1950 census.

## 9

*Gyurika*

On January 27<sup>104</sup>, 1925, George Ehrlich—"Putsy" to his sister—was born at the family apartment on Division Street, helped along by midwife Anna Bonus. A week later Joseph wrote in Martha's Diary:

**1925 February 8.** You have a little baby brother, Mártuka... In the first few days you were disappointed because you wanted a sister. When you first heard it was a boy, you cried and said to give it back, you didn't want a boy, just a girl. It took three days for you to accept him, after we let you hold him in your arms, and from then on you loved him and wanted to play with him all the time. My dear Mártuka, I just hope you always will be good to your little brother, never have misunderstandings, and love and take care of him. You will always be the older, and have to be smart and look after him, then you both will be very happy. George is a very good-looking big baby, nearly nine pounds at birth, and looking straight at you while you hold him; you like to watch him and are happy to be with him.

Some years later, writing this time in English in George's Scrapbook, Joseph would humorously redescribe his son's arrival:

The stork arrives! There is a blessed event this afternoon at 2607 W. Division St. second floor front. The temperature is low, and Martha is lower—she wanted a sister. Papa Ehrlich is unemployed, but not for long. Li'l Georgie brought plenty to do—making soup, cleaning house, and of course the inevitable "three-cornered pants" to put the hourly crease in.

Li'l Georgie (Gyuri or Gyurika<sup>104A</sup> in the mother tongue) was himself to unsentimentally state: "I was born on Division Street in Chicago, on West Division Street, and even then it was a rather run-down area."

<sup>104</sup> Like Martha, George was born on the 27th of the month but the birth was not recorded until the 28th.

<sup>104A</sup> George in Hungarian is *György*, pronounced somewhat like "Dyordih" (gy being a "voiced palatal stop"). Its diminutives include *Gyuri*, *Gyurika*, *Gyurka*, and *Györgyike*.

The birth of her nearly-nine-pound son was difficult for Mathilda and it took her some time to recuperate. On George's birth certificate, her occupation is listed as "housewife" and Joseph's as "hat manufacturer"; but about the time George was born, Joseph began a stretch of unemployment that went on for months. He'd had a series of odd jobs, none lasting very long—as a janitor in a theater, cleaning spittoons, or hard labor when he could get it. One time he was hired to do sewing at a factory by giving the impression he knew what to do, then trying to fake it by watching others. But he did not turn the sewing machine's light on, thinking he would save electricity, and this gave him away; he was fired after half a day's work.

"Without experience, everybody took advantage of him," Mathilda would remark, "and several days he came home without getting paid—they just telling him not to come back tomorrow. His hands were sore and swollen so he couldn't hardly hold his spoon to eat with. I felt terrible to watch him struggle and never giving up. But he was terribly discouraged and if he'd had the money he'd have gone back to Europe the next day. Thank God he didn't have the money for that at that time..."

Perhaps the worst of Joseph's odd jobs was sweeper in a marshmallow factory, where powdered sugar was always drifting down through the air, getting shoveled up off the filthy floor—and being used again.

In February Martha began attending "regular school, kindergarten," and some cut-out hearts and colored-dots-pasted-on-paper were tipped into her Diary "for you to see later on: this is your first handiworks in school." After praising them and noting that "up to fifteen, you can do arithmetic every which way," Joseph added:

I hope, my dear, that whatever I can help to make easier for you I'll be able to do. And all that didn't come true for me, I can help to make come true for you in life. Be a good girl and study hard my dear, and most of all be friendly and helpful to your fellow man so everyone will like you, it will make you happy in later life, and never be ashamed that you are a Hungarian.

---

When Mathilda had recuperated and George was old enough to be placed in a daycare nursery, Mathilda returned to her job at the hat factory. Joseph did not object to wives

working outside the home, but *his* wife shouldn't have to; and "it hurt his ego for me to be bringing home the money," Mathilda would say. After about four months of joblessness Joseph got work at Mathilda's factory, stretching hats on forms. To him this must have seemed only a marginal improvement: his wife had to obtain him the job, and as a professional milliner she of course had the more skilled position.

**1925 June 9.** Mártuka, I feel guilty because I've neglected you lately. You know darling you are not the only child in our house anymore. I always thought I could never love a second child as much as I loved you, but I was mistaken all the time. I do love Gyurika just as much as I ever did love you. Sometimes I play a bit more with him than with you, not because I love you less, but because he is the smallest and more helpless than you are. At first you felt hurt and it made you a bit jealous of him, but now you get used to having a little brother and you too love him just as much as Mama and I do... but once in awhile you ask me still if I love him better than I love you. Believe me, my dearest, we both love you just as much as before, except we can't play with you as much as we used to when you were the only one.

I am terribly disappointed in America. I have to work very hard, and even so I have a lot of worry and haven't got the spirit to play much nowadays. For the last four months I was unemployed, and you overheard when Mother and I talked about where we could get money to pay the rent for our apartment. You understood our worry and now every so often ask me if we have money for the rent. I am sorry dear you have to worry with us, I never intended for you to know about it, and did not think you heard and understood what we were talking of... [*Joseph*]

Mathilda's home millinery shop "just didn't go at all<sup>105</sup>," and with it the \$300 spent for materials were written off as wasted. The Ehrlichs had to take a loan to pay the Division Street rent, and at this grim time the family was near to completely destitute; but of course there would be no question of "burdening" their relatives. Even so, they could at least be nearer friendly faces, and around August the Ehrlichs moved back to the North Side:

It took quite some time, but finally we did find a suitable apartment for ourselves and

---

<sup>105</sup> Possibly in part because simple cloche hats were all the rage by the mid-1920s, just as women of all ages had begun bobbing their hair.



in a very nice neighborhood, 807 Lakeside Place, close to Lake Michigan, which is lovely. When we look out of the front window we can see the beautiful Lake just across the walk, with a large sandy beach full of people.

The new apartment was basement-level, but the Kohns and Ruhigs lived within walking distance and on weekends the family could get together on the beach and in Lincoln Park. “We had a lot of fun together.”

Things gradually began to look up for the Ehrlichs. They spent much of that summer in the park, going out for inexpensive strolls just as they had in Kolozsvár. According to Martha, “Our Sunday afternoon entertainment was an endless walk for I don’t remember how many miles, to a ‘country’ type area where we sat on grassy knolls and watched the trains go by.” They would usually pack a lunch for these outings and eat it overlooking the train tracks.

Around this time things got busy at the Ruhigs’s fur shop, and Rose and Béla asked Mathilda and Joseph to help them out by sewing up small furs. As Mathilda was to say, “It was quite a surprise to everyone” that Joseph took to this, learning “every kind of fur work and doing a good job on all of them.” The Ruhigs asked Joseph to stay on and work for them steadily as a finisher; he agreed, although his pride and determination to not be a burden doubtless gave him the driving ambition to open his own fur shop before long.

If not yet content, Joseph was for the time being feeling more cheerful. In September Martha had become “a real school girl,” beginning first grade; the Ruhigs’s store on Sheridan Road was not far from Lakeside Place, and sometimes Mathilda and Martha would bring George in his buggy there so that the family could walk home together. “Soon the work started to interest me,” wrote Joseph, “and it was better than no work at all, and we all got along pretty good.” He presented Rose Ruhig with a watercolor he’d painted of three roses, dated September 3, 1925, and signed *Józsitól* [“From Joe”]. That same month Martha turned six years old (“Honey, time sure flies”) and her parents gave her a colossal party:

**1925 October 4.** ...By the time the party was on, we had twenty-two kids around the table. Luckily we have a large living room, and everyone enjoyed the food and games and had a wonderful time... Mother baked a large birthday cake with pink frosting, also made lots of fancy cookies. We served ice cream, and each guest got a paper basket full of candy. Your

little brother was sitting in his high chair right with all the children at the table, his big eyes wide open watching everything, and trying so hard to talk... We have lots of fun with Gyurika, you love each other and play very nicely always. Sometimes just to tease you I pretend I am angry at him and talk loudly, but you run to me and beg me to leave him alone.

In a few days we'll be two years in the U.S.A.<sup>106</sup> You hardly remember anything or anyone from our old home. Still talk Hungarian but your English is perfect already, no accent<sup>107</sup>, which I believe your good ear for sounds and music is to thank for. I wish I would have more money, I'd love to start to give you music lessons, but we are quite poor, even a violin seems too expensive. Mártuka, it is bad to be so poor as we are, but we all have our health, and right now that's the main thing. [*Joseph*]

At Christmastime Martha “got lots of lovely presents which made you happy, you still believe in Santa Claus, so we had for you a nice Christmas tree. You could be happy my dearest while you believe in such illusions, and we like to prolong it till we possibly can without harm.”

So Joseph wrote; but for Martha, Christmas posed a considerable problem. In Europe there had been St. Nicholas filling shoes with clowns and chocolate, “but that wasn’t a *godly* figure. And in America, it’s *God*. And that’s what disturbed my father terribly, and that is why he didn’t want me to have any part of it, and I was so torn between wanting to take part and be with the other kids, and the loyalty to my father.”

For Joseph the Neolog rabbi’s fatalistic son, religion was something educated people did not need as a crutch. However carefully you might plan and make provision for the future, what was going to happen was going to happen, and you were inevitably going to have to cope with it: that was that. “Yes,” Martha would sum up her father’s philosophy, “reality—everything had to be reality.”

---

“Tomorrow will be George’s first birthday,” Joseph wrote on January 27, 1926. “I can’t tell you much of your little brother yet, he doesn’t do much.” As for Martha, “at first we worried a lot about you, my dear. For the first three years of your life we always were

---

<sup>106</sup> Actually in Chicago, where they arrived October 7, 1923.

<sup>107</sup> Martha and George would both grow up with moderate, not-always-audible Chicago accents—e.g. “peeceple” for *people*.

with you, and all of a sudden we landed in America, and all changed for you and for us too.”

On February 23rd Martha got her “first paper in school with a 100 on it”—an arithmetic exercise in addition, to her father’s pride and joy, and of course the high-scoring paper got tipped into the Diary. “Hope many more will follow it,” Joseph added.

That month he was able to buy a used piano, and started teaching Martha the basics of how to play it: “The first lesson went very well. You learn quickly and have a very good ear for music.” Joseph also bought a violin for himself “from a man who needed the money, he asked only ten dollars for it.” Mathilda had learned to play the piano in Kolozsvár, and sometimes she and Joseph “played easy duets together,” thought not often since Mathilda did not think she was very good. Both thought “it would be nice if we could recapture some of our old lifestyle again in our new country.” Moreover, Martha’s piano lessons were viewed by her parents as being “necessary to a well-rounded-out education.”

Martha herself was to say: “The remarkable thing is that as strapped as they were, and as poor as they were, the things that were listed as priorities to do for the children—there was always money for this. No matter where they had to scrimp. If it had to be for the children, it was there... Dad had time to teach me, but he wouldn’t ‘have time’ to sit down and enjoy himself, playing for himself.”

For Joseph’s thirty-second birthday on March 17th, Mathilda had the first portrait photograph taken of Martha and George together. Martha wore “a lovely new white fur coat and matching tam made from ermine tails, showing a bit of silver greys. George has his first knitted wool outfit with cap on his head to match... Dad was really very happy with this birthday gift.”

By mid-March Joseph had been giving Martha piano lessons for several weeks, “but now you don’t want to practice anymore. I have to force you to do it because I can see sometime you will be a very good pianist. Now we get to the point where I have to pay one cent to you, to even sit down at the piano.” On the other hand Martha liked to read all the time, to the point where her concerned parents sometimes had to take her books away for fear of eyestrain. (She had started wearing glasses regularly again a few months earlier.)

**1926 June 15.** ...Mother and I love to read too, but we don’t have too much time for that, except when you and your little brother are fast asleep... Good thing we have a library not

too far away, and it has a few Hungarian books on the shelves. Also we get the newspapers. Wish we could read English more fluently. There's so much we must learn, and Mother started to read your schoolbooks and it seems they help her to understand and to speak a lot more now. Soon as I find time, I will try to go to school at night; if only I could get to it, I'd feel so much better. But so far I am too tired when I get home, and I like to spend more time with my family. [Joseph]

He was never to make it to night school, and his skill at reading and speaking English always lagged behind Mathilda's. In the years to come she would use both her library card and Martha's to check out ten books at a time, every week or two, toting them back and forth in a shopping bag. But however Joseph might feel about life in America, he was always to find solace in his children. Years later, retrospectively and in English, he would write in George's Scrapbook:

Life carries on at 807 Lakeside Place, where all the children of the neighborhood fight for the honor of playing with Georgie—"the darling of the lakefront." This is the place where I initiated you into the exciting realm of Little Red Riding Hood, your favorite bedtime story. No other would do, and it wasn't long before you were able to chime in on the list of groceries in her basket, and explode at the end of—"leves (soup), *hús* (meat), *főzelék* (vegetables), *bor* (wine), *sör* (beer), with an emphatic *palinka* (brandy)!"<sup>108</sup>

The Ehrlichs's basement apartment on Lakeside Place had windows at sidewalk level. A streetlamp was outside the bedroom window, and when the bedroom light was off at night the streetlamp would illuminate the room. "Those days," Martha would recall, "were among our more lean-'n'-hungry ones, and 'boughten' entertainment (movies, etc.) few and far between." But Joseph would cut from cardboard little silhouettes of people, animals, birds, trees, buildings, and the like; and at night he would tell his children stories, illustrating them by having the shadows of his cardboard props cast upon the bedroom wall.




---

<sup>108</sup> Both the Hungarian words and English translations appear in the original Scrapbook.

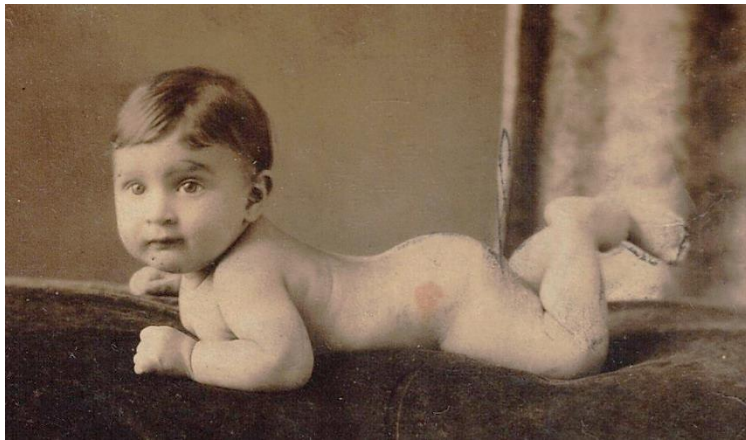


above: 2607 W. Division St. in 2004 — below: “Second floor front” in 2004

Copyright © 2004 by Matthew C. Ehrlich

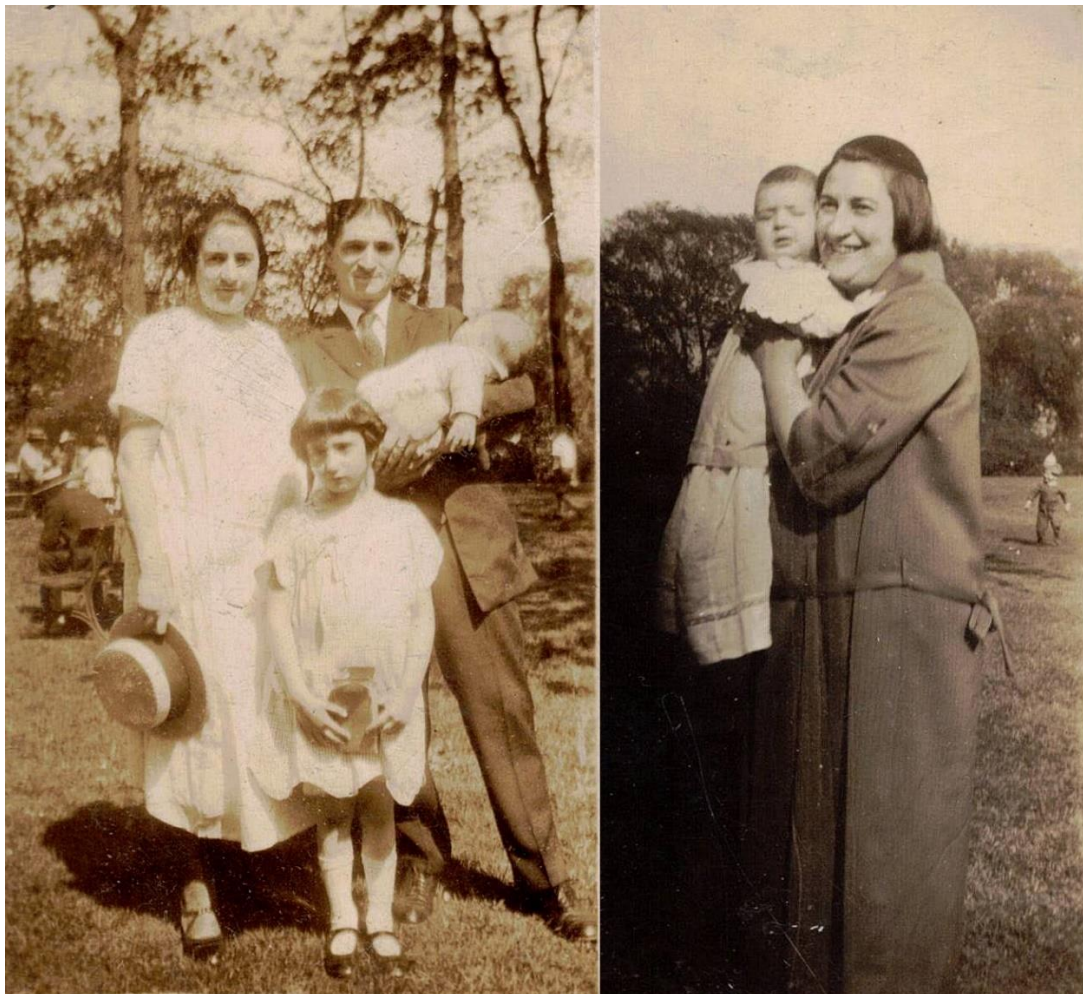






above: "Forgive me for this picture": Winter 1925

below: Sunday in the Park with Gyurika: Summer 1925





above: Martha on ponyback, January 1926

below: George and Martha, March 1926







Lakeside Place in 2006: a vacant lot

*I'm currently in Chicago for the weekend and did some additional exploring of old Ehrlich family haunts. One place I went to was 807 Lakeside, where I found . . . nothing. The Historical Chicago Tribune archives ... turned up a 1970 clipping saying a fire that started in a "vacant basement apartment" at that address spread to upper floors. So it's possible that whatever was left of the building was torn down afterward and never replaced, though the archives turn up classified ad listings for the same address for a few years afterward. It's also possible the addresses on that street were renumbered at some point; 809 Lakeside is for some reason right next door to 817 Lakeside. (817 is a larger apartment complex that perhaps replaced smaller buildings at 811, 813, 815, etc.)*

Copyright © 2006 by Matthew C. Ehrlich



Lakeside Place in 2006: another view

*The 1970 Tribune clipping said 807 Lakeside was a three-story brick building. I'm assuming that what currently is 809 Lakeside is similar to what used to be next door... (Note the street light in front, and the larger building just to the right that now is 817 Lakeside.)*

Copyright © 2006 by Matthew C. Ehrlich

## 10

*Furriery*

On June 27, 1926 the Chicago Progressive Fur Club had a Sunday picnic at Lincoln Park to which the Ehrlichs and Ruhigs went. “As usual there were all sorts of programs to entertain everybody,” including running contests for all ages, and Martha entered the five-to-ten-year-old race and won it. “But the surprise came next day, when a letter came for you by name, saying that you’d won a two dollar savings account in a bank.” The club’s letter expressed hope that this would be the means of beginning Martha’s success in life; Joseph called it her “first real earnings” and wished they could leave the money there a long time for her.

Martha had completed first grade and was “very happy for vacation,” staying outdoors all day; her parents still had to keep at her to practice the piano. “When you learn one of the parts, then you love to play it over and over, and no more problems, until the next new part comes along.” Martha’s handwriting was poor and Joseph intended to help her with this (“I’m going to teach you during vacation”) but he was usually too tired when he came home from work in the evenings. “He still tries to spend some time with you and George if he’s still awake,” commented Mathilda. “He isn’t used to such hard and fast life as in the U.S.A.”

After July 1926 no entry was made in Martha’s Diary for nearly a year. By the following spring, after eighteen months or so of working for the Ruhigs and learning the fur trade, Joseph opened his own store at 1539 Devon<sup>109</sup> Avenue, considerably further up the North Side from the Ruhigs’s place, not far west of Loyola University and Lake Michigan. For at least a year and maybe two, the family lived in a two-room-and-water-closet apartment in back of their ground-level store. This was the first home George would remember: “The ‘bathroom’ there had a sink and stool only, and I had to take a bath in a rubber folding bathtub. We lived in a kind of loft situation.”

---

<sup>109</sup> Pronounced “Dee-VAWN” in full-throated Chicagoese.

The Ehrlichs's shop had a built-in steel storage vault, always called the "wault"<sup>110</sup>, where coats were stored during the summer. Mothballs were kept inside the cedar-lined vault (cedar also repelling moths) and theoretically the vault provided cold storage, but didn't. Materials and linings were stored in a couple of sheet-metal safes featuring big combination locks.

By the time their new store was furnished, the Ehrlichs had no money left to buy furs or trimmings; but Joseph had already established himself as a man of his word who always paid his debts promptly. Dealers offered to extend him credit till after Thanksgiving, when customers would pick up their furs from storage and pay for them. The fur business was very definitely a seasonal activity, with an ebb-and-flow cycle that Martha would one day explain:

"All summer long he had done the repairing and the glazing and the cleaning, and then everything was stored in the vault. And also during the summer while he was working, there was no money. When [customers] picked up their things, then they paid. Well, the first snowfall netted George and me each a nickel, that was a big celebration, we got a whole nickel, because it was snowing and that heralded the beginning of the season. Then they got the coats out, and all during the winter, as the money kept coming in day by day, that's when Dad paid his bills.

"And of course he *was* the soul of honesty and everybody knew it, so they gave him lining on credit, they gave him furs on credit, and of course the first thing when money started coming in, the bills had to be paid first. So by the time the bills were paid and everything was caught up, it was almost the end of the season, and we were back to nothing again."

Joseph was a competent and dependable furrier who did his work well, came through on time, and gave good value for the money; he could also be possessed by an occasional whimsy, such as the time he made George a miniature "collegiate" raccoon coat. But he had a continuing struggle with English that hampered communication with his customers. Joseph's grasp of American language would always be clumsy and this would always profoundly embarrass him; he never liked to speak at length in English. After calling on the

---

<sup>110</sup> Joseph and Mathilda transposed their pronunciation of V's and W's, and some of Mathilda's R's had an almost-Asian inflection, so that *tree* sounded a bit like "tlee."

more fluent (and far more self-confident) Mathilda for interpretive help a few times, it was decided she should give up her job at the hat factory rather than risk getting fired. From then on she worked with her husband in the fur store.

Along with his local reputation for honesty and debt-settling, Joseph had another significant business asset: Old World charm and gentlemanly manners, especially effective with the fur trade's largely (so to speak) female-matron clientele. To those who understood Hungarian he would say "*Kezét csókolom,*" a polite phrase serving as "Good day Madame," but more literally translated as "I kiss your hand."

One day a couple of men visited the store, and men coming into a fur shop without women was suspiciously unusual. Whether they were sizing the place up or not, Joseph became concerned about having some sort of protection. The store had an alarm, but he thought a watchdog would be more dependable and so got a shepherd called Peggy from the Ruhigs. Peggy would let anyone come into the store, but would not allow them to *leave* until Joseph gave her the go-ahead.

While watching the family eat, Peggy drooled to such an extent that puddles formed between her paws, and she had to be banished at mealtime.

---

**1927 May 14.** It's a shame, almost a year has passed since I wrote in your diary, but all the worry we had and trouble took up all my time. Although it isn't everything rosy yet, but your Daddy has a fur store now which gives us something to look forward to for our future in a better way. The best part is that now we are all together all day, and I'm not scared and don't have to be afraid I won't be able to find a job.

But to get back to you, Mártuka. You are a nice and healthy seven-year-old girl, and in second grade... We still have to make you practice piano, but I am so sure you will like it and will be a very good player sometime, and you will thank me for it when you are grown up, and it will help you in later life. The most punishment you get is for fibbing. I am sure it isn't anything to worry about, but I have to correct it before it gets to be a habit. Then you are stubborn, which in itself isn't important except when you show resistance with me, I can't have that. [*Joseph*]

**1927 July.** You love to read anything and everything, and second best you love playing

outdoors, where you run, jump, and act very lively, and we have to force you to come in when it gets dark. You love George very much and now he is old enough to be out with you, but you don't like that because you have to look after him and he hinders you in your freedom. Otherwise there's no problem between the two of you, even when he starts a fight with you, because Gyurika is a darling little fighter. He's watching every move you make, and tries to do the same thing. When you read, he gets a book and tries to read it too. Or when you dress up in anything, even rags, he wants you to dress him up too...

You don't care if you are late for school, we always have to rush you otherwise you'd be late. Once we even had a note from your teacher because you were late and it made me spank you, but it did not impress you at all. You are leisurely slow getting ready, although you love to go to school. You can't hold onto money, as soon as you get any, you run to spend it. You never so far save till you get two cents together, have to buy candy as fast as possible. I hope when you get older you will change and learn to save your pennies somehow. Learn it, Mártuka, if you save one hundred pennies you will have a dollar. Don't live just for today, think of tomorrow also, because today is gone in no time, but our tomorrows will stretch ahead of us in a long row... [Joseph]

After a year of teaching Martha the basics of piano playing, Joseph wanted her to take more advanced lessons from a professional teacher. The one he had in mind was much too expensive, but she recommended a pupil of hers, a "beautifully accomplished young woman" named Dorothea Claussen<sup>111</sup>, who was to teach Martha for the next ten years.

**1927 Aug. 20.** Today we received a letter from your Grandmother Ehrlich [in Budapest], she is a very old lady already. She sent you a lovely poem for a remembrance. So sad to see you don't remember her, nor anyone else from home. Europe and our close relations are all gone from your memory, although from over there they still write how much they miss you and can't forget you. We were a very close family, loving and respecting each other, and hoping with all our heart that we soon can go back for a visit, and show a really loving family you have there. That's everyone's wish there too. [Joseph]

---

<sup>111</sup> Born in 1904, Miss Claussen married efficiency expert Herbert F. Virus in 1944 and had three daughters; she died in 1999.



*To darling Mártuka as a remembrance*

*Live in the lap of life's luxuries*

*In countless years to come*

*And promise to still remember often*

*Who wrote you these few lines*

*Your beloved blossoming face*

*Will be kept forever in my heart*

*My only wish for you my dear is that*

*Nothing ever goes wrong in your life*

*Live gaily and happily ever after*

*Your loving Grandma Ehrlich*

---

Romania was eager for the West to permit Jewish emigration, and certainly there were many Jews in Romania who would have been happy to leave. In December 1927 Romanian students staged a series of pogroms, wrecking synagogues and burning Torah scrolls in public squares. The riots spread to Kolozsvár/Cluj and eight synagogues there were looted by the mob, including the one attended by the Kohn/Kun family.

But in the United States, the National Origins clause of the 1924 Immigration Act had gone into effect in July. The quota for all Europe was now fixed at 150,000 a year, with each country's share in direct proportion to the number of its nationals in America. Britain's quota was huge and seldom filled, while central, eastern, and southern Europeans would have to wait years for even a chance at getting a visa.

American immigration, for all intents and purposes, had been cut off.

---

Martha proved to be a good student in the third grade. "Although not the best, you are in the higher average," her father characteristically wrote. She appreciated that her parents's fur business was successful, since she now got more spending money; this mostly went for candy and soda pop. "Ice cream doesn't appeal to you somehow," Mathilda wrote in one of her now-rare Diary entries. "My darling little girl, it is ages since I had a chance to write in your book. I had no time nor patience to do so. I still can't get used to doing all the hard work that Americans have to do, if they have no help. I do love it here, but life's so



much more complicated for Dad and me than we ever could have expected.”

Though Mathilda had to do most of her own housecleaning, Joseph “in his old-fashioned, European, gallant way, scoured the bathroom once a week,” according to Martha. “This was one area which was beneath the dignity of his lady.”

George was not at all pleased at being left behind when Martha went off to Stephen K. Hayt Grammar School<sup>112</sup>. “He holds onto you and doesn’t like it when you leave for school and he has to stay home with us.” When the summer of 1928 rolled around, George “had a lovely time in the vacation because he tagged along with you all day, he was out of doors with you playing and you took good care of him. People told us you were like a little mother to him”—a role that Martha mightily resented. When she began fourth grade that September, George outdid his previous reaction. Years later, retrospectively and in English, Joseph would write in George’s Scrapbook:

It was here that you had your first great sorrow. In fact it was a daily sorrow. Martha leaving for school, accompanied by your tantrum and shrill “I want to go too’s.”

Your first disappointment came at 3½, when going out to meet the world, you were rejected by the Hayt kindergarten as “too young.” However a few months later, the school authorities repented their first hasty decision, and you were enrolled.

Mathilda went to Hayt and asked the school to *please* admit George, “because he wanted to go to school so badly that I don’t know what to do with him.” George finally got his wish the following February, beginning kindergarten at the ripe old age of just-turned-four.

**1928 Oct. 12.** It isn’t laziness that I didn’t write this long, but the worries I had took my mind away from everything. Besides, we had some sickness in our family, and more worry too. Thank Heaven things got better and so with a lighter heart and mind I can pick up my pen to chat with you again.

You are in the fourth grade now and an average good student. Mathematics is hard for you, so I am helping you in that every day... You surprised me with a mark of forty in math, you explained it was because you didn’t finish just half of it. Your usual marks are

---

<sup>112</sup> At 1518 W. Granville Ave: still a public elementary school in 2024.

ninety or over, so I didn't scold you for it although I found out you cut paper dolls out and pasted them on paper when you should have been doing mathematics. [Joseph]

Joseph also noted that Martha, who kept her hair long at a time when most girls had theirs bobbed, had gotten into a hair-pulling fight. "You don't mind a good fight now and then. Not your brother, he is a little fraidy-cat." (So much for Gyurika the darling little fighter.)

By May 1929 Martha had a best friend, neighbor Dorothy Peterson<sup>113</sup>, and an unbest friend, the piano at practice time. Joseph praised her playing ("you go through the hardest things with ease and learn very quickly to play from memory, and your technique is very good") though he said she would be outdoors playing all day if he didn't make her practice.

Yet Martha had few children to play with as a child. When Dorothy Peterson was not available, "there was nobody. So this is why most of my life was spent reading. My *books* were my friends... And you know, although I think it worried Mother that I didn't have friends, Dad seemed to feel this was okay, because books would never disappoint me...

"But the thought keeps coming to me: that if parents feel and talk and act with a child the way my parents did, why did I have *no* self-confidence, *no* ego—I should have been the most egotistical kid in the world..."

---

Having paid off their debts and established their credit, the Ehrlichs were doing well enough to move to a separate apartment at 1512 Rosemont Avenue, just south of the fur store<sup>114</sup>. They were living there on June 12, 1929, when "Josif" Ehrlich—aged thirty-five, standing five-foot-seven, with blue eyes, brown hair, and no visible distinguishing marks—was granted his Certificate of Naturalization and admitted as a citizen of the United States.

To achieve citizenship, Joseph and Mathilda had studied English so they could answer pertinent questions. But a husband's naturalization no longer automatically made his wife an American citizen, and illness would delay Mathilda's getting her citizenship until

---

<sup>113</sup> Dorothy Vivian Peterson (born in 1919, two weeks before Martha) was the daughter of Swedish-born parents Carl Arthur Werner Peterson (1897-1979: a fire insurance agent) and Edythe Lundelius (1899-1957). The Petersons lived at 1534 [West] Highland, across the alley from the Ehrlichs when they moved to 1553 [West] Devon.

<sup>114</sup> They would live in a series of apartments near the fur store until 1932: two others were on Glenwood and Greenview Avenues.

July 1936.

Things looked very promising for the Ehrlichs in the summer of 1929, not least because Martha had saved up \$1.50 for the first time in her life:

Your happiest time is if Mother or I ask you to lend us some of it once in awhile.

Then I pay it back and give you some interest, to teach you what it means to save, and you like that. But you ask me to give change, because it seems a lot more that way than if you get a dollar bill. You're saying you feel grown up since you have money of your own, and can lend some to us when we need it.

Joseph was glad to encourage this, but sorry to have to discourage Martha's reading "to all hours of the night... I've found you several times in the early A.M. awake and reading in bed. Finally you had to be punished for that because you are drowsy all day after these bouts." Martha's punishment was to write *My father told me not to read in the bed and I'm not going to do it any more*, fifty times. If the next day was not a school day, Martha was allowed to stay up later. One time she finished her book early and when Joseph asked her, "Now what will you do?" she answered, "I'll start reading it all over again."

Around July 1929 George was taken to Michael Reese Hospital for a tonsillectomy. "Now he won't eat. We have to use force to feed him, although it is over two weeks since he had his operation." When George began eating again he was very picky about it, and began a lengthy holdout against vegetables. Conditions deteriorated to the point where he would touch nothing but milk and ham sandwiches. Mathilda was perfectly willing "to make ham sandwiches ad infinitum," Martha would relate, but one day Joseph decided George was going to eat vegetables, or else. "Both being totally stubborn males, neither would give by a carrot slice, and finally the ultimatum was proclaimed: George would either eat what had been put on his plate, or he could leave. Period!"

What resulted was young George—having donned winter coat, galoshes, and round hat with ear flaps tied under his chin—marching away downstairs, his face dry-eyed and expressionless. At the top of the stairs Mathilda was wringing her hands, Martha was "sobbing uncontrollably," and Joseph was "waiting for the kid to give up, turn around, and return to eat the damned carrots." But George was apparently ready to join the Foreign Legion.

In the end it was Joseph who had to back down. “The era of ham sandwiches continued for a few months,” Martha would conclude, “then disappeared naturally.”

---



above left: Poem from “Nagymama” Sarolta Ehrlich, August 1927

above right: Martha on a “winged” tricycle, Summer 1927



THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

No. 3110806

TO BE GIVEN TO THE PERSON NATURALIZED.

**CERTIFICATE OF NATURALIZATION**

Petition, Volume 386 Number 72044

Description of holder: Age, 35 years; height, 5 feet, 7 inches; color, White; complexion, Fair; color of eyes, Blue; color of hair, Brown; visible distinguishing marks, None.

Name, age, and place of residence of wife: (NOTE: AFTER SEPTEMBER 22, 1922, HUSBAND'S NATURALIZATION DOES NOT MAKE WIFE A CITIZEN.)

Names, ages, and places of residence of minor children: Martha age 9 years; George age 4 years; Chicago, Illinois.

ORIGINALLY

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS

Best remembered, that JOSIF EHRlich then residing at number 1512 Rosemont Ave., City of Chicago, State of Illinois, who previous to his naturalization was a CITIZEN of ROMANIA, having applied to be admitted a citizen of the United States of America pursuant to law, and at a Regular form of the District Court of the United States held at Chicago on the 12th day of June in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and 29, the court having found that the petitioner intends to reside permanently in the United States and that he had in all respects complied with the Naturalization Laws of the United States, and that he was entitled to be so admitted, it was thereupon ordered by the said court that he be admitted as a citizen of the United States of America.

In testimony whereof the seal of said court is hereunto affixed on the 12th day of June in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and 29, and of our Independence the one hundred and fifty-third.

Charles M. Bates  
Clerk, District Court of the United States,  
Northern District of Illinois.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

above: Citizen Joseph: June 12, 1929  
below: Mathilda and Joseph, 1929



## 11

*New Deal on Devon*

“Well, here we are again, time sure flies fast,” Joseph wrote in Martha’s Diary on February 8, 1930. “I am afraid to look how long it’s been since I wrote in your book last.” He noted that Martha was now in the fifth grade, and that her most recent report card had been half Excellent and half Good. “So you are not the very best, just middle best, so far. Which shows you could do it if you put your mind to it.” She was also coming along well with her piano lessons, although she still had to be prompted and even forced to practice daily.

For special occasions such as Joseph’s birthday when a surprise present was needed, Martha would secretly learn a new piece of piano music and practice it on the sly. Each time she wondered how she managed to practice without her father knowing, until it finally dawned on her that everybody repeatedly pretended *not* to know—Joseph probably appreciating her voluntary practicing as much as the thought-that-counted. Mathilda would also slip the children twenty-five cents, and they would buy their father a couple of two-for-a-quarter cigars for his birthday, one cigar coming from each of them.

Joseph’s February 1930 Diary entry mentioned that George (who was beginning his second year in kindergarten, having been deemed too young at five to enter first grade) had started taking violin lessons. “I am teaching him to read music. I asked him what is a half-note and a quarter-note together, he thought for awhile, then said ‘One dollar.’”

---

In 1930 the Great Depression gradually made its presence felt across America, not least in Chicago, which had devoted the late Twenties to opening vast new public buildings and reeling from a long spree of unrestrained, heavily-publicized gang warfare. Now with the Depression deepening and prosperity *not* waiting just around the corner, many jobless people were moving to Chicago in search of work. In September a “Hooverville” shantytown appeared at the foot of Randolph Street.

There was no shantytown up on Rosemont Avenue; and many of Joseph and Mathilda's relatives back in Europe assumed that since the Ehrlichs lived in America, they must be rich. One most convinced of this was Joseph's younger brother Miska, who played the violin in Athens café orchestras and later lived in Cairo. From time to time Miska would write "dunning" letters asking for money, and Joseph would exclaim, "They don't realize how *poor* we are!" Even so, the Ehrlichs occasionally scraped together ten dollars and sent money orders to Joseph's mother Sarolta in Budapest<sup>115</sup> and Mathilda's father Móric in Cluj. Since it could not be more money, the Ehrlichs would say it was "for cigarettes."

Around 1930 word came that Móric Kohn had died. Martha, who no longer remembered her grandfather clearly, startled George by bursting into tears; and Mathilda bought a candle to light in Móric's memory, the only such candle that George would ever see in his parents's home. Memorial candles were constantly burning at Aunt Jeni Kohn's apartment, which "always smelled of melting wax." But *Jenka néni* was the only one in the family circle to practice all the rites of Judaism, even keeping a kosher kitchen. Mathilda would have appreciated the comfort of regular ritual and overt prayer; but such were definitely not for Joseph, and Mathilda went along without question.

---

**1931 January 3.** Here's another year gone. We all are well, but I have money worries again. I don't think Mother and I ever will forget these hard years. It doesn't bother you because we try to keep it from you and Gyuri. It would have been easier for you if we had more money to do with. I am just mentioning this so whenever things look dark for you, dear, never despair, but look forward in hope like we hope for the better soon for us all. Hope you won't ever have to worry about money... Today you both played music for the PTA, it was very nice... [*Joseph*]

The younger Ehrlichs's debut as an instrumental duet came about because Mathilda belonged to the PTA, "and naturally we all talked about our children," so Martha and George's progress on piano and violin was well known. After PTA meetings the parents "always had socials, coffee and cake and everybody brought something—and one meeting I

---

<sup>115</sup> There was little correspondence between Sarolta and Joseph: "not due to any animosity, but simply because theirs was not a close relationship." George, unsure when word came that Sarolta had died, dated it to 1937-38.



brought the children.” Together they played several of the *Merry Widow Waltzes* “and got a big ovation... [A] lot of people for years after asked me about them, how they were getting along.”

Joseph was proud of his children’s musical prowess, particularly Martha’s after six years of lessons, although he plaintively wrote: “If you would practice half as much as you read, it would be even better. I wonder if that will come true, Mártuka? that sometime you will say ‘Thank you’ to me for making you learn and to practice your music? I hope sometime you and Gyuri will even earn money with your music...” (Ever practical-minded, Joseph was always on the lookout for professional opportunities that might be provided by a Well-Rounded-Out Education; Martha, for instance, would be able to find work as a pianist in a silent cinema.)

As she completed sixth grade Martha was her class’s best speller but not so good in geography and history, “which I think is because you don’t like them well enough to put your mind to them,” wrote Joseph. “I could let you in on a secret, Mártuka: I was poor too in these two subjects when I was as young as you are now.” Martha did like and do well in math, and even better at reading, both in school and out: one night Joseph had to take her book away because she was reading in bed at eleven o’clock. “You enjoy some of your books so much that you laugh right out loud and startle all of us. But other times I notice tears in your eyes, evidently the story was sad. But even now you like best the stories I could tell.”

Joseph would regale his children with tales about the Three Boys: Pali, Sanyi, and Laci<sup>116</sup>. Their adventures got the Boys in and out of scrapes at boarding school, the circus, and the North Pole:

For years I was telling stories about these three boys, making up their adventures as I went along. Both you and George were the happiest when I told these wonderful stories, even I enjoyed them. I usually sat in our large armchair, Gyurika on my lap, and you on the footstool facing us. We had countless sessions like these, and I was happy hearing your laughter ring out when the three boys did something funny. But

---

<sup>116</sup> *Paw-lee, Shawn-yee, Lawt-see*: diminutives of Pál (Paul), Sándor (Alexander), and Ladislás. George wished he himself had been named Paul; in 1957 he would bestow that monicker on his firstborn son, and later tell *him* stories about the Three Boys (redubbed Jasper, Oswald, and Alonzo).

sometimes you both cried when the story got a little sad. These stories have been going on for the last three years now, and at times I really have to put my thinking cap on so I could continue them. Other times I guess I fell back and mixed some of my early childhood that I vaguely recalled and told as a story. Mother was always there too, doing something else, but we all were together at home.

---

**1931 December 19.** Today I took out your diary and browsed over the pages a bit. I think it is interesting enough even for a stranger. It seems it is my diary as well as yours. Since we are in the U.S.A. I have very little time for these sorts of things; I have to work very hard to make a living for all of us. But at least once a year I manage to sit down and chat with my girl. There wasn't much news to jot down this last year anyhow, you grew a lot and you are a healthy normal child, have a good appetite. I only wish George would have half as good.

You are in junior high school<sup>117</sup> in seventh grade. An average student, although the few latest report cards show much improvement. The piano lessons are going on and improving all along; you will be able to play well enough for your enjoyment. Your most enjoyed recreation still is a good book, you just started on the Jack London series, and when you start reading you can't put it away till it's finished. You don't like housework at all, that's why I'd like to make a schoolteacher out of you, which seems a very good profession for a girl, and positively you show inclination to be a good teacher. You always loved to play school and you always chose to be the teacher, which pleases me a lot... Now you are both waiting for Christmas and naturally the gifts with it... [Joseph]

Christmas 1931 was the first big Christmas-for-kids that the Ehrlichs celebrated in America. Till then Martha and George had been given small gifts, toys or books or school things, but this year Martha asked for a typewriter and George (who still believed in Santa Claus) wanted a Lionel electric train; and their parents decided to buy both, "although I have no business to spend all that money when we are so short." Having as usual paid off all his various debts, Joseph had little cash left; but instead of making his children "partners" in the current hard times, he splurged all his few spare dollars on Martha and George. The gifts

---

<sup>117</sup> Roger C. Sullivan Junior High at 6631 North Bosworth Avenue, opened in 1926 and turned into a four-year high school when junior highs were phased out in 1933. As of 2024 Sullivan High is still in operation, and since 2017 has been a "newcomer center" serving foreign-born refugee students from many different countries.

were exchanged on Christmas Eve, as was the family custom: Martha got her typewriter and was soon learning to type her schoolwork; George spent all his time playing with his electric train; and both children got “a couple of good books also.” George was “a bookworm already, always reading and spelling out every thing, we never see him without a book in his hand.”

As 1931 gave way to 1932, the Depression ground bitterly on. Things continued getting worse in Chicago, one of the hardest-hit American cities: wages dropped in economy drives, schoolteachers went without pay for months, rent payment sagged drastically and hundreds of families were evicted from their homes. In January 1932 Edmund Wilson visited old Jane Addams, still doing social work at Hull-House; she sent him to observe a Hooverville next to a garbage dump at 31st and Cicero. Wilson found that rules had been established there so each family would get a fair turn at the garbage when fresh dumps came in. Banks were collapsing nationwide, and by September less than a quarter of Chicago banks were still open; for years to come Joseph would not trust a bank, choosing to keep his money in the fur shop safe instead. The economic paralysis made life increasingly unpleasant and times unrelentingly hard.

Joseph had perhaps six hundred customers at his peak in 1930, but from then on his clientele was not to grow. A fur coat, because of its warmth, was almost a necessity in the days before central heating; purchasing one was a major investment intended to last fifteen, twenty, even thirty years. Choice was based less on fashion than on durability: you might buy a muskrat coat, or a beaver coat if you could afford it, or better yet a seal coat—that was a good one; it would *wear* well. During the Depression, keeping coats in good condition was how Joseph and other small furriers were able to survive; they did not sell many new coats, but kept repairing and remodeling old ones. Besides cleaning and storage, Joseph’s bread-and-butter business would be fixing a rip in a coat, or replacing its buttons, or sometimes shortening or lengthening a coat to restyle it.

In 1932 the landlord of the Ehrlichs’s shop at 1539 Devon announced he was doubling their rent. Joseph realized they could no longer maintain both an apartment and a store, so he made what George would call “a kind of primitive market analysis,” looking at various areas in north Chicago, and deciding that one location down the street from the old store was of significance. The family moved shop and home to 1553 Devon Avenue: up a

dark stairwell on the second floor of a building that faced the Ridge Theatre across Devon. It was just east of Clark, near two major streetcar line intersections and a large streetcar barn; there was a lot of traffic, and Joseph was looking for visibility. He pictured people coming out of the Ridge Theatre and seeing the “Ehrlich Furs” sign in the upstairs window, or changing streetcars on Clark and seeing the other sign projecting from the building wall.

An existing second-story apartment was partially gutted and transformed: its living room became the fur store’s showroom, looking out over Devon; the main bedroom and its closet became the workshop and storage vault. Joseph had his safes brought from the old store, hauled up on pulleys through the windows at 1553 and installed there. The workshop got a metal door with a grating, “but any thief could have broken in,” George would remark; “it gave the *semblance* of massive security.”

The dining room, behind curtained French doors, became the Ehrlichs’s living room. The kitchen became the family’s dining room; the refrigerator remained there, but the stove was moved into the pantry, which became the family’s kitchen. Joseph and Mathilda slept in the back bedroom, and for a year or so George slept there too, on a youth bed; he later moved to a rollaway bed in the family’s living room. Martha slept on another rollaway bed in what had been the kitchen, and after a couple of years would write: “I have to drop everything to help open my bed. I hope the darn bed caves in. I would rather sleep on the floor.”

The apartment tended to be very crowded. From the kitchen/dining room one could go out onto a back porch which Joseph enclosed and used as an additional working area, especially for cleaning furs in a “drum.” A wooden stairway led from the porch to ground level; this was the children’s usual entryway. Lake Michigan was only five blocks or so to the east, and up on the second story the Ehrlichs were able to get lake breezes.

Martha and George would grow up living at 1553 Devon, in a neighborhood where traditions stretching back to the 19th Century were still present: there was a blacksmith down the street, and icemen and greengrocers and ragpickers. The icemen and milkmen still got about on horsedrawn vehicles, while others went up and down the alleys carrying their apparatus on their backs, as Markus Temmer had once delivered laundry. Several empty lots and abandoned excavations were nearby, since the Depression had ended all construction, but George was to say, “It was not a bad neighborhood to live in. [Although] it was not integrated, not racially, but ethnically it was; there were all kinds of people. It was not a bad


place to grow up in...”

Joseph and Mathilda’s fur business would remain at 1553 Devon for many years. As time went by they were fully aware their clientele was dwindling, particularly as the spread of central heating allowed cloth coats to dominate the market. Depression or no Depression, it was never an easy way to make money and the Ehrlichs always had to be very cautious about expenditures; Martha and George were brought up with frugality and both would make it a lifelong style of living (often out of necessity).

Weeks would go by with no contact at all from customers, especially in the spring and summer. During a couple of these dry spells George helped his father make a canvas banner to hang under the showroom windows, saying (in carefully-drawn block letters) SPECIAL—on cleaning or the like. Joseph strung out his work and took his time doing it, maybe spending two hours mending a coat, then reading the newspaper for the next three hours. On average he probably worked no more than twenty hours a week, but had to be “on call” all day in case the phone might ring, or the bell that sounded when the store door opened. Joseph could pretty accurately gauge just how well business was (or was not) doing by going into his “wault” and looking at how many fur coats were stored there, recalling the better times when all his racks had been filled.

Sometimes during Depression summers the only income was from Mathilda’s work on her hemstitching machine. “Times were hard for everybody,” she was to say:

Even though we paid twenty-five cents for a pound of butter and ten cents for a loaf of bread, also a quart of milk, it still was hard to live it through until Thanksgiving when the customers started to call for their fur coats. Then we had plenty of money to pay for all the materials we bought during the summer. Then about six months’s rent we owed to our lovely landlady, Mrs. Haney, who trusted us each year... Fur business is, or was, funny. No one knows that better than the furrier’s family. We had plenty of work all summer, but no one paid for it until they called for their coats... Boy oh boy were we happy then to see money after about six months of moneyless waiting. Soon as we got it, just as fast we started to pay our bills to everybody. But we were happy to do it and had big celebrations over the holidays.




Joseph had been terribly disappointed in America, but a decade after his and Mathilda's arrival they had established a business and a home and a life for their children that held as much promise as anyone on their economic plateau had in the 1930s. With this accomplished, Joseph built himself a protective shell.

For entertainment he would go to the parks, enjoying free Sunday concerts at the Grant Park bandshell; occasionally to the movies; or to the homes of relatives in Chicago and Racine. Unrelated Hungarians, friends of the Ruhigs or the Hoyers, were often included in the family group, and when everybody got together they played a great deal of cards. The women played gin rummy or canasta; the men—usually the foursome of Joseph, Béla Ruhig, Markus Temmer, and Steve Hoyer—would play *máriás*, a Hungarian game much like pinochle, where cards were trumped with tremendous snapping flourishes.

Sometimes the Ehrlichs would accompany the Ruhigs to Hungarian-American picnics which featured Gypsy orchestras and Old Country dancing, but Joseph did not feel truly in his element there. Yet he never attempted to *find* his element, not even after the Depression when there was more leisure time and fewer financial worries. He never made it to night school, never got involved with clubs and organizations as did the outgoing Mathilda or Béla Ruhig. (In German *ruhig* means “quiet,” but Béla was always “involved in these intense political discussions” about what was wrong with The System and how it should be corrected.)

Joseph could not overcome his dread of being perceived by the New World as an ignorant unlettered “bohunk.” After being buffeted by adversity most of his life, he had found haven in the calmer waters of the routine and the comfortable. So (as Joseph saw it) what sense could there be in seeking out the unknown? In having to deal with further change? It was simply looking for trouble. So he no longer willingly ventured beyond the familiar circle of Family and Home. To his children in January 1931 he had written:

My ambition is to make you both love your home, and I try to do everything possible for you to like being at home always. I want you to remember how nice it was to be at home together. Don't forget my dears, your home is always open for you, and never will fail you. Think of your home as your church.





Form 14-4  
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE—BUREAU OF THE CENSUS  
FIFTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1930  
POPULATION SCHEDULE

Enumeration District No. 16-1875  
Superior's District No. 5  
Enumerated by me on April 3, 1930, Helen M. York

State Illinois  
County Cook  
Township or other division of county 49  
Incorporated place Chicago  
Ward of city 49  
Block No. 8

Unincorporated place  
Institution (name, location, date, and names of those in which the census was taken, see instructions)  
Place of birth of each person enumerated and of his or her parents. If born in United States, give name of State, Territory, Possession, or Country. If born abroad, give name of Country, and date of arrival in United States. (See instructions.)

PLACE OF ABODE	NAME	RELATION	HOME DATA		PERSONAL DESCRIPTION		EDUCATION	PLACE OF BIRTH		ACQUAINTANCE OF FOREIGN BORN		CITIZENSHIP, ETC.		OCCUPATION AND INDUSTRY		ENCLINEMENT	
			Male	Female	Age at last birthday	Color of race		Sex	Age at birth	Age at last birthday	Place of birth	Place of birth of father	Place of birth of mother	Place of birth of father	Place of birth of mother		Place of birth of father
1	George	Son			17	White	Male	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17
2	Martha	Daughter			15	White	Female	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
3	Mathilda	Daughter			13	White	Female	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13	13



above left: The Ehrlichs in the 1930 census (at 6331 Glenwood Avenue)

above right: George, Martha, and Mathilda: Christmas 1930

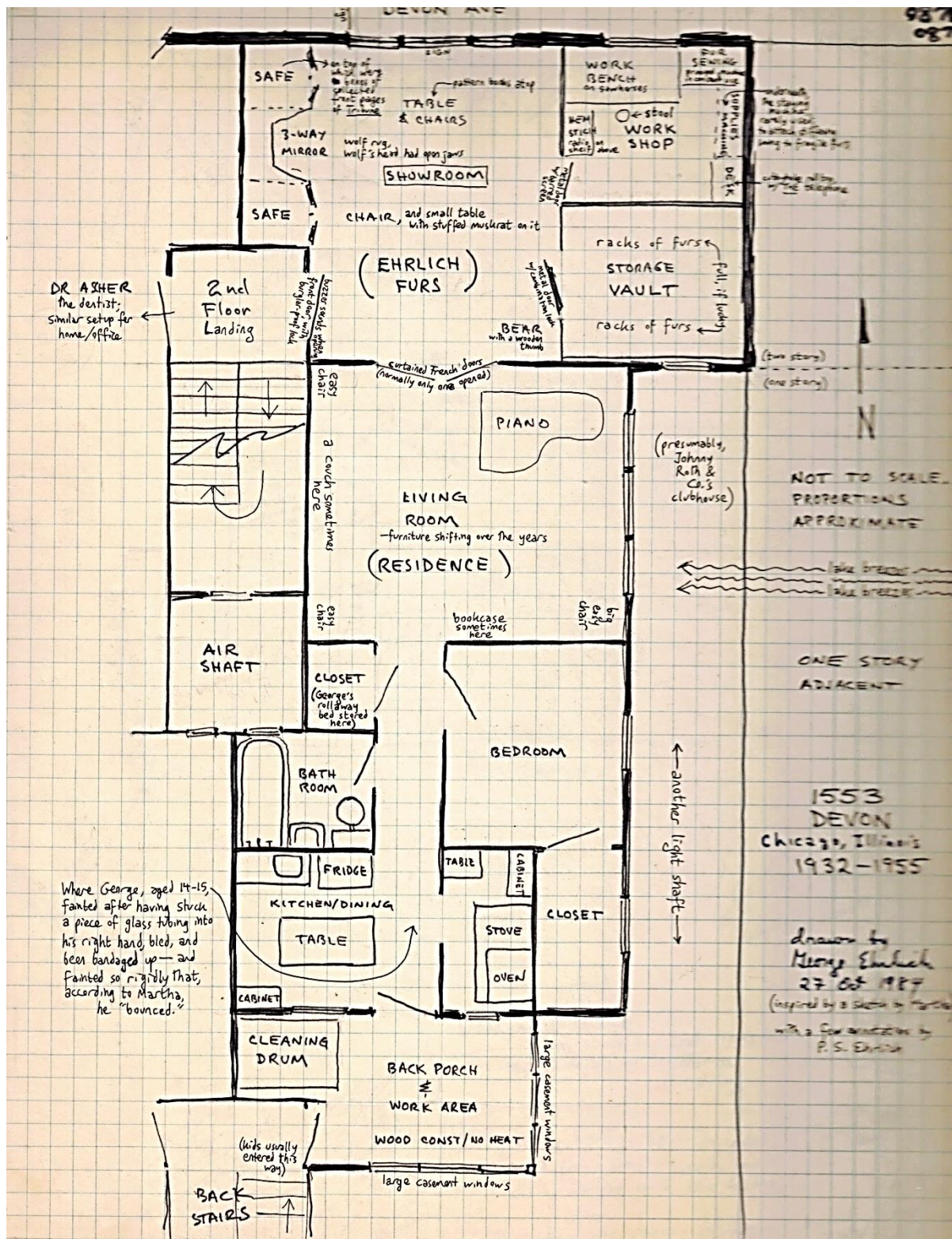


above and below: 1553 W. Devon Avenue: exterior views, 2004

Copyright © 2004 by Matthew C. Ehrlich







1553 Devon Avenue: a floorplan drawn by George in 1984, from a preliminary sketch by Martha  
(with notes by Paul Stephen)

**FUR  
S  
T  
O  
R  
A  
G  
E**

**LET US STORE - CLEAN YOUR FURS**  
GUARANTEED FUR PROTECTION BY OUR SCIENTIFIC  
STORAGE METHODS.  
YOUR FURS SHOULD BE CLEANED ONCE A YEAR  
SO AS TO RETAIN THEIR BEAUTY.

**REMODELING - REPAIRING**  
NOW IS THE TIME TO RECONDITION YOUR OLD  
FUR COAT WHILE LOW OFF-SEASON RATES ARE IN  
EFFECT.  
PHONE OR WRITE US TO CALL FOR YOUR FURS.

**EHRlich** **1553 DEVON AVE.**  
**BRI. 3919**

Ehrlich Furs advertisement printed by George circa 1939

## 12

*Martha and George*

In 1932 Joseph suffered what Dr. Biesenthal, the family physician, thought at first was a heart attack. Dr. Biesenthal called in a specialist; they consulted in private by going into the Ehrlich bathroom, where Joseph's condition was rediagnosed as a severe case of pleurisy. To recuperate, he would have to get away from the cold and damp of Chicago and into a warmer climate.

One of Joseph's customers<sup>118</sup> mentioned that her mother, Mrs. Dever, ran a home for convalescents in St. Petersburg, Florida, assisted by another daughter, nurse Lila Renbarger. For something like a dollar a day, patients could rest on cots outdoors in the Florida sun; meals were part of the package. Joseph went off by bus to St. Petersburg, convinced he was going there to die; but Mrs. Dever and Lila took such good care of him that after a month he returned home "all well." A year or two later Mathilda was suffering from gall bladder problems; she too was sent to St. Petersburg and got not only well "but fatter," as she put it. For several subsequent winters Mathilda and Joseph would alternate going to St. Petersburg; they were unable to go together since they could not afford to bring the children with them.

Joseph had to give up smoking, cold turkey, as part of his recuperation; so he took up chewing P.K.s, a peppermint Chicletlike gum made by Wrigley's and sold in machines on pillars at the elevated station. You put in your penny, a little mechanical man would rotate, and the P.K. would come out of a slot. (On one occasion the mechanical man kept turning and a whole series of P.K.s were produced—greatly upsetting Joseph, since he'd only spent a cent and people were hurrying up to help themselves to the gum windfall.)

He was allowed to continue drinking, in moderation as usual. During Prohibition there was New Life near-beer which he purchased by the case, always dark, restricting himself to a single bottle a night, and offering Martha its last few drops. After Prohibition, if

---

<sup>118</sup> Mary Loretta Moran Hyland (1889-1984), whose widowed mother Delilah North Moran Dever (1869-1957) and sister Delilah "Lila" Moran Renbarger (1891-1974) had moved from Chicago to Florida and operated Dever's Restorium at 3128 21st St. N. in St. Petersburg. Mrs. Hyland was the mother of Reva Belle Hyland (1922-1993) whom George would be teased about during his 1937 visit to St. Petersburg.



the Ehrlichs had company at 1553 Devon, George might be sent with a pitcher to the local tavern to fetch ten or fifteen cents's worth of beer—about a quart. Joseph was also known to have an occasional glass of wine, always drunk “Old World style” in one swallow, and followed by a little hiccup.

Up till now Joseph had picked up and delivered customers's fur coats by hand, traveling by streetcar, but around 1933 he bought his first automobile: a Chevrolet two-door sedan with maroon body and black fenders. This was not so much to spare Joseph's health as to enable his having a more widespread clientele; now many customers, including those who moved away from the neighborhood, would not have to come to the store at any time. Joseph never liked to drive, and for trips to St. Petersburg he would advertise in the newspaper for a driver; a young man who wanted to go to Florida would be hired and get paid transportation there. So as not to worry about maintenance Joseph would trade in the car every year or two, going back each time to the same Chevrolet dealer, who looked forward to these trade-ins since the Ehrlich Chevy tended to be in fine condition with less than 5,000 miles on it.

At this time Joseph also began listening to radio broadcasts of baseball games and boxing bouts, always rooting for the least objectionable boxer. The Ehrlichs bought their first radio, a Majestic, about the time they moved to 1553 Devon, but the very first radio George remembered seeing belonged to Leo Kohn. It had enormous dials three inches wide, all calibrated, with Leo wearing earphones busy tuning it, periodically going “Shh! Shh!”—he had to have absolute silence—and on one occasion saying, “I think I have Pittsburgh.”

---

On February 8, 1933 Martha performed at a piano recital for Miss Claussen's students at the Indian Boundary Park Field House. Afterwards Mathilda wrote:

You, dear, weren't nervous at all, and played very well ... but best of all was that you enjoyed it, and knowing it was worth all the effort to make you admit that you liked what you did this evening. We are so glad to hear you say that at last. We are very proud of you and we are sure you are proud of yourself too.

If not a turning point, this recital was at least a milestone in Martha's gradual emergence from her shell of insecurity and lack of self-esteem. “As I grew older,” she was



to say, “I was distressed more than a few times to find that I could go through life in my early years as if behind gauze draperies. Instead of clear, sharp images, all my past is blurred and muted. No doubt a self-defense mechanism. If I didn’t see anyone or anything clearly, I couldn’t be seen clearly either, and invisibility was what I sought always, except when playing the piano.”

In April 1934 Joseph wrote in Martha’s Diary:

Your piano playing improved very much, and now you really enjoy sitting at the piano and playing just for pleasure. There are times when you go to practice without anyone prompting you to do it, which is very good. It’s true you can play well but just because I insisted on your practicing every day so you learned your lessons. But music isn’t in your blood. But I am going to keep you at it because I know there will be times in your life when your music will be a help to forget all your troubles and to help you make adjustments when you need to, and keep you from despair.

The love of animals *was* in Martha’s blood, and she tended to volunteer at holiday times to bring home any small creatures being nurtured in school classrooms. Once this included a snake, which escaped from its container and got into the fur shop.

There was always at least one representative of Nature resident at 1553 Devon, thanks to the presence of Peggy the drooling watchdog and her successors. After Peggy’s death the Ehrlichs looked for a suitable replacement and seemed to find it in a big shepherd called Rin, who “was so ominous-looking that people would cross the street rather than walk past the dog. Except the dog was an absolute milquetoast.” Since Rin looked horrific he would have been ideal, had he not been so huge that he could (and did) eat out of pans cooking on the stove. By 1934 he was replaced by Patsy, a much smaller Belgian shepherd who “really had a nasty temperament, except with the family; would tolerate absolutely no one else... and barked up a storm, snarled, teeth flashing—consequently was exactly what we wanted.” Patsy would remain with the family for nearly a decade.

Among other wonders of Nature intermittently in the Ehrlich household were a little green turtle or two, and a couple of experiments keeping canaries. Whether it was “Would it be nice to have a bird sing?” or “Would it be nice to have it for the kids?”, the Ehrlichs’s canaries were not be nature singers; nor did they live very long.

In February 1935 Joseph returned from another visit to St. Petersburg, bringing home a ten-inch baby alligator—under his coat, to keep it warm in the wintry Chicago climate, and possibly also to keep the neighbors from gossiping. The Ehrlichs tried to keep their alligator alive on flies and bits of raw hamburger, and “I just love it,” Martha wrote. “I am worried about it though because it will not eat.” Its general lack of response caused Joseph to call it Dumbkopf, which Martha abbreviated to Dunky for the remainder of its brief life<sup>119</sup>.

Earlier that year Martha had encountered a dog “laying in the street as if he was dead,” stretched across the streetcar lines so that a conductor had been obliged to drag it over to the curb. Martha indignantly observed:

One woman went to call the dog hospital and they sent out an ambulance. It must have been broken ribs. The dog was a beautiful police. Big, strong, it didn’t cry or whimper, just lay there. A man called it across the street and it got hit by a car. The man that hit it disappeared, nobody knew who it was.

Martha wrote this on January 3, 1935, in the Diary her parents had kept for her since birth, and presented to her the previous September when she turned fifteen. Beforehand, both Joseph and Mathilda made final entries of their own:

**1934 September 27.** I just looked over your diary once more before giving it to you. Fifteen years is a long time, dear, but to me it seems like it was yesterday when we made a party for your sixth birthday. It was a big party, lots of children and presents too, but you don’t remember anything about that. I wish you could, Mártuka, because childhood is the most precious time in life. Before I close this book to give it to you to keep, I’d like to give you only one piece of advice, and hope it will help you out. If you ever come to a hard problem in your life that you don’t know what to do about, just stop for a second and think: What would Dad advise me to do? If you think I would say go ahead and do it, then you could be sure it will come out OK. But if you have any doubt about it, then don’t do it at all. One more thing, my dearest: always love your brother George, he is a good boy and loves you very much. We can never know what the future brings for us in life. But we are better off by knowing we are a family thinking [of] and loving each other forever. [*Joseph*]

---

<sup>119</sup> Every other alligator Martha owned (and there was at least one) would be named “Dunky.”

[*Same day*] My darling, it is ages since I wrote anything in your diary, but since you are grown up to be a young lady, there isn't much happenings I could write down for you. There's so much more I'd like to say in here, but as you are growing up we don't see all the little things that were so important before. Except what I think is interesting to jot down is you have a stubborn streak just like Daddy. When you decide you want to do something, it has to be done no matter what. I argue with you about this and try to show it is wrong, but in the end you always win because I can't argue, never did for long, so I give in. My dear, I hope this won't get you in trouble. Sometimes you need to be stubborn, but then you have to learn when you do too have to give in to someone else also. Tomorrow you will be fifteen years old, my darling, and I wish you all the joy and happiness for the rest of your long life. Never to know disappointment, and to be contented with life. Best of all my dear, remember you have a younger brother to love and to be good to. Be a good girl, which won't be hard I am sure, and try to remember with a kind heart your old parents, we love you dearly always.

[*Mathilda*]

When Martha was given her Diary, Joseph had to read it to her since she could not read Hungarian well enough to translate. The next day Martha herself began writing in it:

**1934 September 28.** Daddy read me pages of the book and I cried like a baby. I want to thank everyone who wrote in my book, and I think it is the best present I ever got. [*In Hungarian:*] If I ever go back to Europe, my first visit will be to my Uncle Janika and Aunt Fáni, to let them know I still love them even if I don't remember how they look. I'll be always grateful for their love and goodness to me in my earliest life with them. [*In English:*] I shall try faithfully to keep the first and best diary of my life...

The next day she added: "Today I just remembered that when I felt very dramatic, I always acted as if my life story were being written. I read a lot and often imagine myself doing things people do in books."

---

That same month Martha began tenth grade at Nicholas Senn High School<sup>120</sup>, which had "truly some very good teachers in what today we would call college prep courses."

---

<sup>120</sup> Still in operation at 5900 N. Glenwood Avenue as of 2024.

Among her tenth grade classes were Zoology, taught by Gertrude Eckaros<sup>121</sup>, and Geometry, taught by Clyde Brown<sup>122</sup>. These teachers made a great and lasting impression upon Martha; in January 1935 she wrote, “Mrs. Eckaros and Mr. Brown are the two teachers that make going to school worthwhile. I love both of them and hope I shall never do anything to make them ashamed of me<sup>123</sup>.” She had given both teachers Christmas cards: Mrs. Eckaros had liked hers and reciprocated, but Martha had “laid Mr. Brown’s on his desk and scrambled before he came in.” Earlier she had wistfully written:

I wonder if when I graduate will I have any boyfriends? I am fifteen years and one day old, and boys are still holy terrors. I hope I change because it does not make a girl very popular with boys if she is afraid of them.

“Woe is me,” Martha went on in March. “I think I shall become an old maid and teach dumb kids their ABC’s. Here’s hoping not<sup>124</sup>.” But little by little she was gaining shreds and patches of self-confidence. When she turned fifteen she was finally allowed to stay home alone, and buoyed by this freedom she would sit at the piano and play “mood-release” music—Rachmaninoff, Sibelius, Liszt<sup>125</sup>. It must also have been around now that Mathilda defied Joseph (a thing unheard-of) not just once but twice, the only occasions Martha was to remember, and both on her account. One was when Martha wanted to shave her legs for the first time, and Joseph told her to just keep wearing stockings—they would “rub” the hairs off. The other time Joseph pounded (or at least slapped) the table and declared that no daughter of his was going to appear on the beaches of Lake Michigan

---

<sup>121</sup> Gertrude Blanck Exarhos Olive (1897-1984)’s surname appears as *Eckaros* in Senn High yearbooks from the 1930s, and she signed it likewise when she made an entry in Martha’s Diary. Most of her teaching career was spent at Steinmetz High School (now Steinmetz College Prep). In 1940 a judge made Mrs. Exarhos/Eckaros break down in tears on the witness stand, saying “We ought to send people like you back to Russia!” for belonging to the International Labor Defense (ILD).

<sup>122</sup> Clyde Maurice Brown (1898-1980) was prefixed by “Dr.” in the 1941 Senn *Forum* yearbook.

<sup>123</sup> During the 1935-36 school year Martha was a member of the Senn Pythagoreans (motto “Education is Life and Life is Education”) for whom “brain teasers that sharpen the wits are part of the regular procedure... The students were shown how mathematics dovetails with science and how the modern world depends upon mathematics.”

<sup>124</sup> On February 16th Dorothy Peterson wrote in Martha’s Diary that “I haven’t got much to say except that she was and *is* still my best friend... I hope we will know each other for many future years, and if she ever gets married which I am sure she will, I hope I will be her matron of honor because I know I will want to have her for mine.” In 1943 Dorothy married Edgar Charles Williams (1911-1986), who became a vice president of the Kemper Insurance Group; they had two children, Carol Sue and Robert.

<sup>125</sup> After one such mood-release Martha glanced out the window and found Johnny Roth (“the boy upstairs”) and his friends sitting atop their alley clubhouse, listening to her play: a substantial boost to her minuscule ego.

dressed like *that*. Both times Mathilda intervened and got him, albeit unenthusiastically, to let Martha go ahead with *that*.

By the age of sixteen, Martha the pianist (according to her own grudging admission) “played really well. It was not really concert caliber, but close to it.” Hers were the closing performances at Miss Claussen’s recitals, and she won a tryout to become one of three accompanists in the Senn High School orchestra. “So I felt an ego-boost there. I *was* good, and that—that—I was able to admit.”

However, music was not to be George’s road toward finding himself. Around 1933, when he was eight, his violin lessons came to an end. Joseph had been teaching him and Joseph was a perfectionist, so “if you didn’t get it right the first time, or the fortieth time,” Martha would remark, “you played it the forty-first time, to get it right.” George found playing the violin a chore; he was developing facial tics and not sleeping well—“the kid was a nervous wreck,” Martha was to say, “he burst into tears at a sly look”—and finally dug his heels in and refused to go on. Which Joseph allowed, expecting him to come to his senses in time. Martha was intended to become a teacher (particularly as talkies dried up the silent-cinema-pianist market) but Joseph had ambitions for George to make music his life’s profession. He told his son that being able to play the violin might be of help in case another war broke out, since George could then “join the military band and stay out of combat.”

This was not enough to sway George; and when the PTA asked Mathilda how her talented children were getting along, “I had to tell them that Georgie didn’t want violin lessons very much, so we stopped it.” Nevertheless she too remained hopeful: “I still had for years afterwards all the violins in one bunch in the closet”—the quarter-size, half-size, three-quarter and full-size violins, awaiting George’s coming to his senses. Eventually the violins had to be sold, and as Joseph was getting them down from the closet shelf and putting them together he said, “They look just like coffins.”

Far from coming to his senses, George (along with two other kids) gave Joseph material for a new Three Boys story, this one written in English:

Once upon a time there was a good little boy who got into bad company. That made three bad little boys. They filled their pockets with stones, and went out to conquer windows. One little boy got twelve, another got five, you got only one. When you

came home that afternoon, you murmured incoherently about stones, but who would dream that you.....! You were such a *good* boy. Nevertheless a plainclothes man came with a warrant, and next morning I awakened you early to appear in court. I was more scared than you. You were soundly lectured and I was fined \$2.75.

“That was my total juvenile delinquency record during the Capone era,” George would say. In spite of this, at the age of nine he demanded that he be allowed to go downtown alone<sup>126</sup>, and this was granted—at a time when big sister Martha was still being escorted everywhere by Joseph, even to the Ridge Theatre across the street.

Downtown Chicago was an exciting place for a youngster to explore. It was the year of the 1933-34 World’s Fair, “A Century of Progress Exposition,” which the Ehrlichs could not afford to visit as often as they would have liked<sup>127</sup>. But there was no admission charge at Chicago’s many museums and George began to systematically check these out, partly because there was such a “wealth of museums—probably there was no equivalent in terms of the variety, except New York, at that time.” Grant Park boasted not only the Field Museum of Natural History but also the recently-opened Shedd Aquarium and Adler Planetarium; there was the Botanical Greenhouse, the Chicago Art Institute, the Historical Society of Chicago, and what was then called “the Rosenwald Museum”—the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, which began to develop after the World’s Fair. George would go to all of these, “not all in one day, but it would be a typical weekend kind of thing... half entertainment, half ‘What do we do on Saturday?’” He was to be a museum buff from this point on, and in later years would attribute a great deal to having had such extraordinary educational opportunities while growing up.

George had been just as glad as Martha when she was given her Diary, and he enjoyed looking at it, though the only thing in the book he could understand was its photos. At least until Martha began writing in it herself; soon she was grumbling that “George is so nosy I think I will have to lock my book up somewhere.” At Christmastime in 1934 she noted that “George got a diary from Daddy and is he proud of it. He also for the first time in

---

<sup>126</sup> Usually by streetcar or bus, whose fares were no more than a nickel. “The elevated was somewhat more expensive... [but] that would take me into the Loop.”

<sup>127</sup> In a Century of Progress family photo Martha wore “a tomato-red crepe dress with nailhead studs,” which she thought was the very height of sophistication.



his life, I think, saved up 75¢. He counts his money every little while and acts as if he were a millionaire miser.” Granted a chance to write in the little memorandum book that served as George’s diary, Martha contributed:

Don’t forget that after you read this you still have to dust. You make a better “Scrooge” than “Scrooge” himself. I hope that when you grow up you won’t be as tight as you are now. Happy New Year and the king of hearts. *Martha* (I am your sister).

Having gotten a diary of his own, George judiciously observed: “This is not so good as Mar’s but I like it. I don’t know when I will write again but I will have something interesting when I do.” His next entry mentioned that he was starting a stamp collection and getting an album for his tenth birthday; Patsy had cut her foot and was limping (Joseph made her a little shoe out of fur to protect the cut paw, but Patsy was not enthusiastic about the shoe and kept working it off with her teeth); and “Martha is a big pest. I bought 25 stamps for a nickel today and I still know Martha’s a pest.”

Joseph himself contributed to George’s diary on January 18, 1935, commenting in Hungarian (now in part indecipherable) that when he had been a soldier he could not have imagined having a little son someday to tell war stories to:

When you grow up and read these lines you will be curious about what you actually were like before. You very much liked stories to listen to; in all the world you liked best of all that I told stories to you... On another occasion, you said, “Papa, it is good that you came to America. In this way you became my father.”

(George was at a disadvantage when boys boasted of their fathers’s exploits in the Great War, since Joseph had spent most of his time on the hardly-heard-of eastern front—and on the losing side.)

By the fall of 1935 both Martha and George had become very sporadic diarykeepers. On September 10th George wrote:

Dear Dinery, I haven’t written since my birthday because I just went crazy and I quite forgotten you, but today I happen to wish I had a diary and I took you out and wanted to take out the old pages but I couldn’t find a scissors and a customer was in the store

and I got an idea I wanted to continue you since Jan. 28th. Dad GOOD OLD DAD went to Florida and when he came back I got a lot of stamps... I get two bits or 25¢ a week for taking Bob<sup>128</sup> to school. You know Bob is the brother of Martha's best friend or she was Mar's best friend and I['m] supposed to like Bob very much he's all right but he isn't my kind... Mom was sick Dad still takes medicine and Mar's OK and her birthday is the 28th of this month and I only got 63¢... Oh and Huey P. Lond [*sic*] is dead he is a senator of Lousyeana and he was shot. GOOD NIGHT.

Even though George had not come to his senses about playing the violin, his parents remained determined that he be given a "well-rounded-out" education. Joseph informed his son that dancing was a useful capability<sup>129</sup>, one appropriate for George to acquire. So once a week for six weeks George attended Mr. Huntinghouse's Dancing Academy. This was a large and rather dimly-lit upstairs room on the North Side, where girls and boys were instructed by Rudolph G. Huntinghouse. There they learned the foxtrot, the tango, the "fairly entertaining" waltz, and also the polka, which struck George as "mostly kind of a jumping thing." He learned everything except how to dance.

In February 1936 it was the ailing Mathilda's turn to visit St. Petersburg, and in her absence Joseph did some cooking for the children. From his youth in Budapest he recalled how to whip up things like *kolbász* (sausage), but having seen Mathilda pan-fry *prézli hús* (breaded chops) he decided this was the proper method of preparing cube steak. He put cooking oil in a frying pan and set it on the stove, assuming that as a liquid the oil would eventually boil. When it started smoking instead, "this was a Discovery—I won't say of momentous proportions for my father," George would remark, "but the fact you couldn't make this automatic transference based upon casual observation of cooking."

If Joseph was tentative as a cook, he was rather indifferent as an eater and not that interested in his meals, except for his favorite Continental breakfast: a big mug of milky coffee into which he would break up a roll, eating it with a spoon. Once in awhile Mathilda would prepare Kolozsvár dishes in Chicago; Martha still enjoyed Transylvanian fruit soups,

---

<sup>128</sup> Robert Werner Peterson (1929-2007), who grew up to become a retail butcher. He and Dorothy had an older sister June who died young (1917-1928) and was buried in Chicago's Montrose Cemetery.

<sup>129</sup> One that Mathilda loved but had to give up upon marriage to the jealous Joseph. ("Dancing! What, other men touching me?" she would tell me with a roll of her eyes in 1984.)

but George continued being fussy—he tasted one once “and that was it.” The children were always given the better cuts of whatever was on the table, and sometimes there was not much there. Mathilda became very proficient during the Depression with whatever was at hand, creating another kind of soup out of chicken necks and feet.

Summers were always the hardest times, both weatherwise and moneywise. During the dreadful killer-heat-wave summer of 1936<sup>130</sup>, both Martha and George held down jobs, and Martha in fact had two: she worked for neighbor Dr. Ascher<sup>131</sup>, a dentist, and also as a waitress at a Walgreen’s drugstore. Mathilda would send George to Walgreen’s to pick up Martha’s tips, and these would buy the family’s evening meal. One night they could afford nothing but rye bread and watermelon, yet Martha and George considered this a treat.

Mathilda would remark that she and Joseph “were very sad because, you know, we never had to do that before, send the children to work. But that summer we needed the money very badly.” George was made apprentice in the fur shop, partly because Joseph said it would not hurt to learn the mechanics of sewing and how to operate the machines, and partly for discipline. The latter was a matter that cropped up more than once when George was eleven. In November he was ordered to write:

Dad—I will always do my work without you having to prompt me. I will take the dog down when I come in from play and won’t make a fuss. I will finish my homework before 8. I will always keep my word. *George Ehrlich.*

“Old fashioned maybe,” Joseph would comment in English in George’s Scrapbook, “but most effective means of ‘Bringing up Baby.’” As for keeping one’s word, Joseph was never shy about reminding George that in German the family name meant “honest.” (He also assured his son that “you don’t have to be the best—I just want you to be in the top ten percent.”)

As George moved into adolescence, he and Joseph—“both being totally stubborn males”—began to have differences more often; but as George was to put it, “You could not

---

<sup>130</sup> During which Mathilda at last received her Certificate of Citizenship, on July 8, 1936.

<sup>131</sup> Lee S. Ascher DDS (“Albert” Ascher in the 1930 census) lived with wife Ida and son Stanley across the hall from the Ehrlichs at 1555 Devon—at least until 1937, when Ida filed suit for divorce and custody of their son, charging cruelty. In the 1940 census she appeared as a “widow,” though Dr. Ascher didn’t die until 1959. In January 1935 George called Stanley Ascher (1921-2001) “my best pal.”

argue with my father.” After a no-win non-argument, George’s recourse would be to grit his teeth, go downstairs, and head outdoors for a several-mile, several-hour cooling-off walk.

Joseph was a devout FDR Democrat, and the economic maxim “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” was one he fully agreed with; but he also invariably read the *Chicago Tribune*, and few newspapers in the United States were further out of sync with Roosevelt (not to mention Marx) than Colonel “Bertie” McCormick’s. George might bring home the more liberal *Daily News*, but Joseph would never read it. The *Tribune* had been his newspaper while he was teaching himself English; moreover it was a morning paper, and it took him all day to wade through it. For many years he saved the front page of each *Tribune*, storing them in a large flat fur-coat box kept atop his safe, with the idea that they might someday prove useful. During the 1930s Joseph also subscribed to a Hungarian tabloid paper, the *Pesti Napló* [*Diary* or *Journal*]<sup>132</sup>. When George was asked to bring a non-Chicago newspaper to school for a fifth-grade project, he produced a *Pesti Napló*, but his classmates would not believe it had come from Hungary.

Mathilda underwent a serious operation in February 1937 and afterwards went to St. Petersburg for the customary recuperative trip, this time with Joseph. The only way they could go together was to take George too; Martha, now in her final semester at Senn High, stayed in Chicago with the Ruhigs. This was George’s first great journey, which Joseph would later call “Marco Polo Jr. or Around the States in Thirty Days.” George was to remember it as one of the more boring episodes of his life, with nothing to do in Florida than eat citrus fruit and do his homework out in the sun.

The following summer he again ventured into the world beyond Chicago, going to a “rural resort”—a forty-acre farm near Glenn, Michigan, which boarded kids for about ten dollars a week. This place was discovered by the Ehrlichs’s good friend and former neighbor Florence Kan<sup>133</sup>, “a really extraordinarily fine person” whose husband Michael had sold women’s wear at 1537 Devon when Ehrlich Furs had been at 1539. The Kans’s son Joe went to this farm, and Joseph and Mathilda thought it would be a good experience for George too. He was “absolutely terrified” at the prospect, but parental persuasion got him on the bus and four hours later he was down on the farm. After the first day he adapted well and came to

---

<sup>132</sup> Published in Budapest from 1850 to 1939.

<sup>133</sup> Florence Hahnesand Kahn (1894-1960), a bookkeeper, was the mother of Joseph H. Kan (1926-2017).

enjoy it tremendously: “I literally learned how to harness a mule, mow the oat field, rake it, bring it in, and put it in the hayloft so the stock could be fed... I learned how to shovel manure.” George wrote the folks back home that “it’s swell out here,” mentioning that he had gotten a compliment “from some lady on table manners<sup>134</sup>.”

Martha graduated from Senn High School in June 1937. As a graduation present Joseph gave her a treasured book, Sándor Petőfi’s *Összes Költeményei* [*Complete Poems*], which he had bought in Budapest twenty-five years before<sup>135</sup>.

His daughter had stayed in Chicago during the family’s Florida trip so as to take the Normal School Tests. She wanted to attend one of the state teachers’s schools, either the Illinois State Normal University near Bloomington or the Northern Illinois State Teachers’s College in DeKalb. Both elliptically informed her that their Jewish quotas were filled; so she set her sights instead on the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

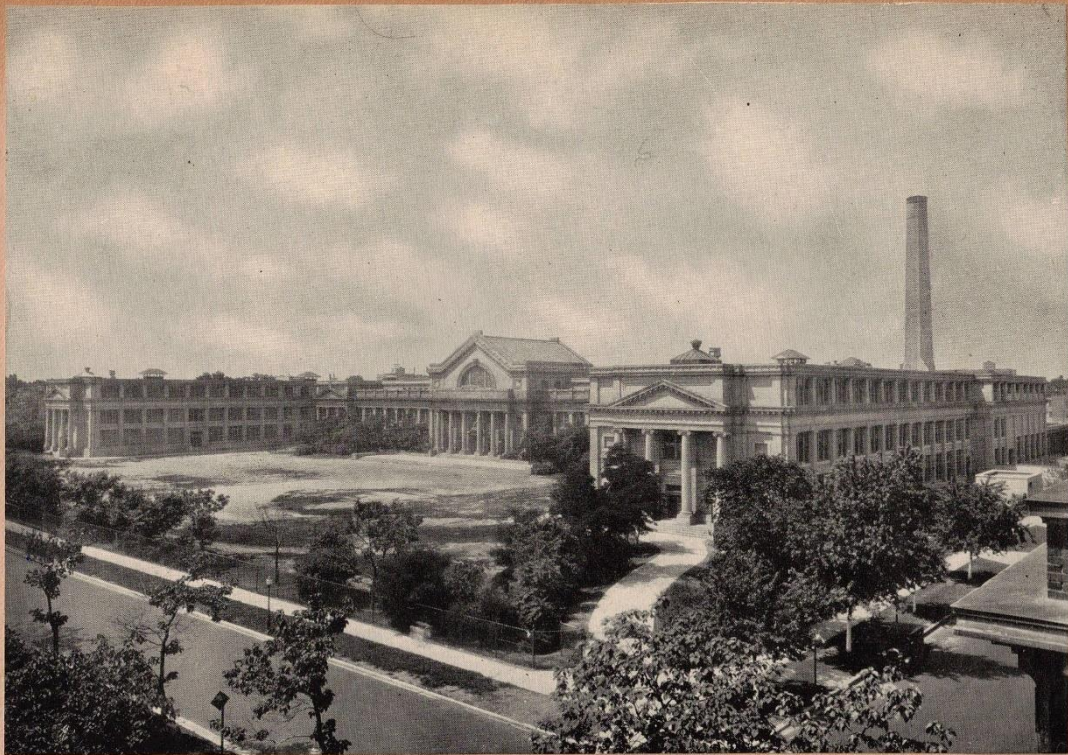
In bringing up Martha, Joseph had (in Martha’s words) “more or less brainwashed” her into thinking as he did: that being a teacher was not only “the most tremendous thing anyone could ever be,” but in her case the *only* thing to be. Martha never seriously thought of becoming anything else; and in September 1937 she left home to try achieving her father’s dream.



above left: The Ehrlichs in 1934: “A Century of Progress”——above right: George and Martha, 1934

<sup>134</sup> George would return to the farm in the summer of 1939.

<sup>135</sup> This was later bequeathed in turn by Martha to myself.



THE COMING OF NEW HORIZONS.

Nicholas Senn High School





The Ehrlichs in 1935



THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO BE GIVEN TO  
THE PERSON NATURALIZED

No. 4047377

**CERTIFICATE OF  
CITIZENSHIP**

Petition No. 144078

Personal description of holder as of date of naturalization: Age 40 years; sex female; color white; complexion fair; color of eyes black; color of hair black; height 5 feet 4 inches; weight 133 pounds; visible distinctive marks none.

Marital status Married

former nationality Rumanian

I certify that the description above given is true, and that the photograph affixed hereto is a likeness of me.

**MATHILDA EHRLICH**  
(Complete and true signature of holder)

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS

Best known that **MATHILDA EHRLICH**,  
then residing at 1553 Devon Avenue,  
having petitioned to be admitted a citizen of the United States of America, and at  
a term of the District Court of The United States  
Chicago held pursuant to law at  
Chicago on July 8, 1936  
the court having found that the petitioner intends to reside permanently in the  
United States and in all respects complied with the Naturalization Laws of the United  
States in such case applicable and was entitled to be so admitted the court thereupon  
ordered that the petitioner be admitted as a citizen of the United States of America.  
In testimony whereof the seal of the court is hereunto affixed this 8th  
day of July in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and  
thirty-six and of our Independence the one hundred  
and sixty-first.

Seal

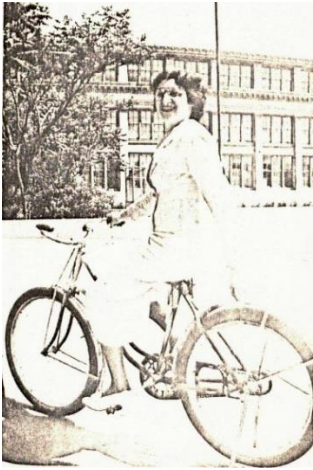
Henry W. Freeman  
Clerk of the U. S. District Court.  
By [Signature] Deputy Clerk.

DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

above: Citizen Mathilda: July 8, 1936



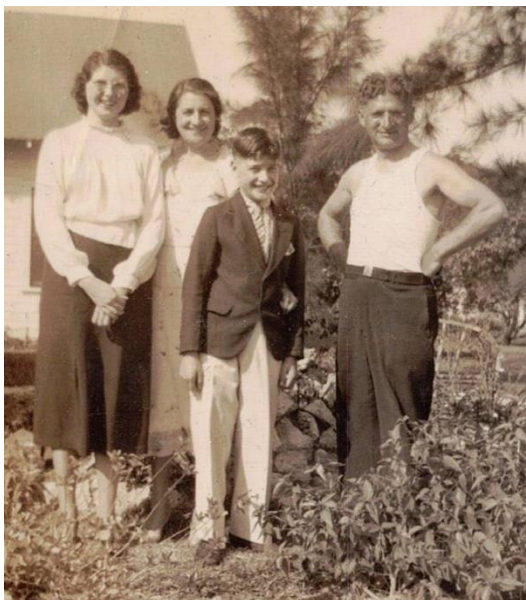
above: Mathilda in St. Petersburg, February 1936



Martha: Senior Year at Senn, 1936-37 <sup>136</sup>

<sup>136</sup> Many years later Martha would say she learned how to fly a plane without ever having ridden a bicycle; see Appendix J.





above left: George with his parents and Reva Belle Hyland in St. Petersburg, February 1937<sup>137</sup>



above right: George (top left) pitching hay at the “rural resort,” Summer 1938



above: The Ehrlichs, Summer 1937

---

<sup>137</sup> “All decked out in white flannels to impress Reva-Belle” (commented Joseph in George’s Scrapbook).



## THREE

### AND BEYOND

*Can we go down to the railroad tracks and watch the train go by,  
Shining like silver  
I hear the whistle, the train is on its way;  
Hold me over your shoulder so that I can see the light  
Over the pine trees,  
How I would like to go riding on that train!  
Tell me the story again about the time you went away,  
You went to Chicago, no one knew where you were—  
Why did you ever come back here after you had run away?  
I'm so glad you did, sir!  
Wrap me up in your winter coat,  
Wrap me up so tight!  
I never will feel the cold,  
I'll be warm tonight..*

—Judy Collins, “Grandaddy”





## 13

*New Horizons*

TO THY HAPPY CHILDREN  
OF THE FUTURE  
THOSE OF THE PAST  
SEND GREETINGS

reads the inscription on the Alma Mater statue at the University of Illinois. Eighth-largest in enrollment among American campuses in 1937, Illinois was perhaps the archetypical Midwestern university; not even the eruption of a volcano, it was said, would be able to hide its identity from future archaeologists.

As an Illinois resident, Martha had to pay a tuition of no more than forty dollars a semester. Her real expenses were textbooks, supplies, and especially housing. This was a far more formidable cost, around \$350<sup>138</sup>, to be paid each semester as one lump sum; and each time the Ehrlichs would struggle to come up with the money for Martha's room and board. She lived at Busey Hall, one of the women's dormitories, rooming at first<sup>138A</sup> with Ruthie Schnitzler who "sang like a bird." Joseph and Mathilda and George would go down to see Martha once or twice a year, usually on a Sunday, leaving Chicago fairly early since it was a four-and-a-half-hour trip to Champaign-Urbana. Busey residents could arrange for their families to lunch in the dorm dining room, where the girls would sing "college-type songs" waiting for meals to be served. After lunch the families were allowed to go upstairs and see their coed's room, while shouts of "Man on second!" "Man on third!" were given to warn shower-exiters. The Ehrlichs never stayed for long, nor did much at the University other than visit Martha. She in turn would come back to Chicago via the Illinois Central Railroad, which had student specials at holiday times. During her visits she seldom had

---

<sup>138</sup> Approximately \$7400 in 2023 dollars.

<sup>138A</sup> As noted in Appendix J, Martha's "first day of college had an unforgettable intro. I had been sent the name of my dorm roommate, but when I arrived, I found out that my blonde, blue-eyed Christian roomie had said no thanks to living with a Jew. A few days later I had been paired with another Jewish girl."

much to say about school.

Martha was in fact dreadfully homesick her first year away at college, and doing poorly there as well. She started out uncertain whether to major in mathematics or biology, but her first math class was Spherical Trigonometry & Navigation where “there were forty-nine engineering students and Martha,” she would recall. “I got through with a D- out of the kindness of the teacher’s heart, and that ended that... Ohhhhhhh, was I miserable!!” It was not the sort of thing to hurry home and tell Joseph.

She did better her sophomore year, figuring out the best ways to study: some subjects were strictly memorization, while in lab work you could *see* things happen instead of merely reading about them. And Martha became involved in Orchesis, an extracurricular dance group sponsored by the Women’s Athletic Association, which presented a Mother’s Day pageant in May 1939. Martha’s numbers included two parts of Cecil Burleigh’s *Leaders of Men*: The Fanatic (“Unbalanced and fiery, the fanatic leads the masses to that same state”) and Savagery (“I heard the boom of a blood-lust song / And a thigh-bone beating on a tin-pan gong”).

The following summer, Martha’s cross-eyed strabismus was at last corrected by surgery. Both eyes had tended to cross, particularly when strained or fatigued, but following the operation she was better able to face the world head-on. At times this seemed of little comfort: although she was working at a Walgreen’s again that summer to help pay her college expenses, when the time came for Martha to begin her junior year, the necessary \$350 was simply not available. Three days before school started, a customer came to Ehrlich Furs needing her coat repaired. Normally the job would have cost at least six hundred dollars, but Joseph agreed to do it for \$350 if paid in cash that day. He was; Martha was able to continue college; and Joseph doubtless attributed it all to Fate.

Back in Urbana, Martha continued economizing. At Busey Hall she breakfasted on a slice of toast with coffee, and for dinner had another cup of coffee or glass of milk with a bowl of chili. (Crackers were free.) And that was it, mealwise, for the day.

By her senior year Martha had improved to the point of getting a letter of commendation for superior work from the Dean of Education. Among her accomplishments in the fall of 1940 was student-teaching at an Urbana high school. She enjoyed this, her first

chance to teach, and in the Spring 1941 semester student-taught at Thornburn<sup>139</sup> Junior High in Urbana. Her supervisor or critic teacher there was Joyce Faber<sup>140</sup>, who every once in awhile called in Principal A.H. Lauchner<sup>141</sup> to observe and be impressed by Martha's performance.

**1941 April 6.** College, Busey Hall, coking and smoking, men, Orchesis, Phi Alpha Chi, God! what a five years. I've just discovered diaries aren't for the present—they're for the future. In reading back over the past dozen years or so, I've realized what a mess of a kid I must have been (hm!). But them days are gone forever. Seven more weeks and graduation. Then what? I don't know... Practice teaching, home for vacations, and soon home for good. How can one summarize five such years as have gone by? Graduating from H.S.; starting college, maladjustments, homesickness, unhappiness... Stacks of letters written home in four years—more than any diary could say, yet less too. But now, home for Easter in four days, registration with the appts. committee, the kids home for the weekend—me here grading sky-high stacks of papers. Oh, what's the use. I'll never catch up with myself anyway. Continue later as though I had never left off. About the only way to do it.

[Martha]

But Martha's Diary came to a final end eight days later, after "a wonderfully perfect Easter" with the family in Chicago and Racine. She practiced the piano "till I thought my back would break in two," hemmed hems "till I couldn't see straight," danced in Racine "till I could barely stagger out to the car, but it was worth it," and "ate like a refugee from a famine all vacation. Now back to Busey, and back to famine..."

In June Martha graduated from the University of Illinois with a Bachelor of Science degree, and struck a Statue of Liberty pose in her cap and gown to note academic liberation. Three months later she had a teaching job—not at the Sorbonne but in Sanborn, North

---

<sup>139</sup> Named for John Thornburn (1829-1913), longtime highway commissioner, who donated the site for what was originally a senior high school. In 1929 his banker grandson John Henry Thornburn [*ctd next page*] ("Dapper John": 1878-1961) would be convicted for misappropriating \$100,000 in Urbana school district funds, and taken to prison with a man given a harsher sentence for breaking into a henhouse and stealing fifteen chickens.

<sup>140</sup> Joyce Otilla Zimmerman (1911-1999) was still single in the 1940 census. She would marry Paul F. Faber (1913-2011), who owned and operated the Champaign Mattress Factory.

<sup>141</sup> Aaron Hawthorne Lauchner (1901-1975) published numerous articles in the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) *Bulletin*.

Dakota, an agricultural town with a population of 350<sup>142</sup>. “I had been applying all over everyplace,” she would recall, “and of course everybody asked ‘What religion? What church?’ And I would get letters back saying, ‘Sorry, the teacherage was for this particular religion, or that particular religion.’ And ostensibly what they were saying was, ‘We don’t want Jews.’” So when Martha wrote to Sanborn she said she was a Unitarian. “Well, it was such an innocuous church, it wasn’t way-out in any sense, no gung-ho religion about it.”

She was hired to teach high school English, biology, and general science for a monthly salary of \$100. The high school had a faculty of three: besides Martha there was Ernest A. Hornbacher<sup>143</sup>, who also served as Principal and Superintendent; and a young woman named Dugalda Langdon<sup>144</sup> who taught history and music, directed the band and played trumpet. For \$30 a month Martha got room-breakfast-and-laundry at Tom and Olga McCormick’s house<sup>145</sup>, the only place in Sanborn other than the school that had indoor plumbing. To an extent: “They had a cistern up on top of the roof, and when it rained the cistern was full, and when it didn’t rain—boy, you saved water no matter what. We’d get about half a cup of water, and we brushed our teeth, and that was all the water there was, so you kept dipping your toothbrush in the cup, and then you’d rinse with that. And that to me was HORRIBLE. *My water runs when I brush my teeth! and I get it from under the faucet!*”

There was not a great deal of entertainment to be found in Sanborn, North Dakota. Once (and only once) Martha went out as a beater in a pheasant hunt. Occasionally she and Dugalda Langdon went to the Royal Neighbors of America lodge, where Dugalda—daughter of a Methodist minister—would not play cards, so she and Martha indulged themselves in Chinese checkers. There never seemed to be enough for Martha to eat: “I didn’t feel I had enough money to go to a restaurant—I was being fed by pillars of the town, and you couldn’t admit to being hungry.” And during the winter of 1941-42 it was not warm in Sanborn, North Dakota: “My lord, it got forty below—but real dry, so you could freeze to death and

---

<sup>142</sup> By 2020 Sanborn’s population would dwindle to 161.

<sup>143</sup> Ernest Arthur Hornbacher (1902-1960) was later an insurance agent while serving as school superintendent. (“I expect that the job of a rural North Dakota school official may have required some supplemental income to make ends meet,” said his nephew Daniel C. Peterson in the online essay “When Family Stories Unexpectedly Come to Life.”) Mr. Hornbacher would be killed by a train while driving at night in a blizzard.

<sup>144</sup> Dugalda Margaret Langdon Wolfson (1917-2006) was one of the first women admitted to the Dickinson State Teachers College Band in 1935-36.

<sup>145</sup> The McCormick household (and all its neighbors in Sanborn’s Potter Township) lacks a street address in the 1940 census. Thomas McCormick was a “grain buyer, buying grain”; he and Olga had a teen daughter Elaine.

not even feel cold.”

Yet as Miss Ehrlich the Teacher, Martha found a role to play and compensate for her self-styled lack of identity. “As a teacher, I could meet people—I could meet the parents of my students, and I could be among strange people at meetings, because I was a teacher. But leave me as a stranger at a gathering, a social gathering for just people, and [it was] back to the wallflower days of dancing school. I didn’t dare talk to anybody, I was afraid—well, I *couldn’t* talk to anybody, I had nothing to talk about, I was afraid that anything I would say would be not worth hearing... I didn’t feel there that I was a *good* teacher. So in addition to the normal shyness that I had as a basic part of my personality, there was the shyness that I felt too that I *wasn’t* as good. My father taught me to be perfect. You know: you had to be perfect to be anything. And since perfection was lacking in that first year of teaching, I felt so inept, and so negative about myself there, that really I had almost no identity there at all... See, here I am, twenty-two years old, my first teaching job, I was teaching everything from ninth grade through twelfth, and some of my students were nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one-year-old farmboys who hadn’t been in school long enough each year to be graduated, ‘cause they’d have to leave to do crops, and all the rest of it. And I had troubles. I had discipline problems. I remember one day... after the kids had finally gone and I had had a day to end all days, I was standing in the cloakroom crying and debating to myself: do I want to jump out of this window and end it all? or can I make it to the end of the year? or how am I going to handle it? All these thoughts going through my mind—and then as usual I got stubborn and said, ‘The hell with it, I *am* going to finish.’”

The year at Sanborn, that is, and not herself.

---

When George was about twelve, he hauled out his parents’s box of European memorabilia and started going through it, organizing the old postcard photos brought from Kolozsvár. Many of these were of wartime couples with the man in uniform, or of soldiers out on the Eastern front, and George laboriously dated the photos and identified the people pictured in them by asking Joseph and Mathilda. His parents might say, “That’s my brother Dezső,” or “That’s your cousin and her husband,” but they would provide few stories or anecdotes. When George pressed Joseph for tales of the war or about his father’s boyhood, Joseph gave him only bits and fragments—the beautiful books behind glass doors in Győr;

having to study by moonlight; a shell that came into the dugout but did not explode. There would be no elaboration.

Eventually George put his notes in order and tried to lay out family trees for the Ehrlichs and Kohns/Kuns; he ended up thoroughly confused, and had to give it up. Occasionally the past made itself present in unexpected ways: George slept on one of the goosefeather pillows brought from Kolozsvár, and one night he found a Hungarian coin in it. Or when Martha read Jack London's novels and George began collecting the works of Mark Twain, Joseph might let them know he had read these too (in translation) when he was their age. The books he talked about were always ones he had read in his youth.

In January 1938 George turned thirteen<sup>146</sup>. Perhaps this stirred some memory for Joseph, because soon afterwards and completely out of the blue, he took his son to a synagogue or temple. George would recall their donning yarmulkes, and for many years would wonder what had suddenly motivated his father to take this most uncharacteristic step. Was it to see what George's reaction might be? Or for Joseph to find out how he himself would react? There was no discussion of this adventure, and it would not be repeated<sup>147</sup>.

The following September George began high school (Joseph calling this "The Coming of New Horizons") and among his first classes at Senn was Algebra—an easy subject, since Joseph had already given him lessons during the summer, having patiently waited to do this till George got out of grammar school.

Around now Joseph also began assembling George's Scrapbook. This was not a running account as Martha's Diary had been, but consisted of recollections and carefully-saved keepsakes. Another notable feature of the Scrapbook was Joseph's writing its captions and commentaries in English rather than Hungarian.

George took his first Art class during his sophomore year at Senn in 1939. "That's probably when I began drawing," he was to say. "Chances are if I did any interesting drawings before then, my father would have saved them, because *that* would have appealed to him." Joseph himself had skill and imagination when it came to art, though by the 1930s it surfaced only in such projects as making the occasional SPECIAL canvas banner. When George wanted better-quality (and more expensive) paint and materials, his father told him,

---

<sup>146</sup> A month later he was promoted half a grade from 7A to 8A, skipping 8B.

<sup>147</sup> Joseph did title a photo of thirteen-year-old George "Today I am a man!"



“First show me what you can do.” George sketched his customary live subject, Patsy the shepherd (“Probably I was sitting there, and the dog was on the floor, and I thought: ‘Well, you know—draw it’”) and Joseph was impressed. He pasted several of George’s sketches and paintings<sup>148</sup> in the Scrapbook, captioning them “Favorite Indoor Sport.”

George got his first “real job” in the summer of 1940, working on the assembly line at a fluorescent lamp company where Florence Kan was bookkeeper. He worked for thirty cents an hour, making \$13.80 a week; ten dollars of this went to his parents. A couple of summers later he would get his second real job, as a Walgreen’s soda jerk, and in the Scrapbook Joseph would write “I’ll have a chocolate-banana-double-flip-super-colossal ‘Ehrlich Special’<sup>149</sup>.”

On December 5, 1941, George attended a seminar at the University of Chicago where he “heard a very lucid and clever fellow tell us why there would be no war between Japan and the United States for at least three months.” Two days later Pearl Harbor was bombed. George was already in the Senn ROTC (“It wasn’t mandatory,” Mathilda was to say, “but he liked the uniform... it was prestigious, you know”) and the following February he and other cadets worked fourteen straight hours helping teachers with draft registration.

In the spring of 1942 George and Don Friedlen<sup>150</sup> (a fellow member of the Glenn Miller Club) presented a research project to their History class: “From Bar to Bar—Musical and Otherwise,” which covered ragtime, jazz, blues, boogie-woogie, swing and precisionism. Many years later George would comment that this was “my first exposure to historical research... I assembled a body of notes which I still have in a box somewhere, and we organized this. Don Friedlen was the musical expert, he had the phonograph records and he could play the piano, and I did the sort of historical narrative; and this wowed everyone... There weren’t any of these History of Jazz kinds of things [at that time], and it smacked of New Orleans, red-light district, and things of that sort. Yeah: that was when I discovered it was fun to do research.”

---

<sup>148</sup> One was of the Ehrlich bookcase, featuring a clock (kept under a glass dome) that got wound once a year, and the 24-volume Authorized Edition set of Mark Twain’s Complete Works that George gradually collected.

<sup>149</sup> “My father did have a sense of humor, that occasionally was allowed to show forth,” George would say. “It was just that he had so often so little to laugh about or joke about.”

<sup>150</sup> Donald Mandel Friedlen (1925-1999) would go on to be a mathematics professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, where “as a long-time dedicated teacher his primary interest was Probability” (per his obituary).

George graduated from Senn High School<sup>151</sup> in June 1942, not yet eighteen and therefore not yet eligible for the draft. He had been admitted to both the University of Chicago and the Illinois Institute of Technology, but neither gave him a scholarship and without one he wound up going to Champaign-Urbana and the University of Illinois. Since George had never “regained his senses” regarding the violin, Joseph had begun thinking of him as a future engineer.

“You went off to college to become something or somebody in the professional sense,” George would remark. “An engineer was clearly the sort of thing that young men did become and I’m sure my father had suggested this, either directly or indirectly.” But what what kind of engineer—civil, electrical, mechanical, or chemical?

“I had a vague idea that mechanical engineers were not as high up the status scale, because my father always muttered about the fact that when Bill Hoyer had become a mechanical engineer, he had to wear coveralls at his work... I had had what I would consider a very bad physics course in high school, and that would have been the lead-in to electrical engineering. And civil engineering was really roads, bridges, and things like that—that didn’t seem anything I could relate to. So that’s probably why I picked chemical engineering when I looked down the list: it seemed closest to something I understood, what they did. *Which was not true at all.*”

---

In April 1942 Martha received a letter from Joyce Faber, her teaching supervisor the year before at Thornburn Junior High. “It seems that I must retire to raise a family,” Joyce wrote, so Mr. Lauchner the Principal had asked her to get in touch with Martha and see if she would like a try at Thornburn, for \$1100 per school year. “You know the advantages of Urbana, Illinois—and there’s promise (almost definite) of a demonstration table complete with H<sub>2</sub>O and CH<sub>4</sub>!!!”

Joyce’s pregnancy was Martha’s ticket out of Sanborn, North Dakota. Having lived a frugal life there, she’d saved a fair amount of her \$900 earnings, and when she stopped by 1553 Devon for a post-Sanborn visit “I had two hundred dollars in cash bills. I stood in the middle of the living room and just WHOOPS like that, tossed them up into the air, and it just

---


<sup>151</sup> George tied with Etta Fine for 35th in a class of 606 students (but spent the next forty years thinking he’d graduated 85th, until I enlightened him while doing research for *To Be Honest*).

trickled down like leaves falling. And that's my master's [degree]—that started my master's money."

So the fall of 1942 saw both the Ehrlich children living in Champaign-Urbana, Martha preparing to teach and begin work on her graduate degree, George moving into the Granada Club dormitory<sup>152</sup> and starting college life. He would go to her apartment at 1111 W. Stoughton for Sunday dinners, and Joseph and Mathilda would come down from Chicago at times to visit them. When Martha showed Joseph her Thornburn classroom on Saturday afternoons when no one else was in the school building, he always took off his hat and walked softly and spoke in a whisper. Joseph's home might have been his church, but to him the classroom was a truly sacred place; and in Martha's he looked at everything—the textbooks, the pictures on the walls, and the inevitable small animals which he would be allowed to feed.

As for Mathilda, she exercised her maternal prerogative and wrote her son a farewell letter:

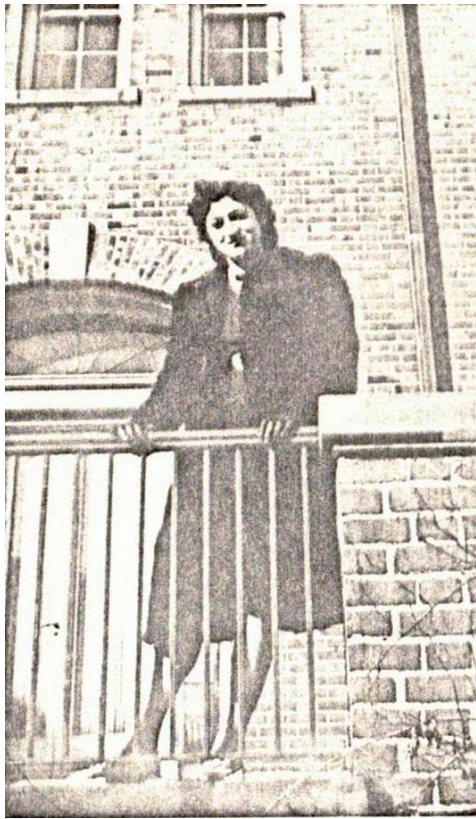
**1942 September 9.** Dear George: I'm writing these few lines so Dad could put it in your scrapbook. Yesterday was the big day for you, as well as for us too. The day of your college entrance. It was wonderful to watch you George dear, you seemed so happy, really it was your biggest day as far as I could tell. But no matter how glad I felt for you myself, I had such a funny feeling right there while we were waiting for you... I wanted to cry, and I believe if I was alone in the car, I would of cried just thinking that I haven't any little boy to spoil anymore. You are so grown up dear with your seventeen years, and it takes time to get used to the idea that you are old enough to be at college and that Dad and I have been left all by ourselves at home. The only consolation is that you and Martha live close together in Champaign. This thought only, that keeps me going here at home, and that I am sure you are satisfied and contented to be at the University. We two old people<sup>153</sup> are terribly lonesome for you and Martha. Good luck my dear, and may your dream come true for ever.



---

<sup>152</sup> Where he roomed with Melvin Straus (1924-2006), a fellow Senn alumnus and ROTC officer.

<sup>153</sup> George would later note that at this time his parents were respectively 48 and 47 years old.



above: Martha the Freshman at Illinois, 1937



above: Martha and Mathilda, Mother's Day 1938





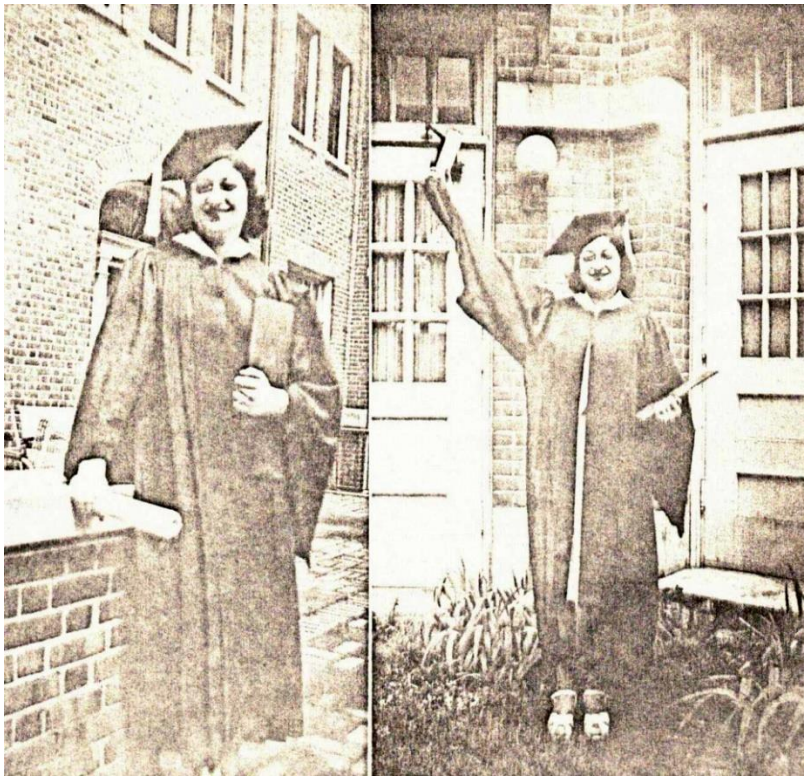
above: Orchesis article, circa December 1938

below: Mathilda with Mrs. Dever and Lila Renbarger in St. Petersburg, 1939



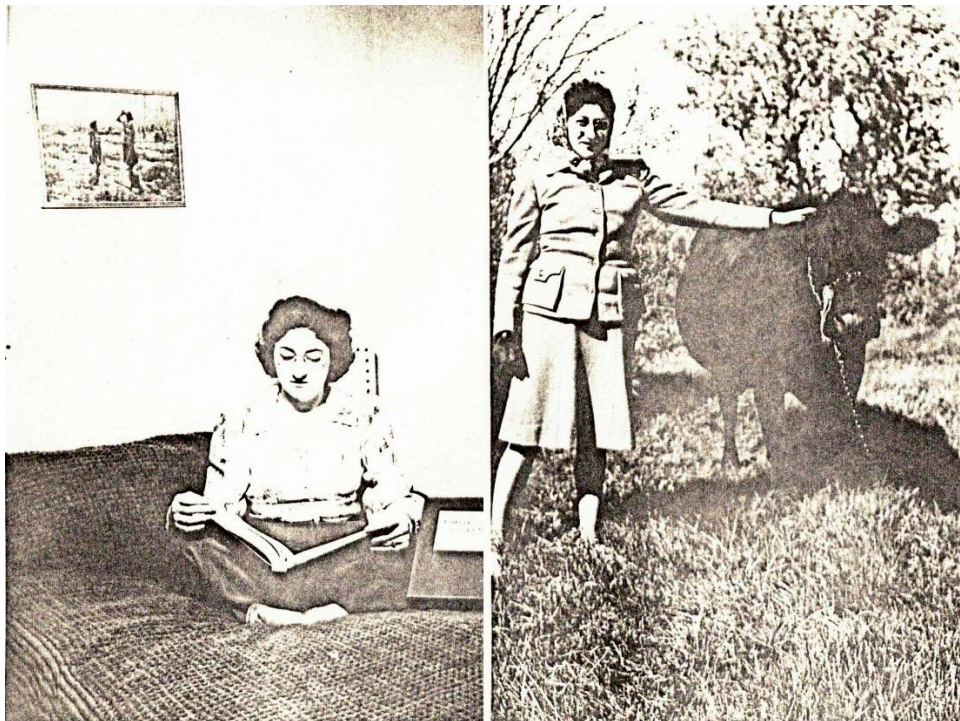


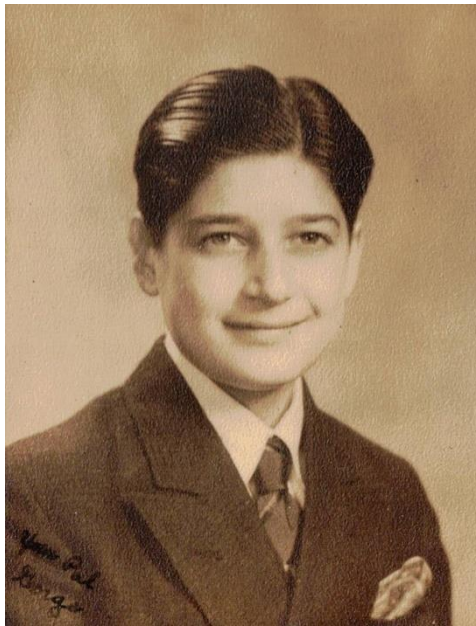




above: Martha the Illinois graduate, June 1941

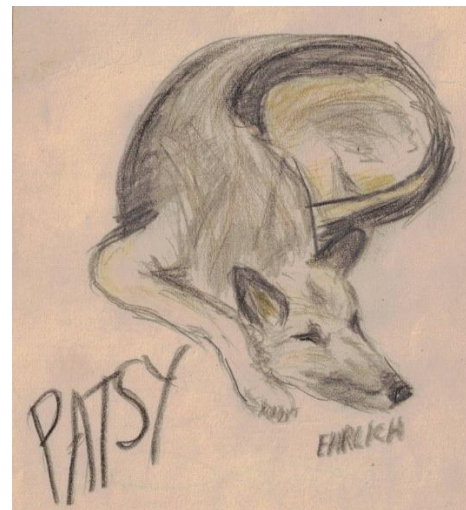
below: Martha (and cow) in Sanborn, North Dakota: 1941-42





above: George at thirteen, January 1938: "Today I Am a Man!"

below: Sketches of Patsy by George, circa 1938 (left) and 1939 (right)





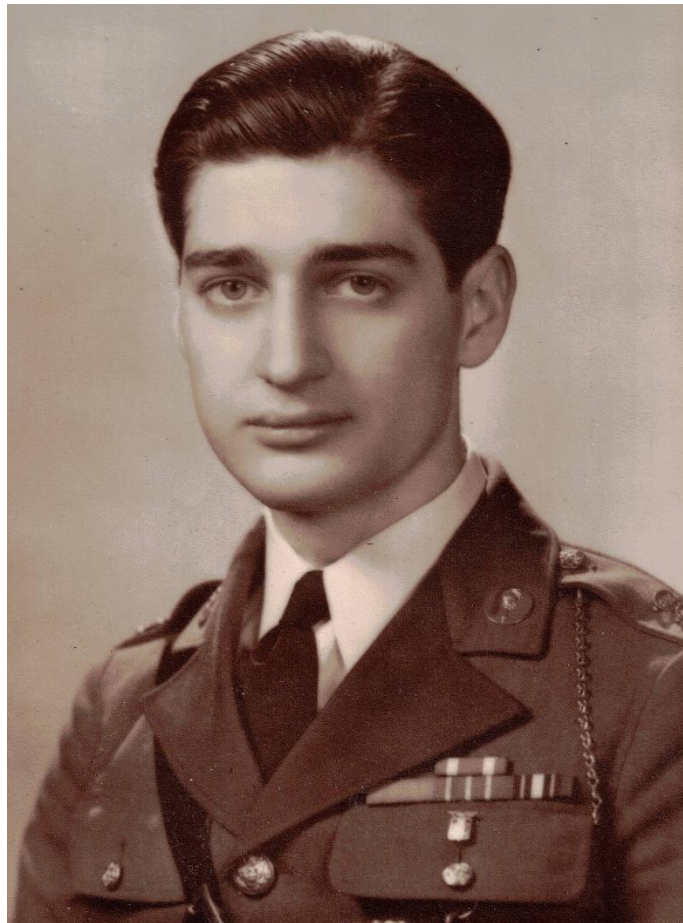


Painting of the Ehrlich bookcase by George, 1940



Martha and George in Urbana (above left) and Racine (above right), 1941

below: George the high school graduate: June 1942





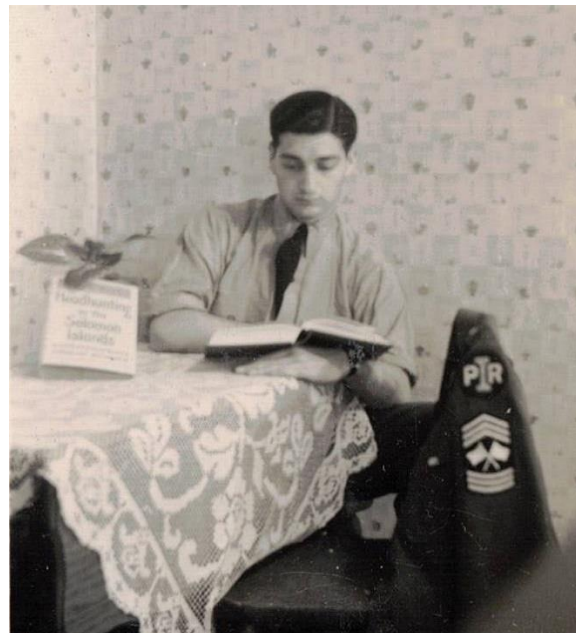


above left: "And Then There Was George": July 1942  
(L to R: Albert Sessler, George, Ted Ruhig, Béla Ruhig)



above right: George in uniform at Martha's Urbana apartment, early 1943

below left and right: George washing dishes and reading at Martha's Urbana apartment, early 1943





above: Mathilda with Patsy and Joseph with Patsy, both circa 1942

below: Martha and George, early 1943







Joseph and Mathilda on their silver wedding anniversary, July 1943



REGISTRATION CARD—(Men born on or after April 28, 1877 and on or before February 16, 1897)

SERIAL NUMBER U 166	1. NAME (Print) JOSEPH — EHRlich	ORDER NUMBER
2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print) 1553 DEVON AVE. CHICAGO COOK ILL.		
3. MAILING ADDRESS SAME		
4. TELEPHONE BRT 3919	5. AGE IN YEARS 48	6. PLACE OF BIRTH GYOR
7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS MATHILDA EHRlich 1553 DEVON AVE. CHICAGO, ILL.		
8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS SELF		
9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS 1553 DEVON AVE. CHICAGO COOK ILL.		
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.		
D. S. S. Form 1 (Revised 4-1-42) 10-21630-3 Joseph Ehrlich (Signature)		

REGISTRATION CARD (Men born on or after July 1, 1924, and on or before December 31, 1924)  
(Also for the registration of men as they reach the 18th anniversary of the date of their birth on or after January 1, 1943.)

FORM APPROVED  
Statistic Bureau No. 33-11012-42

SERIAL NUMBER W 63-H	1. NAME (Print) George (None) EHRlich	ORDER NUMBER 12661-A
2. PLACE OF RESIDENCE (Print) 1553 Devon Ave Chicago Cook Illinois		
3. MAILING ADDRESS 1004 South Fourth St Champaign Ill.		
4. TELEPHONE BX 1 3919	5. AGE IN YEARS 18	6. PLACE OF BIRTH Chicago Illinois
7. NAME AND ADDRESS OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS Joseph EHRlich 1553 Devon Chicago Ill.		
8. EMPLOYER'S NAME AND ADDRESS Student		
9. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS University of Illinois Urbana Illinois		
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.		
DSS Form 1 (Rev. 11-15-42) 410-21630-4 George Ehrlich (Signature)		

above: Joseph's and George's World War II draft registrations, 1942-43

below: Mathilda (second from left) with the Red Cross, April 1943



## 14

*Left All by Ourselves*


“We two old people,” approaching but not quite fifty, celebrated their silver wedding anniversary in July 1943. The years had not left them totally unmarked: they had grown stouter, their hair was turning grayer, and both now wore glasses, though Mathilda seldom let herself be photographed with them on. (In photos, when not taken by surprise, the elder Ehrlichs almost always struck formal Old World poses—standing very straight, hands folded, a pleasant but moderately restrained smile on each face.)

Joseph was fortunate to have fairly sedentary work where he could set his own pace and his own hours. He had developed arthritic back problems in the 1930s, and had to have George oil the fur shop machines when he could no longer get down and reach under them himself. Later on he would need to wear a corsetlike steel back brace. Diabetes was diagnosed in the 1940s; every morning Mathilda would take insulin from the refrigerator, load a syringe, and give Joseph his shot. (He always spoke very respectfully of Banting and Best, the discoverers of insulin.) And Joseph’s hands began to tremble slightly, just enough to make it difficult for him to write. This seemed to be another one of those inevitable, unavoidable things associated with aging, and in this case was another good excuse to leave all the correspondence to Mathilda.

When Martha and George left home, their parents were left on their own for the first time since 1919 and their first year of marriage. With the children’s departure came the first chance for each generation to be independent of the other: a chance that turned into certainty as the younger Ehrlichs got caught up, like everyone else their age, in the Second World War. But the older European-born generation was on the other side now, in more ways than one. Eight thousand miles and an ocean away from home, they were steadfastly loyal to their adopted country and proud of their children’s military service to the same; yet they were separated from this World War as they had not been from the first one. And, despite their interest in global politics, they were dealing at a remove from reality.

In Chicago the Ehrlichs got letters from their family in Kolozsvár/Cluj, letters which often made Mathilda cry.

Then, abruptly, the letters stopped coming.



For twenty years after World War I, the Jews of Hungary had been subjected to varying degrees of economic boycott and social ostracism. They had always hoped it would be a fleeting phenomenon, even when laws were passed<sup>154</sup> that defined “Jew” on an explicitly racial basis and restricted the number of Jews in Hungarian commerce and professions to twenty percent, then to five percent. Through it all they insistently proclaimed their undying patriotism, urging Hungary not to blindly emulate Hitler’s Third Reich.

The Hungarian government was in fact trying to placate the Nazis just enough to keep them at arm’s length. It was a perilous balancing act, not made any easier during World War II by Hungary’s own geographic greed. In 1940 they demanded Transylvania back from the Romanians, who were isolated and demoralized by the collapse of their ally France. Romania<sup>155</sup> asked for German mediation, and Germany offered some “friendly advice”—to cede northern Transylvania, including Cluj/Kolozsvár, back to Hungary. The Romanian Foreign Minister took one look at the redrawn map and promptly fainted; yet his country had no choice but to swallow this especially bitter pill.

Transylvania’s Jews welcomed the return to Hungary, the nation to which they had retained strong cultural and emotional ties, particularly the older folk who remembered the Golden Age. But new anti-Semitic measures were immediately introduced: Jewish children were prohibited from attending public schools, and only ten Jewish students (with special connections, which did not save them from being continually baited) remained at the University of Kolozsvár in 1940-41. Eight years earlier there had been 443 enrolled there.

By this time the Nazis had come up with their own solution to the Jewish Question—

---

<sup>154</sup> The First Jewish Law (“A Bill for the More Effective Protection of the Social and Economic Balance”) was enacted in May 1938, partly to prevent takeover of the Hungarian Parliament by the ultranationalist Arrow Cross. The Second Jewish Law (“A Bill the Restrict Jewish Penetration in the Public Affairs and Economic Life of the Country”) followed in May 1939.

<sup>155</sup> In Romania an Iron Guard had risen to power in 1937 and gone on an anti-Semitic rampage, particularly in territories like Transylvania that had been annexed after World War I; there the Jews were stripped of their citizenship, classed as foreigners, and threatened with dismissal from their jobs. A year later Romania’s King Carol (whose mistress Magda Lupescu was Jewish) had the Iron Guard leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu imprisoned, then shot “while trying to escape”; but Carol was forced to abdicate and flee Romania in 1940.

the Final Solution, in fact: they systematically rounded up millions of European Jews, put them on deportation trains, and sent them to death camps established in Poland. Rumors of this disturbed Miklós Kállay, the Hungarian Prime Minister. He pledged to “resettle” Hungary’s 800,000 Jews, but not until the Nazis provided a satisfactory answer as to *where* they were to be resettled. In the meantime Kállay’s government jealously upheld Magyar independence, held firm against German pressure, and refused to deport a single Hungarian Jew.<sup>156</sup>

So Hungary and northern Transylvania became an oasis in the wasteland Hitler was making of Europe. Eliminated from public life, segregated from the rest of Hungarian society, the Jews agreed that certainly these were unpleasant times; but whatever might be happening in other countries—and as the months went by, there was an uneasy awareness of what was going on—it could never take place in *their* civilized homeland. It could never happen to *them*. Despite the harshness of their lives, they did continue to live; and if Kállay could continue parrying the Third Reich they would remain comparatively well off. Surely it was best, then, to adopt the attitude of *megusszuk*: “We’ll get by.”

In March 1944 Hitler summoned old Regent Horthy to a meeting and there gave him an ultimatum: dismiss the Kállay government<sup>157</sup>, or Germany would move in and occupy his country. Horthy agreed to Hitler’s demands, but that scarcely mattered; German troops were already marching across the Hungarian border. Kállay fled to Turkey and a new government was appointed, one that produced a landslide of anti-Semitic legislation. Jews were banned from most Hungarian stores, restaurants, and theaters; forbidden to use telephones or radios; required to stay indoors except for three hours each day; and ordered to wear the yellow star badge.

Adolf Eichmann came to Budapest and met with frightened Jewish leaders. He told them that any opposition would be mercilessly dealt with, but nothing would happen to the Jews if they “behaved” themselves. Any atrocities should be reported at once to Eichmann

---

<sup>156</sup> Excluded from service in the Hungarian army, most Jewish men of military age were conscripted into forced labor battalions and transported to the Russian front in Nazi-occupied Ukraine. In Hungary a Third Jewish Law was enacted in August 1941, extending the racial definition of “Jew” to include 100,000 Hungarians whom even the Third Reich would not have considered Jewish.

<sup>157</sup> During the summer of 1943, Kállay secretly conferred with the Western Allies (he would not deal with the Soviet Union) seeking a way for Hungary to remain neutral till the Allies could defend it from German vengeance. But the West refused to exclude Russia or make a separate peace.

himself; he promised that immediate action would be taken, even against German officers. And he expressed polite interest in visiting the Budapest Jewish Museum and Library. His promises were half-believed; the Jewish leaders *wanted* to believe them. Maybe they would be safe if they cooperated, or at least played for time, since Nazi Germany's defeat seemed imminent.

As for Eichmann, he was delighted with this "fantastic opportunity."

From SS veterans throughout Europe he had assembled a *Sondereinsatzkommando*: his Special Operations Unit. Its members's work elsewhere was pretty much completed; now all their attention and experience could be brought to bear on Hungary. They were ordered to proceed with caution—the Nazis wanted to avoid another Warsaw ghetto rebellion—but they would have to hurry, especially in the east, for the Soviet army had almost reached the same Carpathian passes that the Cossacks had nearly pushed through thirty years before.

On May 2, 1944, the Kolozsvár police chief posted local ghettoization instructions. Then followed the banging on doors, the rounding up conducted by the Gestapo and the greenshirted Arrow Cross, Hungary's own homegrown Nazis. Everything went smoothly, since few of the intimidated Jews dared resist<sup>158</sup>. Some of their Christian neighbors helped hide them; some denounced Jews in hiding; many feared being threatened with the same fate. And many others cheered as 12,000 Jews were herded into Kolozsvár's Iris Brickyard by May 10th. Two weeks later another 4,000 joined them there.

This miserably overcrowded brickyard was exposed to wind and rain. A single pipe with fifteen faucets (frequently out of order) served as the ghetto's water supply; there was hardly enough water for drinking or cooking, let alone washing. Food was doled out once a day. Four ditches were dug to be latrines for the entire brickyard. In one building—the "mint" or "massage room"—people were beaten into confessing where their valuables might be hidden.

Kolozsvár's was a typical Hungarian ghetto.

On May 18th the Catholic Bishop of Transylvania, Áron Márton, gave a sermon in

---

<sup>158</sup> The Jews were told to list in quadruplicate all their confiscated valuables—jewelry, watches, cameras, typewriters, furs, rugs, paintings, silver, gold. One copy of the list was to go to the city, the second to the police, the third left in the vacated home or apartment; the Jews were allowed to keep the fourth copy.



Kolozsvár at the Church of St. Michael, in front of which stood the bronze statue of Matthias Corvinus. And with the courage of Mátyás, Bishop Márton condemned the ghettoization, imploring Hungary not to abandon its Jews to annihilation. But articles appeared in local newspapers claiming that despite exaggerated rumors, all was well at “the brickyard where people play football and rummy and nobody wants to work.” There was no hunger or disease or want for anything—and even if the Jews were not particularly comfortable in their ghetto, remember the brave Magyar soldiers fighting FOR us and BECAUSE of them!

Life in the ghetto in fact grew so intolerable that its inmates were glad to leave it, feeling relief when trains came to take them away. Seventy to ninety people were crowded into each freight car; all had to stand throughout the trip. There was no food, no water, no sanitation other than two buckets per car, and those who happened to die en route were not removed till the journey’s end. Upon arrival at their destination, the freight cars were emptied and columns were formed: one of men, the other of women and children. An SS doctor on sight-inspection divided each column into two groups.

Those who looked strong enough to work were sent to the right; there they were stripped, deloused, dressed in uniforms, and put to hard labor.

Those who looked old or sick or weak, children not yet in their teens, mothers who would not leave their children—these were sent to the left. There they were gassed and their bodies burned.

The ovens and gas chambers of Auschwitz were operating day and night.

---

Over 16,000 Jews were deported from the Kolozsvár ghetto; 150,000 from northern Transylvania; 437,000 Hungarian Jews in all. Most were sent to Auschwitz, where nearly 400,000 perished in a conveyor-belt blaze from mid-May to July 1944. Nothing was concealed; the Nazis operated openly, in full view of the world, and still brought off the most methodical and concentrated extermination in the history of the Holocaust<sup>159</sup>.

“It went like a dream,” boasted Eichmann.

The Allies, as in Béla Kun’s time, pretty much sat on their hands. They rejected a demand to bomb Auschwitz, defining it as a civilian target. Raoul Wallenberg, who would

---

<sup>159</sup> On July 14, 1944, Secretary of State Cordell Hull publicly confirmed the mass murder of Hungary’s Jews. A day later the *New York Times* gave further details in the article “Victims of the Last Fury of the Nazis.”

heroically rescue thousands from Budapest over the next six months, would himself be arrested by the baffled Russians—why should a Swedish diplomat risk his life to save Jews?<sup>2</sup>—and never released; his fate remains a mystery.

Some efforts were made. Pope Pius XII and King Gustav of Sweden appealed to Horthy on behalf of the persecuted. The United States Congress called on the Hungarian people to “stem the tide of inhumanity.” On June 17th a rally in New York was sponsored by the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe. And in one of history’s less piquant ironies, about 2,000 Hungarian Jews escaped across the Transylvanian border to a safe haven in Romania—despised Romania, so notorious for its anti-Semitic excesses through the past<sup>160</sup>. Ultimately northern Transylvania would be returned to the Romanians, and Kolozsvár would again become Cluj, which it remains to this day.

A vast number of people had disappeared, vanishing into nameless night and fog, not to be heard from again. Their whispered fate was so dreadful that for a long while it was dismissed as wartime propaganda. Some, for good or ill, have never accepted or believed it.

A vast number of Mathilda and Joseph’s relatives had disappeared, and in later years they were seldom or never to be talked of. “I really don’t know what my parents knew about the Holocaust,” George was to say. “The grim reality of what in fact was happening to the relatives left in Europe... it was never really discussed. How could it be?”

The Ehrlichs and their extended family were never ones for open mourning or public displays of grief. “When the end for someone came, there was no great family outpouring; each seemed to deal with it privately.” This was equally true whether the death was of someone in the fullness of his years, like Sam Kohn, or in his prime like Margaret Temmer’s younger son Alex. When Jeni Kohn died in 1944, and again when Patsy the shepherd in sick old age “simply vanished<sup>161</sup>,” George was not told about it for a long time “so I wouldn’t feel hurt.”

Joseph and Mathilda would often fend off “feeling hurt” in this manner. No candles were lit; if memories proved too painful, they went unmentioned. In later years Mathilda

---

<sup>160</sup> In 1942 Romania, no longer sure of German victory, indefinitely postponed any deportation of their Jews. A stiff law still forbade Jews from illegally entering the country, but in 1944 this was largely ignored and refugees were dealt with benignly.

<sup>161</sup> In 1984 I asked Mathilda and Martha if this was a canine euphemism, akin to “the dog got sent to a farm”; both promptly insisted that no, Patsy really *had* “gone off somewhere to die.”

might recall her brother Náthán's disappearance and her mother's death; but "even now it makes me cry to think of that," so the elder Ehrlichs resolutely put the past behind them<sup>162</sup>.

Yet it could not be forgotten. On one occasion (and one only) forty years after her family was lost, Mathilda admitted that she still dreamed of them, and wept for them. "We were almost a city of our own, all related," she would say. "And they were all killed."

Surely it was best, then, to adopt the attitude of *look to the survivors*. Despite everything a few were left in the Old World: some of the Ladners<sup>163</sup> and Mathilda's youngest sister Ily lived on in Paris, while brother Jenő and his family eventually made it to Israel.

Meanwhile in America—there by the grace of God, or Fate, or a Vice-Consul's rubber stamp—there were Martha and George. The children, raised as best Joseph and Mathilda could under the circumstances, were about to embark upon independent adult lives of their own. Their parents had always wanted a Better Life for them; now whether they were to enjoy it remained to be seen.



above: Two 1944 memorial stones in Cluj's Neolog Jewish cemetery

© 2009 by Matthew C. Ehrlich

<sup>162</sup> Among my chief regrets regarding *To Be Honest* is that I did not persuade Mathilda to recall and record more about her siblings and their families; but I suspect she would have found this too grievous. (See footnote 279 in Appendix H.)

<sup>163</sup> The Shoah Memorial in Paris includes a Marguerite Ladner (1893-1942) who *might* have been Mathilda's older sister Margit; but there is no mention of Margit's husband Imre.

## Appendix F: Jenő's Family

*Aufbau* was founded in 1934 as a worldwide journal for German-speaking Jews. On page 19 of its March 9, 1945 issue, among bilingual ads and announcements of births and weddings, was an article headlined *Flüchtlinge in der Schweiz suchen Verwandte in U.S.A.* This listed various refugees to Switzerland for whom American friends and relatives were searching via the World Jewish Congress. Among the seekers was “Ehrlich, Josef (1553 Devon Ave., Chicago),” and those he sought were “Eugen Ivan Fried und Martha Kun.”

When the present author stumbled across this in 2007, I at first thought these were not four people but two—a Mr. Fried and a Ms. Kun. Further Googling led me to the website [www.kasztnermemorial.com](http://www.kasztnermemorial.com), a tribute to Oskar Schindler's contemporary Rezső (Rudolph) Kasztner, whose bargaining with Eichmann's SS enabled the exchange of 1,684 Hungarians for three suitcases of cash, gold, jewels, and stock shares in 1944. Nearly a quarter of those rescued came from Kasztner's home town of Kolozsvár/Cluj, and among them were:

Kun, Jenő (Eugen)	born December 26, 1897: a tailor
Kun-Rosenblatt, Fried[a]	born October 28, 1903: a housewife
Kun, Ivan	born May 10, 1928: a student
Kun, Márta/Martha <sup>164</sup>	born October 17, 1931: a student

According to *Holocaust: Survivor List from the Files of World Jewish Congress* (browsable at [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com)) these were Prisoners 5588 through 5591 in Bergen-Belsen's Block 11; and they were the only Kuns on [www.kasztnermemorial.com](http://www.kasztnermemorial.com)'s roster of the rescued. Although the 1,684 on Kasztner's List were deported with the other Hungarian and Transylvanian Jews in 1944, they went not to Auschwitz but a “special section” of Bergen-Belsen. There they waited nearly six months—July to December—for relocation to Switzerland. During this time, Márta/Martha's shoes were stolen; yet with nothing else to do she had memorized the pattern on their soles, and was able to track the footprints to the thief and retrieve them.

Eventually Jenő's family returned to Transylvania, which by then had been returned

---

<sup>164</sup> Called “the other Martha” by the Ehrlichs.

to Romania, but years passed before they were able to emigrate to Israel; Ivan Kun was an engineer, and Romania—whatever its opinion of Jews—was not eager to let engineers leave. The Kuns finally settled in Haifa by 1974, when Mathilda visited them there<sup>165</sup>.

But Rezső Kasztner's story lacks a happy ending: he was accused of collaboration with the Nazis, and in 1952 an Israeli court declared he had "sold his soul to the devil" for failing to warn the rest of Hungary's Jewish community about their impending fate. (It didn't help Kasztner's case that those he *was* able to rescue included his own extended family and friends.) The court's judgment would be overturned in 1958; but a year earlier Kasztner had been assassinated—by a survivor of the Holocaust<sup>166</sup>.

**Flüchtlinge in der Schweiz suchen  
Verwandte in U. S. A.**

Der World Jewish Congress, 1834 Broadway, New York 23, N. Y. erhielt nachfolgende Liste von Flüchtlingen in der Schweiz, die Freunde und Verwandte suchen. Die Betreffenden können nur durch den World Jewish Congress, der alle weiteren Auskünfte gibt, erreicht werden. Bei schriftlichen Anfragen bitte auf Liste No. 025 Bezug zu nehmen.

Kormendi, Ladislaus (New York), von Bela Zsolt.	York), von Rabbi Ernest Klein und Mordechai Klein.
Armin Gros (Cleveland), von Rozsi und Fettman Ella Gros.	Kahan, John (New York), von Paula Lauber.
Doller (Cimball Ave., Chicago) von Josef Einstein.	Weiss, David Hersch, Harry und Jacob; und Pollak, Beni (New York), von Gisella Nola.
<b>Ehrlich, Josef (1553 Devon Ave., Chicago), von Eugen Ivan Fried und Martha Kun.</b>	<b>Kasztner, Lucy (16 W. 71st St., NYC.); und Benatzky, Ralph (New York), von Henry und Ma-</b>

above: from *Aufbau*, March 9, 1945

<sup>165</sup> Jenő died circa 1982-83, aged about 85; Mathilda was not told of his passing.

<sup>166</sup> A marketable novel could be derived from this portion of *To Be Honest*—about three Jewish Hungarian siblings born in the 1890s who each married and had a daughter and son. One household, like Mathilda and Joseph's, emigrated to America before the doors there were shut; another household, like Jenő's, survived deportation and made it to Israel; the third household, like so many of their other relatives's, perished in the Holocaust. Yet though such a story might *sell*, it would not be one I would enjoy reading, much less researching and writing.





above left: Jenő's son Ivan, with his bride Edith——above right: Jenő's daughter, "the other Martha"

below: Mathilda reunited with her sister Ily in 1967 (left) and 1974 (right)





## 15

*A Strange Funny World*

In September 1942 Martha began teaching science at Thornburn Junior High, where she was taken under the wing(s) of veteran teachers like her good friend and “hitchhiking buddy” Esther Ewald<sup>167</sup>, and Mr. Lauchner the Principal, “a marvelous man—he taught me the little tricks of the trade.” After school and on Saturdays she worked on her master’s degree, taking classes at the University of Illinois.

Martha contributed her share to the American war effort during the summer of 1944 by working as a hostess at an Urbana USO show. There she met a sailor from Florida named Murel Calvin Lewis<sup>168</sup>, who was stationed at the Navy base in Champaign and attending a specialist training program at the University. As Martha later put it: “We danced together, chatted together, and then got married.”

“He really had her walking in the clouds, too,” Esther Ewald would add.

To each other they must have appeared totally exotic—Murel the southern Baptist with a Byronic profile and head of dark waves; Martha the urbane college graduate with That Certain Chicago Sophistication. Murel was far from home, Martha “ready for marriage,” and in the heady wartime atmosphere their mutual exotic-appearing attraction rapidly turned into matrimony.

Joseph had always been consciously and deliberately overprotective of Martha; now she wanted to marry a sailor she barely knew. Did Joseph pound (or at least slap) the table and demand to know how Mr. Murel Lewis intended to support his beloved only daughter?

He did not. Joseph’s reaction was: “Even if it doesn’t last long, it’ll be a good experience for her.”

“He was probably so relieved I finally had a boyfriend that he didn’t want to say

---

<sup>167</sup> Esther Loretta Ewald (1910-1998) was born in Arcola, Illinois and graduated from the University of Illinois in 1931. A history teacher, she lived in Urbana with her parents George and Myrta.

<sup>168</sup> Born on February 15, 1921: about whom and whose family see more in Appendix G.

anything,” Martha would quip.

So on or about August 20, 1944, Martha Ehrlich and Murel Lewis were married in Chicago by a grumpy justice of the peace. The J.P.’s attitude during the hastily-performed ceremony gave the bride the giggles, which scandalized her mother, who elbowed the bride to make her stop. Joseph and Mathilda gave the newlyweds a set of silver and a pressure cooker, and Joseph got the Lewises a ten-dollar suite at the Ambassador East Hotel.

Martha and Murel then traveled to Wauchula, Florida<sup>169</sup> to visit Murel’s parents. His father Andrew Lee, a farmer turned foreman at a state convict camp, accepted the marriage and made Martha feel welcome—or at least more so than did Murel’s mother Ella Belle, who was aghast that her son had married (of all people!) a *Jew from Chicago*. The elder Lewises lived in a one-room country shack without electricity or plumbing; Murel made Martha her own outhouse seat, and the junior Lewises honeymooned in the back of a pickup truck.

Returning to her own element in Champaign-Urbana, Martha received her Master of Science degree that October. Murel was able to attend this ceremony before being transferred to San Francisco, with the strong likelihood he would then go on to the Pacific Theater. But things did not work out for Murel; he was not sent overseas, nor did he become an officer and aviator as he had hoped. Around February 1945 Martha gave up her job teaching eighth grade science<sup>170</sup> and went to join him in California, leaving her master’s diploma in Joseph’s safekeeping.

Her having *chosen* to leave the classroom was a decision which Joseph seemed wholly unable to fathom. But he tried coming to grips with it in a letter to his daughter, one of the very few he wrote in English:

**1945 Feb. 13.** Hello Martha! I know you was a Master, but still it was nice to see on paper. Valentine is an occasion to send something like this. I will save you this diploma with the others and someday you will take out from the [fur shop] safe to see it, or (I hope) someday maybe you want to use it. It will be always something for you, to depend on it. I know your ideas are all different now and I hope you get what you want, but we live in a strange, funny world. If it would happen, that the teacher overpower the woman in you, you can depend on

<sup>169</sup> “Cucumber Capital of the World” and seat of Hardee County in the rural Florida Heartland.

<sup>170</sup> The Urbana Board of Education formally approved her resignation on August 6, 1945, as noted in the next day’s Champaign-Urbana *Evening Courier*.

your diplomas. Something else, if I won't be here no more, and you would like to talk to me, ask your Master degree, she will give you always an answer, what to do, because I feel a little part of me is in your diploma. One thing more I want to see in my life, George's diploma from the Eng. school. This must be all of our duty in the future.

So long Martha, Love *Popy* [sic].

At first the Lewises occupied a motel cabin in King City, southeast of Monterey. In August 1945 Murel's father was reputedly killed in a prison uprising<sup>171</sup>, and Murel went to Florida to find out what had happened, insisting that Martha keep a shotgun to defend herself with while he was gone. She was uneasy having it, and gained no confidence after managing to shoot out a screen door and pepper the cars in the motel parking lot.

After Murel was discharged from the Navy he and Martha moved to Ferndale, Michigan in suburban Detroit<sup>172</sup>. Murel remained in the Reserves and worked as a mechanic in the auto plants; Martha tried to get a new teaching job but was viewed as a "Navy wife" and therefore too much of a transient. She fell back on her Walgreen's experience and found work as a waitress and cashier in what she'd later term "ill-fated places."

Martha's entire life had been directed toward education: first in becoming a teacher, then in being one. Now she was in a position where she could *not* teach—not even as a substitute, since she'd never learned to drive and therefore could not get about town—and this led to great frustration, as it had with Joseph.

Moreover, in Ferndale there were few people she could relate to in any way she understood. This emphatically included Murel's widowed mother, who lived with them for a very brief period. Martha was thrown for a loop by Ella's "strange little hillbilly Mammy Yokum habits," such as ignoring the hamper and stuffing dirty laundry under the bed instead.

Like many couples who'd met and married during the war, Martha and Murel found themselves joined together without a whole lot in common or much to talk about. Martha patterned her married life after her mother's, remembering that Mathilda never made waves or argued with Joseph, or at least never in front of the children. And the Lewises attempted to make marital progress the traditional way by having children of their own; but in 1947

---

<sup>171</sup> But see Appendix G. (Murel found out nothing conclusive about Andrew's death—or at least gave Martha that impression.)

<sup>172</sup> Near Martha's cousin Alex Temmer and his family.

Martha miscarried.

Afterwards they decided to buy a trailer with friends from Ferndale, carpenter Howard Johnston and his wife Bobbi<sup>173</sup>, and move together to Florida. They set up in Miami where a big construction boom was going on; Murel got a job servicing planes for Eastern Air Lines at the Miami airport, keeping up hopes of someday becoming a pilot by taking flying lessons. Joseph and Mathilda had resumed their annual winter vacation trips to St. Petersburg, which had lapsed during the war; now the Lewises were able to join them and share some leisure time fishing. Joseph, though not a serious fisherman, enjoyed this sport (perhaps for its peace and quiet and chance to commune with Tampa Bay) and would spend hours catching little fish, then throwing them back.

In Miami Martha remained a “transient Navy wife,” unable to find work as a teacher. She continued waitressing and cashiering—“and I was good at it, too”—but remained less than happy.

---

As part of his freshman orientation at the University of Illinois in the fall of 1942, George took a battery of tests which resulted in his being placed in an accelerated chemistry course. “I started out like a house afire, and slowly began to disintegrate... I did so poorly that I got a D.” Like Martha five years earlier, George’s first semester of college was not a happy one; he discovered he had neither vocation nor real interest in chemical engineering. And at the semester’s end he had to tell Joseph (“which was *not* easy”) that, because of a too-low grade-point average, he had been dropped from the chemical engineering curriculum.

Promptly drafted after turning eighteen in January 1943, George was allowed to complete his second semester at Illinois. “Your past and present have been closely tied up with school,” Joseph had written when presenting George with his Scrapbook the previous Christmas, “and for the future . . . we wait to see.” They were not to wait long: in June 1943 Private George no-middle-name Ehrlich was out of school and in the Army<sup>174</sup>.

There was another battery of tests to take at Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois, to determine selection for officer training. Some of the draftees were told they could take

---

<sup>173</sup> Howard Joseph Johnston (1903-1978) and Cortna Mae “Bobbi” Merrick (1901-1971) both came from Ohio, where they married in 1924; the Johnstons would retire from Florida to Cathedral City, California.

<sup>174</sup> The full story of George’s military service, told in his own words, can be found in *George’s Navigations: The War Memoir* at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Navigations\\_War-Memoir.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Navigations_War-Memoir.htm).

further tests for aviation cadet training; George took these in order to get out of guard duty and KP. While he waited for his test results, most of the rest of Camp Grant was shipped out to Australia. George qualified for the aviation cadet appointment and was sent to Miami Beach<sup>175</sup> for three months of basic training. Most of the pre-cadets got shipped out after basic; George and a few others went through more advanced training, then everyone shipped out—*except* George, whose records had been misfiled.

Once these were found, the Army seemed uncertain just what to do with Private Ehrlich. He was finally sent to Henderson State Teachers College in Arkadelphia, Arkansas to undergo four months of special college training for officer candidates, plus ten hours of flight training in an ancient Piper Cub. In February 1944 he moved on to the San Antonio classification center and took yet another battery of tests, this time to determine specialty training. 95% of the aviation students wanted to become pilots, but George had no such yen; with a “Hooray” he wrote his parents that he’d been classified to study navigation.

For the next four months<sup>176</sup> George went through pre-flight training at Randolph Field in San Antonio. Though now a full-fledged aviation cadet he spent no time in the air, but did get visited by an encyclopedia salesman<sup>177</sup> who was wholly unable to step out of his memorized spiel. When George asked him questions about the Britannica, the salesman had to go back and recite until he came to the relevant answer. George bought the encyclopedia one volume at a time over the next eighteen months, having the books delivered to Chicago where Joseph found them vastly interesting and starting reading through the Britannica from “A” on.

When the San Marcos Army Air Field Navigation School announced the graduation of Class 44-47 N-6 in November 1944, George sent his parents a class photo with capsule descriptions of his fellow students. Himself he captioned: “His mother is famous for cookies.” News always spread quickly at San Marcos when packages for Ehrlich arrived; Mathilda’s “fancy cookies” left the competition crumbling<sup>178</sup>.

---

<sup>175</sup> Where the drill sergeants, “drawn from the rural hinterlands such as Appalachia,” struggled to pronounce names like Ehrlich.

<sup>176</sup> Including six weeks of quarantine because his barracks had outbreaks of chicken pox and mumps.

<sup>177</sup> In response to a coupon George had mailed in, hoping to find out how much a Britannica set would cost.

<sup>178</sup> “My mother was a fabulous pastry cook. She was OK but not distinguished in her other culinary work, but she was from that part of Europe where pastries were an art form... I suppose my mother's pastries made my life much easier in the service because I gained a wide respect because of my potential for delectable largess.”

George was now an officer—*A hadnagy úr* (“Mr. Second Lieutenant”) to his father<sup>179</sup>. He had taken a strange test in radar training, still “pretty hush-hush” at this time, and was one of three officers who received Restricted Special Orders to undergo it. In February 1945 he completed this radar course in Boca Raton<sup>180</sup>, having wrestled with temperamental equipment, and then got thirteen days of furlough in Chicago<sup>181</sup>. Photos were taken of him in his officer’s uniform; when Martha saw them, she burst into tears.

He joined the 315th Wing of the 20th Air Force in McCook, Nebraska. This wing was intended to fly B-29s at night and destroy Japan’s oil refinery capabilities using radar-directed bombing. After a month’s training in Jamaica<sup>182</sup>, George’s crew picked up their plane; they were supposed to be the first in the 356th Squadron to go overseas but ended up among the last, since the authorities kept insisting George’s records were not complete.

Finally his crew made it to Guam. It was the summer of 1945, and they assumed they would take part in the imminent invasion of Japan. George had just completed his first combat mission (a flight to Truk Atoll) as a radar operator when news came of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The A-Bomb was said to have the power of 2,000 B-29 bombloads, which George’s crew had a hard time believing. Seven days later they flew a more conventional<sup>183</sup> bombing mission to Tsuchizaki in the northern part of Honshu; a day after that, Japan surrendered.

There was still plenty going on to keep George busy. In September he flew a mercy

---

<sup>179</sup> “I was an officer, which I think pleased my father greatly, but that was never overtly shown by action or deed.”

<sup>180</sup> With occasional weekend leaves in Miami Beach. At a girls-finishing-school dance where Louis Prima was the band leader, George’s sweet young partner asked “Where are you from?”—and when told Chicago, “was so horrified she stopped dancing and pulled away. I assured her I was not a gangster.”

<sup>181</sup> George’s parents took him to the Blue Danube, a Hungarian restaurant at 500 West North Avenue, “and lo and behold a young lady of suitable age (and background) was present with her parents.” This was Mildred “Milli” Butkin, daughter of Hedwig Schwarzenberger Butkin, a Hungarian-born milliner who might have been a former coworker of Mathilda’s.

<sup>182</sup> Where George bought his father a present: “I was long aware that in Europe he had owned an Omega pocket watch, ‘the size and thickness of a silver dollar.’ He had sold it along with other valuables to muster passage money to travel to the United States. His memory of that watch was one that touched me deeply. So when I saw such a watch in the PX in the base in Jamaica, I bought it... My presentation of the watch I think took my father totally by surprise. He was, I think, deeply touched. But he never wore the watch, or did so very seldomly. Once, long ago in Europe, he was a clothes horse, a fashion plate. Now... he claimed the watch would be damaged by his working with furs. So the watch remained in a drawer.”

<sup>183</sup> Though hardly routine: it was the longest nonstop combat mission ever flown, with fuel needing to be nursed very carefully. “The assumption was that the Japanese could not believe that northern Honshu was in our range, and thus were not prepared for so far north an attack.”



mission to the Philippines<sup>184</sup>, carting in Red Cross material for released prisoners. On the way back his crew encountered a typhoon; and when George, filling in for the ailing navigator, was able to get a fix on their position he found the plane had been thrown 350 miles offcourse. (The B-29 flying behind them was lost.) A month later George spent nine days at Iwo Jima with no gear; and he who'd once refused to touch vegetables would say that World War II taught him to eat.

Returning to Guam at the end of October, he was promoted to first lieutenant. After a long tedious wait for his turn to return home, George finally left Guam in April 1946 on an old-fashioned steamer to Saipan. From there he could have flown home but opted instead for the S.S. *Cape Mendocino*, a converted cargo freighter captained by an ex-internee. It turned out to be a wretched ship and a grim voyage, including a stop in Honolulu to pick up a group of reform school students. After eighteen days, the “Mendocino Maru<sup>185</sup>” arrived at last in San Francisco—and “if there was a welcoming band, it was gone.”

Discharged<sup>186</sup> in June, George returned to the University of Illinois as an architectural design major<sup>187</sup>. Previously he had taken a drafting class and found it far more enjoyable than chemical engineering. Architecture was “kind of like engineering... professional, respectable, and it includes drafting.” With the G.I. Bill and three years of saved military pay, George was now economically independent and able to attend the University year-round—fall, winter, and summer. “I actually had a hell of a good time going to school,” he would say, while expanding his curriculum to sculpture and art history.

He met the local Unitarian minister, Phil Schug, whose church<sup>188</sup> ran a co-op food service of sorts on Sunday evenings; and though George did not become a church member at this time, he took part in their Sunday socials. At them he became close friends with Don and Marion Holshouser<sup>189</sup> and others of their circle at the University.

---

<sup>184</sup> Where George tried in vain to locate his cousin Ernie Temmer, stationed on Luzon.

<sup>185</sup> *Maru* designated a Japanese ship, which the *Cape Mendocino*'s unhappy passengers felt they were aboard.

<sup>186</sup> George agreed to join the Reserves for five years, although no provisions were made for radar operators.

<sup>187</sup> Again rooming at the Granada Club dormitory with Melvin Straus.

<sup>188</sup> George's initial contact with the Unitarians was through their involvement with the Student Community Interracial Committee, which accomplished a great deal toward enforcing equal accommodations.

<sup>189</sup> During one of Phil Schug's comparative religion sessions, a three-year-old girl with blonde braids solemnly turned and stared at George. This was his introduction to the Holshousers, who became his closest friends in Illinois. Don Franklin Holshouser (1920-2002) was an associate at the U of I's Electrical Engineering Research Lab. Marion Stankus Holshouser (1921-2011) would serve on Urbana's City Council and as [ctd next page]

It was not long before George decided he was more interested in the history of architecture than in design. He asked Frank Roos, Head of the Illinois Art Department, about job prospects in the art history field; Roos was bluntly realistic about the lack of such, but at the same time encouraging. By 1948 George's job prospects were becoming better defined: he was hired as a studio assistant in sculpture classes, and discovered that he enjoyed helping students with technical questions<sup>190</sup>.

To aid his study of architecture he got his first camera, a Kodak Brownie. He would often take pictures in Chicago but it never occurred to him, then or later, to photograph his parents's fur shop, their apartment at 1553 Devon, or the surrounding neighborhood; and in later years George would kick himself for not doing so. In September 1948 he visited his sister and brother-in-law in Florida, taking many photos of booming Miami Beach and—still being an incorrigible kid brother—one of Martha's clothed backside. (She captioned it "My Sister Fanny.")

The Lewises now had their own tiny trailer at the Northwest Trailer Park, and commuted to and fro on a motorcycle called "Jezebel." Murel was still working as a mechanic and hoping to become a pilot, but George got the impression he had no practical plan for achieving this dream other than to take flying lessons and work at the airport. There remained the idea that a child would make a difference, and here was a dream with a chance for achievement: in the fall of 1948, Martha again became pregnant.

When George returned to Illinois he realized he had accumulated nearly two hundred hours of coursework, but was still semesters away from earning any established degree. He set his sights instead on becoming a Bachelor of Science in the Division of Special Services for War Veterans, and achieved this the following June. Joseph's graduation present was \$200 to finance a trip to New York.

On the same day that George graduated—June 11, 1949—Sherry Renée Lewis was born at Edgewater Hospital in Miami.

---

City Treasurer. Their daughter Judy's staring at George may have foreshadowed her career as a cultural anthropologist studying indigenous people in the Amazon rainforest.

<sup>190</sup> George would serve as teaching assistant to both sculptor Marvin Martin and art historian Frank Roos, thus gaining a foot in both the studio and art history camps, which were often at odds. Also in 1948 he started earning money as a babysitter (called "Mr. Belvedere" after Clifton Webb's role in *Sitting Pretty*) and moved from the Granada Club to a room in the home of Lou and Mimi Bloom. Lou, a colleague of Don Holshouser, taught George how to develop film; he would be master of his own darkroom for decades to come.

---

**1949 June 15.** My Darling little granddaughter! You made us the happiest and proudest grandparents in the world, by arriving to be part of our family four days ago. We love you with all our hearts even without seeing you yet. But your dear parents promised to bring you to Chicago, as soon as you are old enough to travel without doing any harm to your health. We are looking forward for that time which we all hope it won't be too long. I hope when you see this, you won't think it silly to write to you when you are so young, and couldn't know much about anything. But if you grow up to be something like your Mother, you will like it, just like she did her diary Grandpa and I started for her just about the time she was as old as you are now, and presented it when she was fifteen years old on her birthday. She loved it, although she could not read it herself as it was written in "Hungarian." But now that you are "born" I am going to translate it to English so some time you might be able to read it, and see how much we loved her too. Here together is all the letters your dear Mother wrote since your birth, I saved them all to form a nice diary for you from your early childhood.

Hope you will like what we had to say about you and your progress of life. Your loving

*Grandma Mathilda Ehrlich.*

"Oh how good it feels to no longer resemble the rear view of a baby hippopotamus," Martha wrote in one of eleven letters she sent her parents over the next six weeks. Sherry Renée's progress was spelled out minutely, sometimes clinically, and once in awhile liltingly:

She smiled today for the first time that it wasn't a grimace but a real smile. Murel was tweaking her nose and poking at her chin this morning, and she enjoyed it so she broke into a wide toothless grin each time. I had to stop my work and go hug Murel, he was so tickled at her and proud, and was so cute. He's going to be like you Dad—strict and firm in his ideas about raising her, but he'll be a very proud and loving father. We're so happy—with each other and with Sherry, that I can hardly wait till you come down and can share it with us. I'm a very fortunate person indeed...

News galore today. Stinky grins like a "chessy-cat" now when we play with her, and I know for sure she can see. Her eyes and head follow a moving rattle, or the drape swaying in a breeze, and I can no longer sneak up on her to see if she's asleep or

uncovered. She sees me and wants immediately to be picked up. Which incidentally led to her first scolding and “potchy-potchy.” She simply would not be quiet and go to sleep, and yet could hardly keep her eyes open. Pick her up and she’d snuggle down in my arms and go right to sleep. Put her down and she’d scream herself purple—with rage—not one tear. So, says mama, if the young lady is old enough to get mad, she’s old enough to get mad at. So she got a couple of sharp pops in the spot nature intended and I scolded in a stern voice. She was so surprised she stopped howling, and while getting over the surprise, she fell asleep. Peace and quiet reigned supreme. Five weeks old...

Sherry’s first checkup left no doubt that she was the daughter of the little girl who’d once bargained with a doctor in Kolozsvár to not look into her throat with a spoon. The Florida pediatrician checked Sherry’s “heart, lungs, ears, etc., and finally throat. When Dr. finally removed the tongue-depressor from her mouth she was so mad she would have sworn if she weren’t a lady. But she got even with him a few minutes later—she baptized him, but good.” In August Martha took Sherry to visit Chicago, and on the 19th Mathilda wrote:

Dearest Sherry Renée! You and your Mommy are with us for ten days now, it’s your first visit and you are only two months old. But what a joy you are to us already. I don’t know how we will live after you go back to your Daddy, and Grandpa and me have to stay here in Chicago alone. We will miss you terribly. Your Grandpa loves you very much and as little as you are, you like him too. Whenever you see him you smile at him and he’s as happy to see that as can be. He told me yesterday your smiles are worth a million dollars to him... We have so much fun watching you when you are awake, your Grandfather can sit by you for hours and enjoy every second of it... You were out on the porch, Grandfather was watching your antics, you were lying on your tummy and didn’t see him, but when he laughed out loud you started to smile too although you did not see but recognized his voice and he was tickled silly for that. We both have lots of fun with you, you are a darling and so good too, sleeping all night almost, just whimpering a little when feeding time comes. I gave you a bath alone today the first time and how you love to be in the bathtub. It was a lovely experience for me. But Grandfather helps your Mommy every day

while she bathes you. Your Uncle George came home too to see you and he helped once also, he received you after the bath, he loves you too although he doesn't say it with words, but we can tell.

**1949 August 30.** We are alone again as your Mommy took you home on the 27th. We all five of us drove out to the airport and the three of us watched till you boarded the plane and it took off. Grandfather and I felt very lonesome, but George was with us and he drove our car home. We are glad at least he'll be home for another week so at least he is here yet. He had to admit it before you went home that you are a very unusually bright baby for your age... Now we are like to push the time so Christmas would come sooner because Grandfather and I will count the days till we can see you again right after New Years. Till then, all our love and blessing goes with you wherever you are. *Grandma Ehrlich.*

Around this time Joseph and Mathilda finally bought a new car. They had gotten their one and only Plymouth in 1941, and when the war dried up the auto market this had to last the Ehrlichs for the duration. Now they returned to Chevrolets, and the one-and-only Plymouth went to George. He was back in Champaign-Urbana, beginning work on his master's degree in art history, but with wheels of his own it was easier for him to go up to Chicago for an occasional visit. He was at 1553 Devon about a month after Martha and Sherry returned to Miami. The phone rang, George answered, and Martha was glad of that because she had news to announce: "Murel and I are breaking up."

At first there was dead silence from George, and when he went to tell his parents it was with an absolutely white face—"probably because I was trying to figure out how to break it to them. 'Divorce' was not a word in their vocabulary." But Joseph and Mathilda took the news calmly enough; they told Martha to come home, and they would take care of her.

The Lewises had never communicated well, and Martha's attempts to emulate her mother's make-no-waves style did not help. When displeased, Martha had a tendency to let resentments grow and build, never giving them any ventilation—"and you can't make a marriage on non-talk where you bottle things up," she would later observe. Evidently accusations of infidelity sparked a blowup, and with it the breakup. Martha cut her losses

and returned to Chicago with the only things from her five-year marriage that she considered rightfully hers: the pressure cooker, the set of silver—and Sherry Renée.



above: Martha with and without glasses, 1943-44

below: Martha with family members and “hitchhiking buddy” Esther Ewald, circa 1942-43:  
L to R: Florence Kan, Mathilda, Martha, Evelyn Sessler, Joseph, Esther Ewald, Rose Ruhig







above left: Martha and Murel Lewis, August 1944



above right: Newlyweds and bride's parents: August 20, 1944

below left: Martha and Murel's honeymoon in Wauchula with Ella Belle and Andrew Lewis, Summer 1944

below right: Martha receiving her master's degree, October 1944





above left: Murel with Mathilda, Joseph, and the day's catch, February 1947



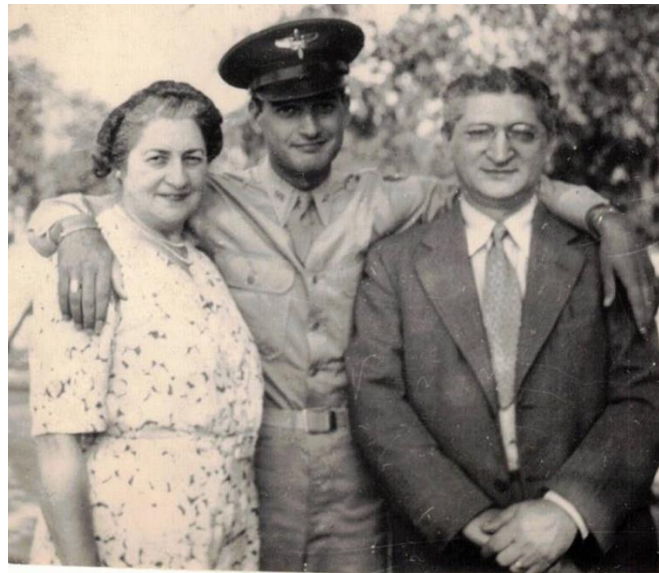
above right: The Ehrlichs and Lewises in Florida, February 1947

below left: Martha and Murel in Miami with Bobbi Johnston, 1947

below right: Murel and pregnant Martha in Miami with Howard Johnston, 1949



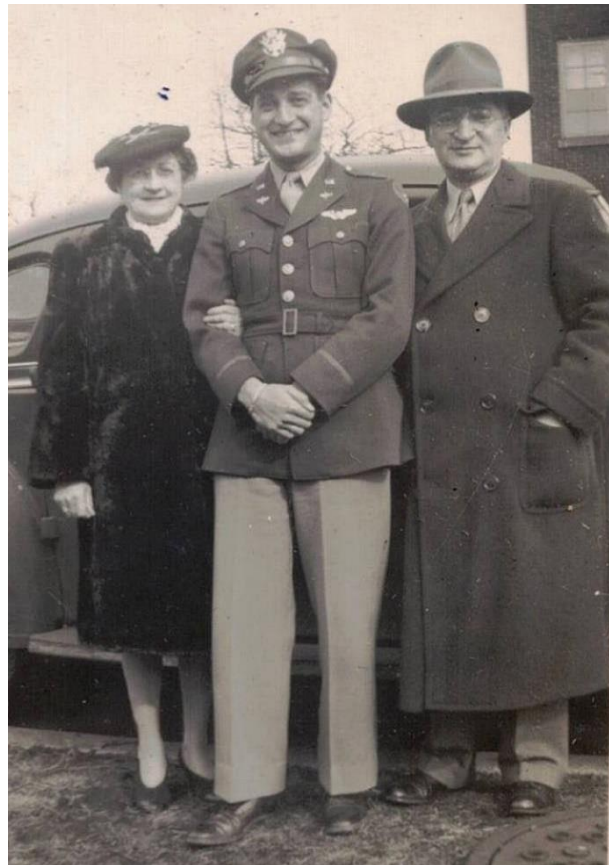


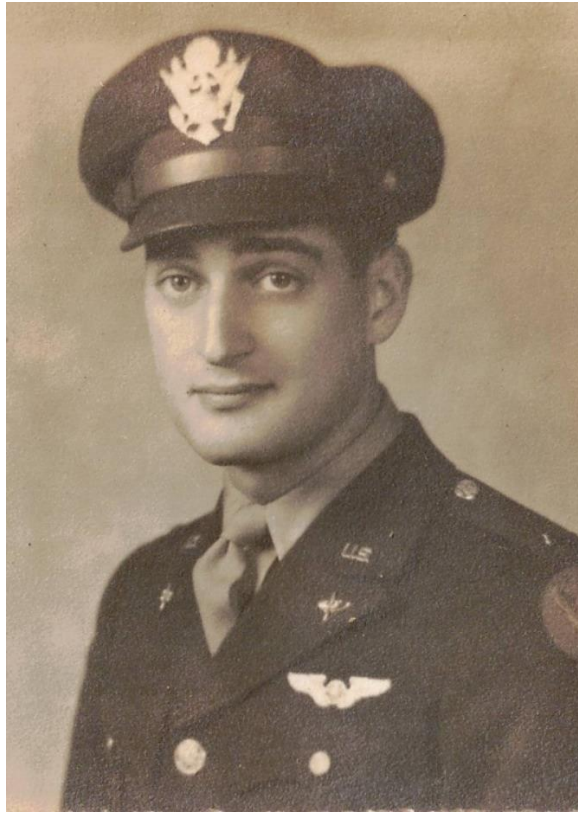


above left: Private George in Miami Beach, August 1943—above right: George home on leave, July 1944

below left: George in Army Air Corps training, Boca Raton: December 1944

below right: George home on leave, March 1945





top: Lieutenant George, March 1945 (the photo that made Martha cry)

middle: A Christmas game of *márias*: 1948

bottom: Mathilda with George the Bachelor of Science: June 11, 1949  
(the same day that Sherry Renée was born)

## Appendix G: The Guthries, Chessers, and Lewises

Murel Lewis's ancestry can be traced back to *Samuel Guthrie*<sup>191</sup> (born 1795/98, died after 1860) and his wife *Nancy*<sup>192</sup> (1797-1862). Both were recorded as being born in South Carolina, having at least seven children in Georgia, and settling in north Florida where they lived on farms in Alachua County in 1850 and Clay County in 1860.

Their daughter *Adaline/Adeline Guthrie* (born 1832/34) married *John Samuel Chesser* in Alachua County in 1852. He was born in Liberty County, Georgia in 1825; some unsourced family trees at Ancestry.com show him to be the son of *Thomas Samuel Chesser* (1776-1849) and grandson of *John Cheshire* (1745-1872).

John and Adaline Chesser settled on a farm in Putnam County, Florida where they had eight children before John's death in 1869. Their firstborn was *Andrew Jackson Chesser* (born 1855<sup>193</sup>) who continued to live with his widowed mother and seven siblings<sup>194</sup> after marrying *Lottie Ann Woodland* in 1877.

Lottie Ann was born May 26, 1861 in Green Cove Springs (originally White Sulfur Springs), the seat of Clay County and called the "Original Fountain of Youth." She was the eldest of three children of *Ruthey/Ruthie Woodland*, whom some Ancestry.com trees identify as Adaline Chesser's younger sister *Ruthy Guthrie*<sup>195</sup>. Supporting this is Ruthey Woodland's living in the same household as Adaline's in the 1880 Putnam County census, along with Lottie Ann's younger brothers *Samuel* (born 1864/65) and *Abram/Abraham* (1867-1944) from the 1870 Clay County census. If Adaline and Ruthey were sisters, that would make Andrew Jackson Chesser and Lottie Ann Woodland first cousins—but Florida allows first cousins to marry.

---

<sup>191</sup> Also spelled Guthry, Guthrey, Guthery, and Gutherie.

<sup>192</sup> For whom several maiden names have been suggested but none verified.

<sup>193</sup> Censuses show Andrew Jackson Chesser as 5 in 1860, 16 in 1870, and 24 in 1880—but 49 in 1900.

<sup>194</sup> Although the 1880 census lists Andrew's occupation as "Abcent [*sic*] at times."

<sup>195</sup> There is a handwritten record of Samuel S. Guthrie, "regular ordained minister of the gospel," marrying Ruth Guthrie to a Mr. Woodland (illegible first name) on December 4, 1864 in Mandarin, Duval County, Florida, not far northeast of Putnam County. However, this was not only more than three years after Lottie Ann's birth, but recorded as a Freedmen's Marriage Certificate—implying the couple were ex-slaves.

At any rate the Chessers had seven children<sup>196</sup> between 1877 and 1898: *Fanny Catherine*<sup>197</sup> (1877-1965), *Grover* (1881?-1917), *Ella Belle* (of whom more below), *Jesse Finley*<sup>198</sup> (1885?-1937?), *George Madison*<sup>199</sup> (1889/1894-1942), *Ida* (born 1891?), and *Ollie Virginia*<sup>200</sup> (1898-1986). After their father's death on April 25, 1904 the family seems to have moved to Muscogee County, Georgia if not its urban seat Columbus. None of them can be located there (nor anywhere else) in the 1910 census; but by 1917 Lottie was living at 1008 Webster[']s Alley in Columbus.

*Ella Belle Chesser* was born August 19, 1883 in Green Cove Springs and left school after second grade. In the absence of any other documentation, we might surmise that she lived with her widowed mother until January 16, 1918, when she married *Andrew Lee Lewis* in Muscogee County.

Of Andrew Lewis's background nothing whatsoever can be said, apart from his being born in Texas to American-born parents circa 1892<sup>201</sup>. The birthdate section on his gravestone was left blank—possibly because he was so much younger than his wife; possibly because no one knew it for certain. According to available censuses he had “no schooling” and spent much of his life working as a truck farmer.

In 1920 he, Ella, and nine-month-old son *John Lewis* lived in DeSoto County, Florida near Zolfo Springs, shortly before moving a few miles north to Wauchula. How long John lived we do not know; the Lewises cannot be located in the 1930 census. A different nine-month old son died on February 16, 1924 and was buried in Wauchula's New Baptist Cemetery; his first name is illegible on the death certificate available at FindaGrave.com.

*Murel Calvin Lewis* was born on February 15, 1921; his first name would be variously rendered as Murrel, Murrell, and Myrl. Unlike his parents, Murel got three years

---

<sup>196</sup> An eighth died by 1900.

<sup>197</sup> Fanny married William Wayne Lockhart (1884-1939).

<sup>198</sup> Jesse's reported birthyear ranged from 1879 to 1892; 1885 (on his World War I draft registration) is most feasible. He married Nellie Armstrong Hodges (born 1886) and one of their sons, Eugene Chesser, died aged 15 on a rabbit hunt west of Wauchula when he “cornered a possum” and, while trying to subdue it, accidentally shot himself. (Per the Feb. 7, 1940 Tampa *Trubune*.)

<sup>199</sup> George was shown with an 1894 birthyear in the 1900 census, c.1887 in 1920, c.1894 again in 1930, and c.1887 again in 1940; his obituary shows 1889. He married Daisy L. Bullock (1902-1992), and his mother Lottie Ann lived with them in Muscogee County, Georgia from at least 1920 to at least 1940.

<sup>200</sup> Ollie, like Ella, married a much younger man named Andrew Lee (Aderhold: 1907-1968).

<sup>201</sup> Circa 1892 if we believe the newspaper article on the next page. Federal and state censuses report that Andrew was aged twenty-nine in 1920, thirty-five in 1935, forty-three in 1940, and fifty-three in 1945.



of high school. In 1939 he was a charter member of Wauchula's new chapter of the Order of DeMolay, a fraternal organization for young men "who acknowledge a higher spiritual power." When Murel registered for the draft in 1942, he was in Detroit working for Briggs Manufacturing, which made automobile bodies for Ford, Chrysler, Packard, and other lines.

His father's death was reported<sup>202</sup> by the August 23, 1945 Fort Myers *News-Press*:

***Foreman at Convict Camp Shoots Self With Pistol***

In an unexplained suicide, Andrew L. Lewis, 53-year-old road foreman at the state convict camp on Pine Island road, shot himself through the forehead with a .38 caliber special pistol at 6:38 o'clock last night in the camp guard shack. The prisoners and other guards were eating supper in the mess hall some 350 feet away when the fatal shot was fired.

County Judge Hiram Bryant, acting as coroner, and Deputy Sheriff W.C. Mathis pronounced the death an apparent suicide after investigating. Captain H.E. Whidden, in charge of the camp, said that every other man was accounted for at the time of the shooting.

Capt. Whidden and the investigating officials were unable to find a motive for the suicide. Capt. Whidden said Mr. Lewis, who had worked for them before at a Bartow convict camp, came here two weeks ago from Wauchula and had shown no sign of despondency or dissatisfaction with his work.

"I talked to him myself yesterday, last night and this morning, explaining what I wanted done," said Capt. Whidden. "As far as I could determine he acted perfectly normal."

Mr. Lewis had been working a crew of convicts near Punta Gorda<sup>203</sup> all day. Upon returning to camp, he remained in the guard shack when the other guards and prisoners went to supper. The shot rang out while the group was seated at the mess tables and Capt. Whidden and two trustees rushed to the guard quarters to investigate. There was no note or other explanation for the suicide. Mr. Lewis was said to be in good health.

---

<sup>202</sup> Though this would not be discovered until 2024.

<sup>203</sup> The seat of Charlotte County, northwest of Fort Myers.

Capt. Whidden said Mr. Lewis was survived by his wife who lives near Wauchula and a son who is in the navy. The body was taken to the Lawrence A. Powell funeral home.

A day later the *News-Press* added that Andrew's body had been sent to Wauchula for funeral and interment.

Following her abbreviated attempt to live with Murel and Martha in Michigan, the widowed Ella Belle moved in with her sister Ollie's family in Columbus, Georgia. The May 9, 1949 Columbus *Ledger* reported:

MRS. ELLA LEWIS, 66, died Sunday [May 8th] at 3:05 a.m. at Bush hospital after an illness of two weeks. Mrs. Lewis was making her home with a sister, Mrs. A.L. Aderhold, 2064 Tenth avenue. She was born in Green Cove Springs, Fla., August 19, 1883, a daughter of Mrs. Lottie Ann Woodland Chessin [*sic*] and the late Andrew Chessin. She was a member of the Rose Hill Baptist church. Surviving are a son, Murrell [*sic*] Lewis, Miami; her mother, who lives in Columbus; two sisters, Mrs. Aderhold, Columbus, and Mrs. W.M. Lockhart, Sioux Falls, S.D., and several nieces and nephews. Services will be held at Colonial funeral chapel at 5 p.m. Monday. The Rev. A. Judson Burrell, pastor of the Rose Hill Baptist church, will conduct the service. The body will be shipped Monday night to Wauchula, Fla., where burial will be held in New Hope cemetery.

(No indication whether the eight-months-pregnant Martha attended this funeral.)

Ella Belle's mother followed less than a year later, as reported by the January 7, 1950 Columbus *Ledger-Enquirer*:

MRS. LOTTIE ANN CHESSEY, 88, widow of Andrew L. [*sic*] Chessy, died at her home, 2064 Tenth avenue, Friday [January 6th] at 11:30 a.m. She had been sick for eight weeks. Mrs. Chessy was born at Green Cove Springs, Fla., May 26, 1861. She had lived in Columbus for 30<sup>204</sup> years and was a member of the Rose Hill Baptist church. Surviving are two daughters, Mrs. Fannie Lockhart, Sioux Falls, S.D., and Mrs. A.L.

---

<sup>204</sup> Her children George and Ollie's obituaries indicated they'd lived in Muscogee County, Georgia "most of their lives," indicating a move there from Green Cove Springs earlier than 1920.

Aderholt, Columbus; three grandchildren, 10 great grandchildren, and several nieces and nephews. Funeral will be held Saturday at 3:30 p.m. at the Rose Hill church. The Rev. A. Judson Burrell, pastor, will conduct the service. Burial will be in the Double Churches cemetery.

Martha's divorce from Murel was finalized in Dade County, Florida in early 1950. On April 23rd of that year Murel married *Martha Jean Converse* (1926-2006) of Putnam, Connecticut<sup>205</sup>. A year later they had a daughter, *Joann/JoAnne Lewis Pituch* (1951-2013).

Meanwhile Martha Ehrlich Lewis had made no attempt to keep in touch with Murel after she left Miami; but around 1953 he contacted her, saying his second marriage was not working out and he wanted to get back together. She did not take him up on it, and she did not hear from him again.

Murel apparently mended fences with Jean; they had two more children, *Mark Calvin Lewis* (born 1956) and *Dale Lewis* (lived only two days, 1957). The Lewises lived in various Florida locales—Lake Forest in 1953 and 1956, West Hollywood in 1957 and 1966, Martin County in 1986, Greenville in 1989, and Monticello in the 1990s. Murel made the news on March 15, 1994 when he testified before the state Senate Education Committee in favor of a bill that would allow prayer in schools. He wound up in Hernando County's Weeki Wachee Acres, where he died on February 19, 2011, four days after his ninetieth birthday<sup>206</sup>. His grave marker at the Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell notes his Navy service in World War II and adds THE LORD IS YOUR KEEPER.

A few years before Murel's death, his firstborn Sherry Renée tracked him down and (after convincing him she was his daughter) tried to establish a relationship. She found the experience disillusioning and said the best thing Murel had ever done was *not* be part of her growing up.

---

<sup>205</sup> Martha Jean was the daughter of *Henry Lincoln Converse* (1876-1966) and *Ruth M. Partello* (1896-1982). The 1944 Putnam High School yearbook stated that "When you hear someone always laughing and having a good time, it's 'Jean.' She is one of the cheerfulest members of the class. This will greatly aid her when she becomes a nurse. She plans to enter nursing school this fall. Jean has been a great help for many class activities here at school. Her hobbies are skating, swimming, hiking, bicycling, and bowling."

<sup>206</sup> His obituary in the Tampa Bay *Times* was simply "Lewis, Murel 90, of Weeki Wachee, died Feb. 19, 2011. Interment Thursday FL National Ceremony at 2 pm. Brewer & Sons 352-796-4991."



Andrew Lee Lewis and Ella Belle Lewis's grave marker  
in New Hope Baptist Cemetery, Wauchula FL  
courtesy of FindaGrave.com

## 16

*The Little Princess*

Readjusting to single life at just-turned-thirty was not easy for Martha. Her parents did what they could to help, particularly with a view toward “insulation”—drawing the curtains on the immediate past. It would be several years before Martha learned that Murel had written her a letter or letters which Joseph and Mathilda decided not to show her<sup>207</sup>. However, to “boost her ego,” they offered to finance Martha’s getting a nose job; she was delighted and jumped at the chance. Shortly thereafter, in search of inner serenity as well as financial independence for herself and her child, Martha returned to Urbana. There she worked two part-time jobs, in the Chemistry Library and the Education Department’s Bureau of Research and Service.

Joseph and Mathilda kept Sherry with them in Chicago. Now, for the first time, the elder Ehrlichs had a chance to raise a baby with all the time and attention they wished to devote. There had never been enough time when Martha and George were born, because there had never been enough money; Joseph and Mathilda both had to work long hard hours to keep their family afloat. But a new opportunity presented itself in the form of Sherry, the Little Princess; and the Ehrlichs were at last well enough off that they could afford to lavish plenty of time on her.

Mathilda continued to keep a record (in English) of Sherry’s early life. “Here is your grandmother again—hoping you will appreciate my efforts some day,” she would write, and “Seems like I always let writing go when I should record each new thing you can do, but that is how things go.” What follows are selected extracts from *How Things Went*.

---

**1949 October 21.** My Darling Sherry, it is a long time since I wrote to you, but there was nothing worth saying till now. You and your Mother’s coming back again, this time to stay

---

<sup>207</sup> They told her about, but did not show her, a final letter from Howard and Bobbi Johnston in Miami.

for good. She's going back to Urbana to teach school again. She will be happy to teach as she always loved it, and everyone loved her too. We are happy to have you, my dearest, you are a very good baby... We have a hand embroidered curtain on our door, have two little donkeys embroidered and a small window at the middle. Grandpa takes you every morning up in his arms while I fix up your bath and he shows you the little "*csacsi*" which is a Hungarian name for donkey, and you laugh out loud. I don't know if it's because "*kicsi csacsi*"<sup>208</sup> sounds funny, or because you like to see the different colors. You always reach out to touch them so you must see what it is. Grandpa is just so crazy about you he said he doesn't know how he could have enjoyed life before you came in our family. But I love you too my darling, and so does your Uncle George and everybody else in the family<sup>209</sup>...

**1949 November 2.** Hello Sherry Dearest! This will be brief because I have lots to do today. I just want to record it that you could hold your small water bottle all alone up to drink from it. You were so cute while I let go of it and you just held it up and looked so mischievous to Grandpa and me, and laughed out loud and we two with you... We could just eat you up when you laugh like that. Your Mommy is coming in next weekend to see you, she's very anxious to, but couldn't for a month before. Now she works steady at the University of Illinois as a Chemistry Librarian, which is OK till she can get back to teaching... You are out on the porch now in your Crib sleeping under the sunshine. We had to dress you warm as it is cold now. You even have a pair of mittens on I crocheted for you and now I am making slippers also.

**1949 December 30.** Christmas is gone, your first, my darling, we have a small tree on the table for you fixed up very nice, just like in the old country everything what's on it can be eaten. Fancy cookies, candy, silver wrapped walnuts, and a Santa Claus made of cotton, very cute. Your Mommy and Uncle George came to spend the holidays with us and got a thrill out of watching you when the lights were on the tree. Your eyes opened wide and you looked at it for seconds, then looked at your Mother who was holding you up, then looked around to all of us and smiled...

---

<sup>208</sup> "Little donkey."

<sup>209</sup> In Chicago Sherry would often play with her slightly-older third cousins Bobby and Birdie Sessler and Rosemary Ruhig.



**1950 January 4.** We were amazed, tonight you stood up in your bed and took several steps around holding to the head boards. We got your first shoes today too, so now you really can go to town with those on your little feet. Grandpa and I were laughing while we watched you trying to stand up, and when you did it you laughed too. You are such a little show-off, but such a darling too, we love you so much, it is all pleasure to take care of you here. I am writing to your dear Mommy about your new accomplishments. I am just so sorry she can't see all the new things you are doing each day. But she was with you on Christmas and she's coming again very soon. She loves you terribly and it hurts her to be away but she has to earn a living for both of you.

**1950 January 18.** ...Now we have to put away everything breakable but mostly the books and magazines interest you. There's two small end tables next to the couch piled high on the lower part with these things, and you are happiest when you stand up there and shove off everything from it, real heavy books too. No matter how hard you are crying, if we give you a magazine you stop instantly, and your grandfather's very happy you like books...

**1950 April 11.** Hi Darling, as you see it's quite a few months since I wrote to you. Not because nothing's new with you, but because I was just neglectful. Today you are ten months old... Dr. Zisler who takes care of you saw you again, and told us you are a very well-developed baby for your age. But for some unknown reason you don't like him, and never let him look in your throat... It's Easter, and your Mommy came home from school to see you and us. It was very bad weather, it rained and froze right on, and got terribly slippery. It looked more like Christmas time, than Easter. George was home yesterday, they couldn't come in together, he had work to do back at the University. They both were pleased to see you developing so nicely. Your Mother too looks a lot better now and happier since she's back at school. Even though she misses you terribly, she knows you are well taken care of till she finds an apartment and can take you home to live with her. We dread that time, but we understand she needs you, and your place is with your Mother. We can come out and see you both when we get too lonesome for you.

**1950 May 14.** ...Your Mother came in to see you on Mother's Day and was very pleased with your progress. You took to her like you know you belong together, and she was very happy about it and so were your grandparents, that's how it should be. She got her


appointment to Thornburn Jr. High School for next fall to teach there General Science. And she is going to take you to live with her in Champaign Ill. where her school is. We will miss you very much, but she misses you too, and as soon as she finds an apartment where is room enough, you will go to her. But Grandpa and I will come and see you as often as we possibly can, we don't want you to forget us so soon...

**1950 June 12.** Well my Darling, yesterday was your first birthday, your Mommy and Uncle George came in for the day to help celebrate this very important day of your life. It was so nice to have them both home together, but it was a very short day, as they were driving and wanted to get back home in daylight yet. Your Mother was so pleased to see how much you grew and how smart you've got since the last time. We all had a nice time together, you took to your Mother right away, but was shy at George, which hurt his ego a bit, he loves you a lot too. He comes in so seldom, that you just can't remember, which isn't your fault at all. You got lots of birthday presents, and I baked a small birthday cake, and your Mommy brought a candle which's a #1 for the one year. I'm going to try to save it for you to see all the cards you've got, and little mementoes if possible. Some day you will get a kick out of them, and hope you will forgive me for all the mistakes I'm making in writing to you. But I had no chance to go to school in America, and had to learn all by myself how to write in English. We are all wishing you a very happy birthday, and many many happy returns of the day, and hoping you and your Mother will have countless happy days and years together.

**1950 August 18.** My Darling Sherry, it's almost two weeks since you went to live with your Mother in "Champaign Urbana" and we both miss you terribly, especially your Grandfather, as he can't adjust himself to changes as quick as I can. I traveled on the train with you too, to help your Mommy on the way. But you were so good we had no trouble at all on the way. Grandfather stayed in front of our train to see you through the window as long as possible and you whimpered a little because you wanted him closer. I saw he had a hard time keeping his tears back too, and it must have been worse for him staying behind all alone. I stayed four days with you to help get used to the change, but it seemed perfectly natural for you there, and didn't make much difference. Your Uncle George came to play with you every day while I was there and you got very friendly with him, which made all of us very glad because you took your time at our house to warm up to him before. Now in two

more days Grandfather and I will drive down to see you... Wonder if you will remember us when we come? If not Grandfather will feel very bad, but you are so young only fourteen months old my sweet, can't expect too much of you just yet.

**1950 August 21.** Here I am again my darling Baby! talking to you again. Yesterday we came to see you, the first time after you left us to live at your Mother's house in Champaign. We were wondering if you'd forgot us after two weeks of being away. We got there eleven o'clock AM and you were the first we saw when we came in the door. Grandfather scooped you up in his arms and as soon as you heard his voice you remembered we belonged together, and after that you just clung to either him or me, hugging our knees and crying to be picked up... You are so young my sweet, and so smart, showing off all the new tricks you learned in these last two weeks. Finally your Mommy held you in her arms till you fell asleep and while you slept Grandfather and I stole away, kissing you softly not to waken you, to save you from getting upset by leaving you behind. But part of our heart stayed with you, and I saw tears in your Grandfather's eyes while we were driving homeward in our car. We just sat quiet for hours before trusting ourselves to talk about you without a break in our voices. You changed a lot even in this short time, look more mature and grown up, you also have another tooth since we saw you last. We both miss you more than ever before, and love you dearly.



Martha and Sherry set up house at 112½ Stanage, an attic apartment in a small white house in Champaign. "Sherry remembers beautifully, and doesn't touch stove, telephone, or books," Martha wrote her parents. "The rest of the house is hers."

The onetime self-styled wallflower Martha now had to play the role of Mrs. Lewis, single parent and provider; but in the process she was at last becoming Assertive. "It just happened," she would later muse. "I got pushed into being assertive, really didn't have a choice—then it felt good, and I didn't shrivel." Certainly the sink-or-swim profession of teaching, where you had to assert yourself to accomplish anything, helped the Assertive Martha to emerge; and in the fall of 1950 she returned to teach at Thornburn Junior High.

George had introduced Martha to his circle of friends in Champaign-Urbana, and she too became very close to the Holshousers. When Martha first resumed teaching, Sherry

spent the schooldays with Marion Holshouser, who had two little daughters of her own<sup>210</sup>. Then “by long and devious routes and much telephoning” Martha found a nursery school run by Mrs. Winnie Padgett, and Sherry was enrolled. It was George who usually took her there in the morning<sup>211</sup>, carrying her down the outside stairway and encouraging Sherry to say “Good morning, sky.” She was in love with the landlord’s flower garden and the landlord feared her effect upon it, so George had her greet the flowers by touching them with one finger only, saying “Hello rose,” “Hello tulip,” and so on.

“When George goes after her, the older kids run ahead to tell Winnie ‘Uncle George is here for Sherry,’” Martha wrote her parents. “He has a label now—‘Uncle George’ to all the kids. I think it pleases him immensely. Then they all line up to kiss her goodbye. Quite a ceremony. All this for two bucks a day.”

Grandma Mathilda was not enchanted by the idea of her Princess in a nursery school, a concern which George responded to in a lengthy letter. After advising his mother on how to take photos (“Be careful to put the main subject of interest in the center and be careful of the background”) he praised the school’s homelike environment and noted that Sherry was quite happy there:

I frankly feel that this place is an ideal solution to the whole problem of where to put Sherry during the day. It is helping to round out her personality. She now is able to meet people, play with other children, without trouble and there is a trained person to keep an eye on things at all times. This type of setup will do a world of good for Sherry and this is no substitute for home life, but it is a supplement. I want to emphasize this. This school is not a poor excuse for a home, it is like a very very friendly, small kindergarten where Sherry can learn things she can’t at home and where she makes and meets new friends all the time. The best evidence is the pleasure Sherry gets out of her day there. You can be sure I wouldn’t say all this if Sherry was unhappy, but since she enjoys her “school” and it is a good one, well I’m convinced. I hope you are too...

---

<sup>210</sup> Judy of the blonde braids (born 1944) had been joined by sister Donna (born 1949); later by brother Eric (circa 1953).

<sup>211</sup> After hauling Sherry out of bed and tossing her up in the air, saying “Nobody sleeps when Uncle George is awake!”

**1950 October 10.** Hello Sherry darling! It's quite a long time since I wrote to you, but since you are not with us anymore there isn't anything to write about. We see you only every other Sunday and only for just a few hours as we have to drive back the same day. But we did see you yesterday, it was the day to visit, and we found you and your Mother looking well and contented... Your Uncle George was there too and his girl friend Bacia<sup>212</sup>, which made the visit a party. We hope she will be George's wife some day.

**1950 December 31.** Hello my Darling! We had you here in Chicago with Grandfather and me for two weeks. I brought you home a week before the Christmas holiday and your Mommy and Uncle George came on later to spend a few days too. We enjoyed you tremendously Sherry dearest. You grew so much, mostly mentally, you are small for your age, but very smart, you talk very good, repeat every word you hear even Hungarian, and your Grandpa taught you to say the Greek alphabet and you knew it was funny because you always laughed after it... I made you a small Christmas tree, trimmed it the European way with candies, walnuts and fancy cookies besides tinsel and lights. You were so sweet when you stood in front of it and asked for Cookies and Candy, but never touched any, waited till someone came and gave you some from it. Every time the light went on you clapped your hands and said "ohh" and were terribly happy to see it, and when we shut it off you asked "light, light" tree. Now we won't see you till Easter time, we'll stay in Florida till April. I wish we could take you too but your Mother didn't want to part with you that long<sup>213</sup>. Well, Happy new year my dear and lots of luck in the coming year.

**1951 April 1.** Hello my sweet! We just came back from seeing you and your Mommy in Champaign. After three months in Florida you did recognize Grandpa and me, which made us both very happy. You changed a lot since we saw you last Christmas, but for the better and you got very smart too, talking everything and very plain just like a grownup. But no wonder as your Grandpa proudly tells everyone you are going to College. Anyway you are

---

<sup>212</sup> Bacia Righter Stepner (1925-2009) earned her BFA at the Rhode Island School of Design (1947) and her MFA at the New York State College of Ceramics (1950). She would marry Murray J. Edelman (1919-2001) and have three daughters while pursuing a celebrated career as a potter and sculptor. (Bacia's obituary advised those coming to her memorial service to "wear black at your own risk, she liked bright colors.")

<sup>213</sup> From St. Petersburg, Lila Renbarger would send Sherry a Betsy-Wetsy (called "Lila Doll") who actively participated in Sherry's toilet training. In January 1951 Martha wrote her parents that Sherry, playing with a spoon and empty coffee can, claimed to be "cooking *tarhonya*" (Hungarian egg drop noodles).

with College people all the time, including your Mommy and Uncle George, and all their friends. You are a very sweet child, goodnatured and goodhearted. Whatever you have and someone asks you to give it up, even Cookies, you do it every time. Hope when you grow up you'd be a little more selfish and look out for your own interest first. We both love you more than you can guess.


**1951 May 11.** My Dearest Sherry! You and Mommy came to visit us for the weekend... We bought a large 20" TV set just a few weeks ago and you too enjoyed seeing the pictures on it. But most you liked to see dancing and you tried to imitate everything you saw, even how to curtsy, by putting one foot behind the other which was a hard thing for a 23-months-old baby. Grandpa and I just watched you instead of the pictures and got a bigger kick out of you...

**1951 August 30.** Hi Darling: It is a long time since I chatted with you, but everything was so crowded in and you grew mentally so much I didn't know where and what to say to you. You and your Mommy were here for a short vacation, she left after a week and let you stay with Grandpa and me for an extra week which we all three of us enjoyed tremendously... You love to help in the house, help me make the beds and wipe the silverware and small dishes, and you are doing a good job of it too. Last week I made you very happy by letting you have a piece of cookie dough, and we both were making Cookies to take them to Mommy. We will miss you dearest, but your Mother needs you more than we do, because she's alone there and Grandpa and I have each other yet. We will go see you on the 28th of Sept., when your Mother will have her birthday too. I would be so happy if I'd be sure she is contented with her life as it is, just to have you and her friends; but I never can tell what she is thinking and she never talks to me about the things that made up her life a few years ago, meaning your Daddy. I am afraid she still feels deeply hurt by him, and that's why she doesn't talk of it even with me. We all love her and you dear, more than we can tell.

**1952 January 3.** My Darling Sherry! You are here again, your Mommy brought you home after Christmas and left you with Grandpa and me for ten days. You never will know what these few days really mean for both of us, and I am proud to say you are enjoying them just as we old folks do. You were home in Champaign for Christmas and Santa Claus was very good to you, got so much toys you just didn't know what to play with first. I was there too



and two days after Xmas we all three of us came to Chicago to be with your Grandfather. You are getting to be a big girl and don't like to be called a baby anymore. Grandpa started to teach you to spell Cat and Dog, and was so happy each time when you remembered how to spell it. Then now he's teaching "Geometry" with drawings like these<sup>214</sup> and you both have lots of fun learning them, what each object means. You have a wonderful mind and memory, can learn everything very fast. You love to help me clean house, put the bedspread on the bed and wash and wipe dishes. Just like your Mommy was when she was your age. When we asked her "What are you doing Mártuka?" she always answered "Working" and laughed just like you...



In the spring of 1952, Martha discovered a two-story single-family dwelling at 1010 West Stoughton which had been split into a duplex. With "massive economizing" she and Sherry were able to move into the first floor apartment, which featured a fireplace. The following summer Martha went off for a long and much-needed vacation, touring the East with Esther Ewald, and Sherry stayed with the people whose names she had turned into a chant and repeated over and over: "My Grampa Ehrlich and my Gramma Matyu."

**1952 September 6.** My Darling Sherry! You were here in Chicago with us for 2½ months this summer. Your Mother went on a vacation, the first in five years, and she needed it badly. So we took care of you all this time, your Grandfather and I, and we all enjoyed it a lot, including yourself. You learned an awfully lot while you were here, Grandpa took all the time you wanted to play with you, and to teach you a lot of things. You learned to read the A.B.C.'s fluently, capital and small letters alike, and you loved to show off to anyone who asked you. We were so proud of our little granddaughter, Grandpa almost burst with pride each time. But now it's over a week you and your Mommy went back home and we miss you something terrible. You were attending Nursery school while you stayed with us, so you had other children to play with and we could do some work while you were away from 9:30 AM to 3:30 PM five days a week. And weekends we took you to the Parks and beaches and you had such a good time. I have some snapshots in your albums to prove it to you when you grow older and want to remember about these things. You called me up on the 2nd, long

---

<sup>214</sup> Rectangle, triangle, etc.

distance, it was my 57th birthday. It made me so happy, but at first I didn't recognize your voice, it was so soft and sweet. When I asked who it was you said Me, Gramma. Then I knew, and it made me even more lonesome for to see you. So next Sunday Grandpa and I will ride out to see you and your Mother, I can hardly wait for the day and Grandpa even more so. He's crazy about you. I love you too very much my sweet.

*Your old Grandma Ehrlich.*

**1953 January 12.** [To Martha] I am starting to translate your childhood Diary my dear, so you and your children can read it too, whenever they like. It might not be a perfect translation, but I will do my best to make it as close as possible. I hope my darling, you will enjoy reading it personally sometime; you cried the first time you saw the book, and heard the recordings of your earliest start on life. Dad and I were very happy, we were in love, and we had you to show for it. We loved you best of all, and when you started to understand things, we both were overjoyed. So here, I will start on it, and hope you and your family my dear daughter will enjoy reading it too. *Your loving Mother Matyu.*

Mathilda wrote her translation on unused pages toward the end of the Diary. Occasionally she skipped over bits, such as the list of new words little Márta was learning ("I'm not going to repeat the words, because in this translation they won't mean much to you or your children either if they're going to ever read it"). And once in awhile Mathilda added parenthetical commentary: when József resolved to teach Márta that good books and good plays were worth more than silly friends or dances, Mathilda observed that "he sure changed his view since then ha?" The translation took her nearly seven months, but on August 3rd she wrote Martha:

Well my dear, I finished with the translating today. Tried my very best to follow it as close as I possibly could, not taking or putting anything more to it than the original diary had. I know I made spelling mistakes plenty in it, but I also know you forgive me for that. But I hope it isn't so bad as not to be understood by you when you read it. I am happy to still be here to see you and your brother George growing up, and on your own, doing something you both want and like to do, and also to see you measured up to our expectation of loving one another, as we hoped sister and brother to understand and care for each other. Life is too short my dear children to do less,

and I am asking you again to be good to each other as long as you both live, and be happy, very happy my dears, then we shall be too, content in your happiness. So long my darlings, *Your ever loving Mom.*

**1953 July 31.** [*Letter to Sherry, headed by rows of capital letters*] Hello my Sweet! You were visiting your grandparents in Chicago for just a short week. Your Mommie was lonesome for you and she came in to take you home sooner than we expected, but we had lots of fun even for this short period. I just want to show you, my dear, how smart you were when you were four years and two months old. You wrote these A.B.C.'s all by yourself, and you were so happy when you saw your accomplishment. We all thought you really deserved our praise, for your age it's quite good too. You can spell out long words like "Mississippi" and count till fifty without any mistakes. You always ask your Grandfather to read with you the headlines from the newspaper, and you can spell out all the letters on it. Your Mommie was a smart little girl also when she was your age, but I think you're even smarter in some ways. I am saving this paper for you to see when you get older and you will get it from your Mother. I hope Grandfather and I will still be around too, but who knows? We both are nearing our 60th birthdays and time just rushes by at our age. So till I have again some interesting things to tell you, I say so long my Pet, your Grandmother loves you more than you ever know.

**1953 November 1.** My Darling Sherry! I took you back to your Mother's today, after a ten-day lovely visit with us in Chicago... You had a wonderful time with your Grandpa, he played with you all the time, never getting tired of it, sometimes I was thinking he is a bigger child than you, my sweet. But you both had a grand time like always... Grandfather took you to see [your] first play to see in the Goodman Theater<sup>215</sup>, "Cinderella." He told me when you came home, it was a wonderful experience for both of you, but especially for him to watch your face when the story you know so well unfolded before your eyes. But when a sad part came, you turned your head away, didn't want to see it. Just when "Cinderella" was happy, then you too felt happy... A few days after you had been in the Theater to see "Cinderella" you fell off a chair and were crying hard, I guess you got hurt a bit. But midst

---

<sup>215</sup> At 170 North Dearborn. Founded in association with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Goodman company did not become fully professional until 1969.

of the crying, you told your Grandpa, “As long as I am crying, let’s play I am Cinderella.” Which struck him so funny he started to laugh, and you too with him. But you wanted to play that all the time. Grandpa took turns being the stepsister or stepmother. But you, always the Fairy Godmother or Cinderella...

**1954 April.** My dear, your vacation has been extended over the Easter because your Mother had to go to a Teachers’s Convention out of Town. But neither of us mind that, we sure are having a nice long visit together, but in a few days I will take you back to your Mama. The other night while we all were watching TV all of a sudden you said, “I wish I was two Sherrys.” Grandfather asked you why? You answered, “Then one could go home to Mommy and the other Sherry could stay here with you and Grandma.” We were surprised and so pleased to think you loved us enough that you’d wish a thing like being two, to divide yourself for us. Then again you said “I wish I was seventeen years old.” When Grandpa asked why? you smiled kind of shy, and said “Oh you wouldn’t understand, you don’t like cowgirls.” So you’d like to be seventeen so you could be one cowgirl. This, and to be a ballerina is all your wish now. You love to watch dancers on TV, and trying hard to do what they do. You are very graceful when you dance. Hope your Mother can send you to dancing school while you are still young...

**1954 August.** Hello Darling! Your Mother took you home yesterday after a three week vacation with us in Chicago. We had a lovely time together, playing Doctor and Nurse with your grandfather almost all the time. I hope really, when you get older too, you still would like to be a nurse as you say now. We read a lot to you as you love books, as much as your Mother and Uncle George ever loved it. Could listen to stories all day if we could read that long to you. But we both get tired of reading as our voices are not too strong, but you are a sweet little girl and when we tell you we can’t read any longer, you right away say OK. Then Grandpa takes a piece of paper and pencil and teaches you different things. These are your first arithmetic problems, quite neat for a five-year-old, no?<sup>216</sup>

In January 1955 Martha wrote her parents that “Sherry was expounding words of wisdom to Winnie who said—‘Guess it pays to have a teacher for a mother.’ The answer

---

<sup>216</sup> Simple addition, subtraction, and “geometry.”

was—‘Oh, I don’t learn anything from my mother—my grandfather teaches me all I know!’ After that what else is there to say?” Mathilda responded:

I just have this to say to you, Sherry my Pet. Your learning comes mostly from your Mother, because you are with her most of the time. But from her, teaching comes as everyday doings, which you darling don’t notice as much as the few days at times you spend here with us. Then everything stands out more in your mind. But all your nice manners, and speech, come from your Mother’s, which you sometimes forget when you are here, because Grandpa lets you get away with things your Mother nor I don’t approve of, don’t ever forget that my dear.

**1955 January 9.** Hello Sherry my Sweet! I just took you home after a two week vacation with your grandparents in Chicago... While here, you sure had a good time playing with Grandpa most of the days, and when I had the time I did the same. I have to admit that now you are 5½ years old you have a mind of a much older child, but just as stubborn too. We had quite a few arguments about that, and sometimes we got impatient with you, because you wanted your way all the time even if you knew you were wrong. But we loved one another just the same, and enjoyed your visit with us. I felt bad when I came away to catch my train after I took you home, because you started crying when I put my hat on. You didn’t want me to go home. Hope the next time you come for a visit you’d be more sensible than that. You had lots of fun with the pink ballerina dress I made you for a Christmas present, and your Uncle George got you a Cinderella wrist watch, and your Mommy got you a manicure set, and a lot of other nice things I can’t exactly remember...

Hoping when you read these lines you will be able to remember all the happy days in your life with us here in Chicago.

---

“...I remember lots of little things, as children do. Things that other people are amazed I’d remember. The first place I remember them living in was on Devon Avenue in Chicago. The building had a round window over the door. Grandpa taught me ‘Pig Latin’ one day carrying me up the steps to the apartment. It was a small, cozy place. The store with its mirrors in front, then the shop, then home. There were French windows between the shop and the living room, covered with sheer white curtains.” (Whenever there was a


customer in the shop, Sherry and those in the apartment would have to whisper; they “mustn’t disturb the customer.”)

“The living room had a beautiful desk and a bookcase with glass doors that slip up above each shelf to get at the books... The bedroom had yellow wallpaper on it with narrow white stripes and garlands of flowers. At first I had a crib (light blue, I think) and then a rollaway bed. And in the mornings I’d crawl into bed with them. He’d always tell me a bedtime story too.” (Sherry would balk at bathtime—the Devon tub was an “old Victorian footed thing”—but once in it she would start playing, and never want to come out. Grandpa always sat nearby “to make sure I didn’t drown or anything.”)

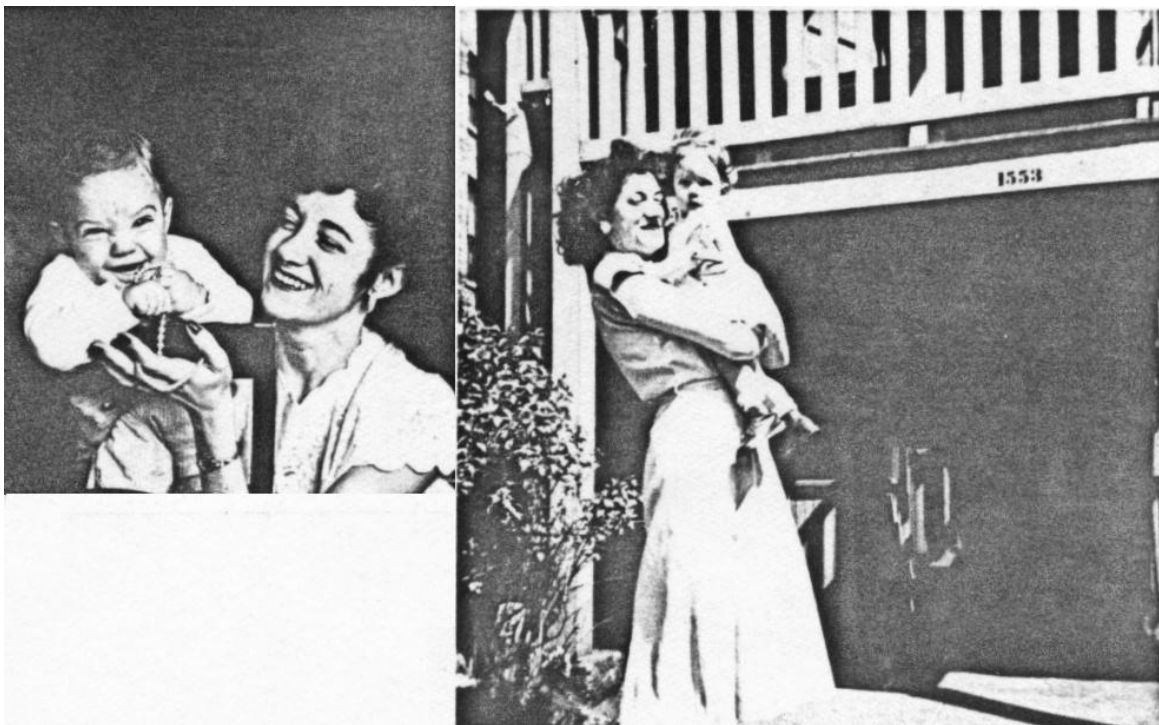
“The kitchen was big, with an enamel table with a red border in the middle of the floor. The floor was linoleum of red and white squares, and the gas stove was in a little room of its own, off to one side. It was a very old stove and Grandma would always make me go away when she lit it with the match. And there was a very tiny back porch just big enough for two chairs. In summer Grandpa and I would sit out there in the evenings with a jar and catch fireflies. But we’d always let them go before we went in. Once we found a bird that was hurt and tried to take care of it. We put it in a shoebox and tried to feed it bread soaked in milk, but it died. He took a shovel and we went into the back yard and buried it. If I went there today I could probably show you almost the exact spot.

“I remember Grandma baking cookies too, at that same enamel table. And putting icing and nuts on some of them. And how good they were dunked in milk... Her old treadle sewing machine in the shop, and the button box. I still have the little coat and cap they made for one of my dolls out of some sort of curly blond fur. And a dress from a leftover scrap of one of Grandma’s old dresses...

“It always smelled just like Grandma and Grandpa’s home should smell—a combination of mothballs (love that smell) and cookies and whatever fantastic things Grandma was cooking for dinner. And age. It’s very strange but age has its own scent too—musty, somehow, and warm and cozy and very safe...”







top: Martha, post-nosejob: late 1949

bottom left: Martha and Sherry, December 1949

bottom right: Martha and Sherry, June 1950

FOR HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD										FOR ALL PERSONS										FOR PERSONS 14 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20										
Person and spouse number	Is head of household?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Name of head of household	Relationship to head of household	Sex	Age	Married	Divorced	Widowed	Single	What State (or foreign country) was he born in?	What was this person doing most of the week?	Is he doing any of the following work?	Is he doing any of the following work?	Is he doing any of the following work?	What kind of work was he doing?										
1503	9	No	No	No	No	Ehrlich Joseph	Head	M	56	Mar				Hungary 16 Jan 1894	Wk				36 Furrier Retail furrier										
1504	10	No	No	No	No	Sherry R. Sherry	Wife	F	54	Mar				Romania 13 Sep 1898	Wk				70 No										
1505	11	No	No	No	No	Sherry R. Sherry	Daughter	F	7	Mar				Ill 1 Nov 1947	Wk				36 Furrier Retail furrier										

The 1950 census

left: The elder Ehrlichs and Sherry in Chicago—center and right: Martha and George in Champaign

FOR ALL PERSONS										FOR PERSONS 14 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER										
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Person and spouse number	Is head of household?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Name of head of household	Relationship to head of household	Sex	Age	Married	Divorced	Widowed	Single	What State (or foreign country) was he born in?	What was this person doing most of the week?	Is he doing any of the following work?	Is he doing any of the following work?	Is he doing any of the following work?	What kind of work was he doing?	
1502	105	No	No	No	No	Livingston, Edward	Head	M	33	Mar				Ill	Wk				44	Original works maintenance State University
1503	106	No	No	No	No	Livingston, Martha	Wife	F	33	Mar				Ill	H	Yes			16	Classroom Government
1504	107	No	No	No	No	Livingston, George	Son	M	7	Mar				Georgia 1948	Wk				40	Librarian State University

FOR ALL PERSONS										FOR PERSONS 14 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER										
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Person and spouse number	Is head of household?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Is on a non-profit basis?	Name of head of household	Relationship to head of household	Sex	Age	Married	Divorced	Widowed	Single	What State (or foreign country) was he born in?	What was this person doing most of the week?	Is he doing any of the following work?	Is he doing any of the following work?	Is he doing any of the following work?	What kind of work was he doing?	
1505	87	No	No	No	No	Bloom, George R.	Head	M	35	Mar				Illinois	Wk				44	Researcher in electronics State University
1506	88	No	No	No	No	Bloom, Marion K.	Wife	F	29	Mar				Illinois	H	No	No	No		
1507	89	No	No	No	No	Bloom, Robert H.	Son	M	5	Mar				Illinois 1943	Wk					
1508	90	No	No	No	No	Bloom, Fred B.	Daughter	F	4	Mar				Illinois 1943	Wk				20	Teaching art State University



top: 112 Stanage in Champaign, 1985

bottom left: Martha and Sherry, December 1950

bottom right: Sherry Renée, January 1951





above: Joseph and Mathilda in April 1951—below: Joseph, Mathilda and Sherry in April 1951





top: Sherry and Joseph in April 1951

bottom left: Sherry with Martha on her 2nd birthday, June 1951

bottom right: Sherry with Joseph and pony on her 2nd birthday, June 1951



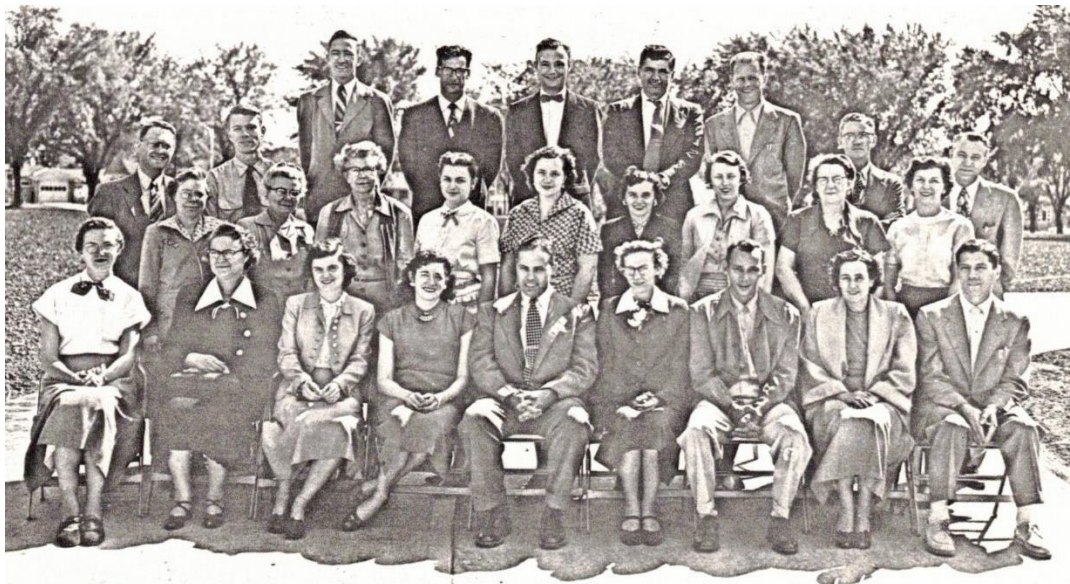


top left: 1010 West Stoughton in Urbana, 1985

top right: Sherry combing Joseph's hair at Stoughton, December 1952

left: Joseph and three dark-eyed ladies, August 1954

bottom: The Urbana Junior High School faculty<sup>217</sup>, May 1954



<sup>217</sup> Martha is seated fourth from left; Esther Ewald is leftmost in the middle row; Annie Mlinarich is fourth from right in the middle row.



## 17

*The Little Postscript*

Thornburn's days as a junior high school came to an end in 1953; Martha would say that it had been "built on quicksand"<sup>218</sup>. A brand-new Urbana Junior High opened its doors, and among those hired to teach English there was Annie Mlinarich<sup>219</sup> of Fairmont City, Illinois, near East St. Louis. She bunked in with Martha and Sherry at their new apartment on Stoughton Street, and they hit it off so well that Annie remained for an extended time.

That same year the Urbana Federation of Teachers was organized, electing Martha as its first executive secretary. "Who would have believed I'd ever come to this—Unions! Politics!!!" she wrote her parents. "It seems I'm up for vice-president of the Teachers Union for next year. I said I'd accept on the one condition that I would not automatically go up for president the year after. Can you imagine me president of a labor organization? I wouldn't know beans from buttons."

When the next year rolled around, Martha duly took office as union president.

(It might be mentioned that she loved Eve Arden's radio/television show *Our Miss Brooks*, but Joseph disliked it because it "made fun of teachers." He much more approved of *The Halls of Ivy*, which starred Ronald Colman and Benita Hume and was set at Ivy College in Ivy, U.S.A.)

In the spring of 1954, Annie Mlinarich invited Martha to come see an old-fashioned Croatian wedding in Fairmont City. After the ceremony Annie appealed to her brother Nick to take Martha to the train station. Brother Nick retorted that this would interfere with a softball game he was to play in, but even so "he graciously dropped me off," as Martha put

---

<sup>218</sup> The school at 101 N. McCullough was demolished in 1971; its annex would be utilized as a community activities center until being closed and condemned in 1992.

<sup>219</sup> Anna/Ann Mlinarich (1926-2011) was the fourth child of Mark Mlinarich (1885-1941, a native Croatian) and Julia Labant (1897-1946, a native Slovenian) who'd emigrated in 1907 and 1913 respectively, marrying in 1916. Their son Nick Charles Mlinarich was born on December 4, 1918. In 1920 the family lived outside East St. Louis, where Mark had a grocery store. By 1930 they'd moved a couple miles northwest to Fairmont City, where Nick had been joined by Helen (1920-1976), Mary (1923-2017), Annie, and Josephine (born c.1929). All four girls lived with their parents in 1940; in 1950 all but Annie lived with brother Nick. The name Mlinarich (*Mlinarić*, *Mlinarics*) is derived from *mlinar* ("miller" in Croatian, Slovenian, and Serbian).

it. The following autumn Nick visited Urbana on weekends, at first to see Annie and attend Illini football games, then to call on Martha. “He liked me because I wasn’t an expensive date,” she would say.

In appearance and approach Nick Mlinarich was cut from much the same cloth as the new senator from Arizona, Barry Goldwater: dark-eyed, with prematurely white hair—“We thought he was an old man the first time we saw his picture,” Mathilda would remark—loud, blunt, never shy about letting you know what was on his mind, and (unlike Martha) gifted with the knack of going into a room full of strangers, being perfectly at ease, and striking up acquaintances left and right. At the age of thirty-six he’d been laid off as a machinist in a Milwaukee zinc plant; applying for a Civil Service exam, Nick was deemed ineligible since he was over thirty-five, and his indignant letter about this to *The Machinist* magazine eventually made the *Congressional Record*<sup>220</sup>. Nick had gone through a marriage and divorce and had two daughters living with their mother in Milwaukee<sup>221</sup>.

At a Halloween party in October 1954 Martha, Annie, and friend Pearl Gold parodied Zsa Zsa, Eva and Magda Gabor, appearing as the “Less” sisters—Aim, Hope, and Use. Martha came as Aim, and from then on Nick called her “Amy.”

Though an inexpensive date, Martha was a high-flying one: during the summer of 1954 she and nine other Illinois schoolteachers had received hands-on training on how to pilot a plane<sup>222</sup>, so they could better discuss the “air age” in their classrooms. On July 24th Martha wrote her parents concerning her adventures in the skies:

Now I know how a caged bird must feel, looking out through the bars at wispy clouds floating by, and wondering “what am I doing way down here? ...” When we got back from the flight to Chicago I was so keyed up I couldn’t sleep for hours... We watched the sun set from an altitude of about 3000 feet, and as we finally turned our nose toward home, we saw Venus to our right in the West, and Mars shining out from the North East, almost close enough to reach out and pull from the sky. As the sun

---

<sup>220</sup> *The Machinist* for April 7, 1955 recapped the chain of events that led to the U.S. House of Representatives outlawing age limits on hiring for government jobs.

<sup>221</sup> Nick’s first wife was Ann Julia Kubala Fedeler (1919-2017). They had a son, Nick Mlinarich Jr., who lived only one day in 1939, and daughters Lynne Mlinarich (born 1941) and Maureen Mlinarich Boone (born 1943). In 1950 Nick worked as a lathe operator for a wholesale tool manufacturer in Fairmont City.

<sup>222</sup> This had been an ambition of Martha’s as early as 1935, when she’d written “If my plans for teaching fail, I think I’ll take up flying.”

sank out of sight, the constellations began to appear, and the city below us burst into bloom as lights were turned on. Route 45 was a luminous ribbon, and small towns looked like sparkling jewels...

Jesse [Stonecipher, Martha's instructor] had even called in to our tower for clearance to land when I finally realized we were back, and I was so overwhelmed, I simply wailed "But I don't *want* to go down!" And bless his heart, even though he did laugh at me, Jesse said O.K. we'd cruise around awhile longer. But if I was going to keep him up there, I'd have to do the work, not he. So he adjusted my pedals, swung the wheel over to my side of the cockpit, and I followed [Route] 101 almost to Bloomington, turning and banking to get a better look at this and that below... Is it any wonder I couldn't sleep when I got home?

Until yesterday I thought that was about the most thrilling day I had ever had. Until yesterday... [when instructor Ralph Green] said very casually "I'll wait for you right here," and I suddenly realized this was it. I don't think I'll ever in my life experience the same sensation I had when, 1100 feet over a golf course, I glanced back over my shoulder and realized finally that it was me and my plane all alone in the clouds. I shot two landings by myself, and then it was 10:30 and time to go in. I got my log book signed, signed the final flight sheet, and felt like crying, I wanted so badly to go up again...

At this time Martha had still not learned how to drive a car. Even after having gotten her crossed eyes corrected by surgery, she'd never had truly binocular vision; yet this was a minor handicap when it came to flying a plane. (Martha knew it was time to lower the landing gear when she could see the grass below from the cockpit.)

---

**1955 June 11.** Hello my Sweet! It is a long time since I chatted with you... But today is a very important day, you are six years old. And you are such a sweet and serious little girl for your age. Everyone tells us how mature you are for a six year old. But no wonder, your Mother, your Uncle George, and all their friends are treating you like a grown up person, and talk to you that way, so you really are like a ten year old at least. You are visiting with your Grandfather and me for two weeks now and we are so glad to have you here with us. You

are no trouble at all and a very nice company for Grandpa especially. Tomorrow, Sunday, we are planning a big birthday party for you...

**1955 June 25.** You had a lovely party for your birthday... On the 17th, your Mama, Uncle George, and Nicky came in to pick you up and take you back home. I went along too for the weekend to be at the wedding, because your Mama and Nick got married on the 18th of June, 1955. She looked so lovely and very happy on that day, but so did you Sherry. You had on a very pretty nylon dress, pale pink with roses on it, and you stood up next to Nicky and Mommy holding the ring on a small silk cushion and looked on so solemnly, listening to every word. I didn't know whom should I look at, you or your Mother, you both looked just lovely, and I loved you both so much.

Well I am home in Chicago again with just Grandpa, and our house seems so quiet without you my darling. But we are hoping you could come again for a visit very soon, and stay for a couple of weeks before the summer is over. I am saving your sixth birthday cards for a souvenir. I guess we won't make another [party] till you graduate from the eighth grade. I hope we all will be well, and living, to celebrate it with you. So long Sherry, my sweet and darling granddaughter. You don't know how much your grandparents love you, and always looking forward for the day you could visit with us here in Chicago. Lovingly—

*Grandma.*

Martha and Nick were married at the Holshousers's house by Arnold Westwood, Phil Schug's successor as Unitarian minister in Urbana. Nick joined Martha and Sherry at the Stoughton Street apartment and began attending college to get an industrial education degree, so as to find a job teaching high school shop.

Friends who knew both Martha and Nick predicted their marriage would not last four weeks, and the Mlinariches's first year together was indeed a rough one. Nick was a stickler when it came to punctuality; when Martha was ten minutes late after a teachers's meeting, she and Nick went tightlippedly home without exchanging a word between them. Quarrels were not settled by being talked out, only with the passage of time. Finally Nick forced Martha to break her bottled-up silences and clear the air. Living with him taught her the "when and how" of dealing with people; living with her taught him to give a little and take things easier. And their marriage lasted longer than four weeks.

To a great extent Sherry was afraid of Nick, what with his being loud and strict and wanting everything right-this-minute, shouting at the scared-to-death Sherry if she were late. But certainly Nick was more open than Martha, who still tended to clam up rather than raise her voice; and “If there was anything I wanted to do that was *fun*,” Sherry would say, “I’d ask him rather than Mother.” In time her stepfather would evolve from Nicky to Poppa<sup>223</sup>.

Whatever else happened, there were always Grandpa and Grandma to turn to.

**1955 August.** It seems my darling that each time I chat with you lately, is farther apart. I don’t know why, except probably old age creeps up on me, and I get more forgetful each day. You were with us here in Chicago almost all of August which we both or rather all three of us enjoyed it a lot. You are so grown up my dearest and don’t act like a baby anymore. Grandfather was teaching you “arithmetic” and marveled at how fast you are learning, and love it too. Soon you will start first grade in Urbana close to where you live, at Lincoln school<sup>224</sup>. You are looking forward to it, and we all are very sure you will be a first class student just like your Mother and Uncle George were... So here is lots of good wishes for you too, my dearest little granddaughter, to be a happy student. We all love you, more than I can express it, but you feel it don’t you my dear?

The previous spring Joseph and Mathilda had left 1553 Devon after twenty-three years of living and working there. With \$10,000 saved over the last decade they bought a house at 4505 N. Western Avenue, south of their old neighborhood, just northwest of Welles Park. The upstairs apartment was rented to a tenant and the new fur shop was downstairs, “on the main floor with more and better facilities for storing, repairing, and remodeling your furs,” as Joseph informed his customers. “We will pick up and deliver, and will do everything possible to keep your furs in the best condition.”

**1956 August.** My Darling Baby! You were here with us for one month during vacation... You weren’t very enthusiastic about going home, but we both tried our best to show why you have to, and in the end it was all OK. I am writing on this paper which isn’t too clean and easy to do. But I wanted to save it for you my dear. This is your very first [multiplication]

---

<sup>223</sup> Martha took the surname Mlinarich, sometimes using “Lewis” as a middle name; Sherry was not adopted and retained the surname Lewis, which would be passed down to her own daughter in 1977.

<sup>224</sup> Urbana’s Lincoln Elementary at 305 N. Lincoln Ave. was closed in 1972 and demolished in 1983.

studies Grandpa did with you. You will start second grade next September. You have a wonderful mind Sherry, you learned this multiplication table very quick and easy. But the best part was that you enjoyed it very much and Grandpa was real happy to do it with you...

“He taught me so much,” Sherry Renée would say. “I learned time and letters and the continents... and math. I wonder if he was ever disappointed because I didn’t enjoy it the way he did.” Of the house on Western Avenue, Sherry remembered “there were bars on the windows, but it was nice. Again, the store and shop were in front and they lived in back. And the big bear<sup>225</sup> stood in the corner of the store, with a piece of wood where one thumb should have been. And a basement full of fur coats and moth balls. Grandma had a garden in back. There were four-o’clocks and mint. Grandpa taught me how to play chess out there before I’d even started school. I used to help him in the shop too. I’d nail the skins down so he could spray and stretch them. And look at all the kinds of furs and patterns of lining. I used to very carefully print his name on the tags to hang on the coats. He’d let me use his lifetime-guaranteed fountain pen with the white dot on it and I’d feel so proud and important to be really helping him.”

Every evening Joseph would have a Pilsner glass of beer, offering Sherry the last few drops as he had with Martha when she was a child. One time at a big family dinner he gave Sherry a little glass of “golden something,” telling her it was wine. Not thinking she would like the taste, she drank it and did—and later found out it was apple juice. (One of the very few instances on record of Joseph consciously uttering a falsehood.) Despite such teasing, “he never laughed at me the way adults often do at children. Most people don’t realize that a child can really feel that, but he did. I used to sit on the back of his green chair and brush his hair for hours. But I always knew not to disturb him when he read the paper or watched the news with John Cameron Swayze. He always got the *Chicago Tribune* and when I was old enough he’d give me a nickel and stand at the doorway to watch while I ran as fast as I could to the news stand at the corner and back with the paper...”

---

Back in 1950 when George visited Chicago and encountered older relatives or his parents’s friends, they were curious why he was “always going to school.” Why did he not

---

<sup>225</sup> Called *Muszka bácsi*, “Uncle Russian (Muscovite).”



get a Real Job and “do art” on weekends? His graduate degree program was for a Master of Fine Arts with an art history option, and since his studies were mostly tutorials he had time to work as both a teaching assistant in Sculpture and a “reader-grader” in Art Appreciation, where he occasionally delivered lectures for Frank Roos<sup>226</sup>.

By early 1951 his wartime savings and GI Bill money had begun to run low. “Poor George,” he captioned a photo of himself: “No money/NO job in sight/Et al.” Rather as a surprise to everyone (himself not least) George was “backing into the teaching profession,” or at any rate trying to; but job prospects in his field, the history of art and architecture, were less than abundant. Not much was available in museum work, and though George applied at a wide range of schools, there were very few teaching positions to be had. This was the effect of the Korean War upon higher education: the draft had resumed with no college deferments, and universities were cutting back staffwise.

He received his master’s degree in June 1951, and the University of Oklahoma expressed interest in someone able to teach both sculpture and art history; but they lacked the budget to hire George. He’d begun to wonder whether he’d better find work (and fast) in a craft such as carpentry, when news came of a possible opening at the University of Kansas City<sup>227</sup>. Borrowing train fare from Joseph, George arrived in Kansas City, Missouri, on July 5th. By mid-afternoon he was hired as an instructor, and before the day was over he visited the grand and impressive William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art<sup>228</sup>. It was actually closed that day but a compassionate guard took pity on George’s weebegone expression, and soon he was shown some of the collections by Registrar Ross Taggart. “There began one of those magical experiences which are truly unforgettable,” George was to recall:

We went through an almost totally dark building, and periodically Ross would switch on a light and wondrous things literally burst upon my vision. That is how I first saw Caravaggio’s *St. John the Baptist*, the *Head of Hammurabi*, little *Methethy*, and

---

<sup>226</sup> George’s master’s thesis was *The International Exposition: An Index to American Art of the Nineteenth Century*. He was also creating sculptures of his own, such as a large-scale concrete cast statue in collaboration with Alice Adelle Boatright (1918-2007), who would spend the next twenty years as a biological illustration specialist at the University of Illinois’s School of Life Sciences.

<sup>227</sup> The full story of “How I Came to KCMO (twice) and Why I Stayed at UMKC,” told in George’s own words, can be found at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Navigations\\_Two-Essays.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Navigations_Two-Essays.htm).

<sup>228</sup> Formally renamed the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in 1983, but always referred to simply as “the Gallery” in George’s household.

Pilon's *St. Barbara*. And dozens upon dozens of others. Cezanne, Van Gogh, Hals and Rembrandt, period rooms, and treasuries of Oriental art, which I could only guess at, paraded before me, or rather I paraded before them in the darkened museum, illuminated room by room, like some sort of controlled theatrical event. The Nelson had begun collecting only twenty years earlier, and the results to date were to my fresh eye on that warm day the furnishings of a treasure house...

George returned to Chicago, marveling at having "been catapulted from the edge of despair to a situation far better than I dreamed I could attain... I thought I had hit the jackpot of good fortune." Joseph and Mathilda agreed; to have both children earning their living as teachers! And George doing so at a university! Certainly this *was* hitting the good-fortune jackpot.

But when George went back to Urbana to prepare his move to Kansas City he found a letter informing him that, in light of the Korean War, the United States Air Force was recalling him to active service. An attempt to arrange deferment was rejected by a colonel who'd been a professor at the University of Florida before himself being recalled; so George had to give up the Kansas City job. At which point the University of Oklahoma wrote to say they would be able to budget a position after all, and was George still available?

At Randolph Air Force Base in Texas<sup>229</sup> it quickly became apparent that the World War II radar operators whose surnames began with A, B, and C were not adjusting well to flying in jet interceptors. Most of the other retreads, further down the alphabet, were consequently sent into a "pipeline" that shipped them to reactivated B-29s in Korea; but there was a shortage of qualified radar instructors *outside* the pipeline, at its beginning at Randolph Air Force Base. "A small clutch of us" happened to be available, those whose surnames began with D, E, and F—and among these was George.

So for over a year<sup>230</sup> he taught radar operation to airmen in Texas. Occasionally the instructors had to fly as a crew, to demonstrate their proficiency; tobacco smoke in the plane's close quarters gave George a constant throat inflammation that got treated with

---

<sup>229</sup> From which George sent a forlorn postcard to his niece: "This mail is for you. Uncle George thought you would like some mail all for Sherry. Uncle George misses you and would like to see you very much... I guess you are a very grown up girl now. Uncle George sends you two hugs, one on each side, and a kiss."

<sup>230</sup> At the end of 1951 George got a brief leave and spent it in Urbana and Chicago, where he watched his parents's new television with fascination.

various new medications, some causing dreadful side effects. His military career in fact culminated in the hospital, where he had a double hernia attended to.

George was discharged in January 1953 and decided to return home via Kansas City, so as to at least see the place a second time. He unwittingly wandered onto the KCU campus smack in the middle of what came to be known as “The Revolution,” when four deans quit over differences with the university president, five hundred students engaged in a mass boycott of classes, and finally the president himself resigned. Not till considerably later would George find out about any of this; at the time he simply went from office to office, being told that each person he wanted to see “wasn’t in,” with no indication why they were out or when they might return. Thoroughly annoyed, George left KCMO in a to-hell-with-them mood and went back to Urbana<sup>231</sup>.

Having put aside a year’s military pay, he was no longer desperate to find work; but neither did he want to live off his savings. So in March George took a job as draftsman at the University of Illinois’s Digital Computer Lab, and discovered that as a civil service employee he could return to school tuition-free. “From many aspects, going back to school for a Ph.D. seems to be a very wise choice,” he wrote his parents, “since it will complete my formal schooling while I am still young... If I do stay at Illinois for the Ph.D. then I can make arrangements to work and go to school. This is ideal... And of course I am looking for a teaching job. I might not be making two chairs to sit in, Dad, but it is a long bench.”

(One of Joseph’s maxims was “You mustn’t fall between two chairs.”)

When George mentioned he was thinking of getting himself a pocket watch since wristwatches interfered with his work as a draftsman, Joseph insisted he take the Omega that George had bought him in Jamaica.

After all, he said, if he had the original [Hungarian] watch he would have given me that. So why not this one, now? I carried that watch for years<sup>232</sup>, but it began to need repairs regularly. And it was expensive to maintain. Finally I put it away as a keepsake. It is perhaps the most telling relic of the curiously distant but close relationship I had with my troubled and disappointed father that I could ever have.

---

<sup>231</sup> Initially he stayed with Martha and Sherry; and Martha reported to her parents that “a stabilizing whirlwind in low gear has come to roost at 1010 [West Stoughton].”

<sup>232</sup> Keeping it on a chain that had belonged to *Jenka néni*.

At least he lived long enough to see me a university professor, married and with two sons. In those ways I had earned my Omega if not before.

The University of Illinois had no doctoral program in art history, but an unusual interdisciplinary program was set up for George in the Social Implications of Art in American History. “While technically I was pursuing a Ph.D. in history,” he would remark, “I was in fact doing something very strange in the context of that discipline.” Beginning in the fall of 1953, George had seven years to complete all the requirements for his doctorate. He took two seminar courses that semester and another two the following spring, working forty hours a week at the same time. All in all it was an exhaustive pace, though George found his job at the Digital Computer Lab more interesting than he had expected. In fact, as the months passed he was very tempted to switch fields and concentrate on computers.

But he continued trying to become an art historian, and in this he was aided by Allen Weller, who’d replaced Frank Roos as Head of the Art Department and was very good about recommending George for jobs. In the spring of 1954 he informed George of an opening for an art history teacher at the University of Nebraska and George applied, only to be told that the position had just been filled by a Mr. Fehl. This happened to be the same Mr. Fehl who’d taken the job at Kansas City that George had been obliged to give up in 1951.

“It was so tempting to bring the circle full around” that George immediately applied for the KCU vacancy. His not knowing about The Revolution delayed matters until he was put in touch with the new dean, John Barnett; and it wasn’t till the end of August that George returned to Kansas City “so I could play out the game to its conclusion.” Once there, he had to wait an hour for the detained Dean Barnett, who that very morning had injured his eye on a shrub while putting out the trash. A hideous summer heat wave was going on, and the lightweight summer suit George wore to his interview felt like heavy tweed. The whole KCU situation seemed not only less than comfortable but definitely unpromising; and George came away from the interview wondering why he should leave his home, his friends and family, the computer world, and free tuition for his doctoral program—all to come to Kansas City, Missouri.

However, he was nearly thirty now and did indeed want a chance to try his hand at teaching art history. Unlike 1951, George had certain conditions he wanted met before

taking a job at KCU; among them, he resolved that he should be offered no less than \$3600 a year. When the University's offer came, it was for \$3700, and George's other conditions were all satisfied. In September 1954 he at last began teaching as an instructor at the University of Kansas City.

There he became friends with dapper Al Varnado<sup>233</sup>, another ex-Air Force navigator who was the new Assistant Director of the KCU Playhouse. As Al's pal, George not only watched tryouts at the Playhouse but created a "dreadful expressionistic green nude" for the landlord's painting in *My Sister Eileen* and a "strange wooden nonrepresentational" sculpture for a play directed by Mort Walker<sup>234</sup>, who in the spring of 1955 asked George to design the set for *Don Giovanni*.

That summer he stayed in Urbana with the newlywedded Mlinariches<sup>235</sup>, building a small balsawood model of this set while continuing work on his doctorate. Returning to Kansas City in September, he was introduced by Mort Walker to a tall young woman with greenish eyes and auburn hair: "This is Mila Jean Smith, who has been abroad."

(She had just returned from a year in Europe on a Fulbright scholarship<sup>236</sup>.)

Mila Jean—whom most people called Jean or Jeanie, but whom George would mostly call Mila—was twenty-three, a native Kansas Citian and KCU alumnus who'd worked backstage on many Playhouse productions, appeared onstage in several (most notably as Mary in *Juno and the Paycock*), and incidentally participated in The Revolution's mass-class-boycott. Now helping with *Don Giovanni's* costuming, she and George were together quite a lot that autumn—first with the rest of the Playhouse crowd, then on their

---

<sup>233</sup> Alban Fordesh Varnado (1920-2015) hailed from Baton Rouge; served for seventeen years in the Air Corps/Air Force; and earned his bachelor's, master's, and doctorate from Louisiana State, to which he would return from KCU to teach for two decades. When I was a child he was "Uncle Al," and I assumed he was George's brother.

<sup>234</sup> Jones Morton Walker (1920-2002) was a co-founder of the Kansas City Lyric Opera and Missouri Repertory Theater, along with teaching and directing productions at KCU/UMKC. (He should not be confused with *Beetle Bailey* creator Mort Walker, who grew up in KCMO, worked for Hallmark, and attended the University of Missouri.)

<sup>235</sup> Whose household now included a dog called Mike who, when he wanted attention, would get into the car and blow the horn. After Mike died in 1956, he was succeeded by a tiny dog called Little Mike who shivered so pitifully during cold weather that he had to be dressed in Sherry's doll clothing.

<sup>236</sup> As related in "The Fulbright Year Abroad," part of *Arrived Safely No Catastrophes Yet Love Jean*, accessible at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Arrived\\_Safely.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Arrived_Safely.htm). Mila Jean was born on May 12, 1932; her family background, both paternal and maternal, is chronicled in great detail by *Fine Lineage: An Elongated Column of Family Trees Covering an Extensive String of Webpages*, at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/finelineage.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/finelineage.htm).

own. George found himself getting “clearly emotionally entangled” with this ebullient young woman, taller than himself and seven years his junior; she, as it happened, was getting entangled with *him*.

George returned to Urbana for the Christmas holidays and invited Mila Jean to join him there to see in the New Year. “Martha (my sister) and Nick (her husband) are standing by, full of eagerness. Sherry (my niece) will be with Grandpa and Grandma in Chicago all next week. This means there are two roll-away beds available. I’m on one—Sherry’s is open. But in the event this cozy, European-type informality is too much—Don and Marion Holshouser are standing by, also full of eagerness... Everyone is eager.”

Mila Jean stayed with the Holshousers, met George’s family, and saw in 1956 with George. “I certainly didn’t get down on one knee,” he would later remark, but by January he and Mila Jean decided to get married.

“Dearest Jean!” wrote Mathilda, “I wanted to tell you my dear, how happy we all are, to have you as a member of our family. But specially, Dad and I welcome you as a daughter with open arms. It sure took our boy a long time to find his girl. Thank Heaven he finally did find her, and that she is you.”

George and Mila Jean were married on May 26, 1956, at the All Souls Unitarian Church<sup>237</sup> in Kansas City. George’s family was unable to come (“We are standing up with you in Spirit,” Mathilda wrote) but on June 16th the newlyweds were again married, this time by Arnold Westwood at the Holshousers’s in Urbana. Mathilda and the Mlinariches were present on this occasion, and “there was a reading, ‘Marriage’ from *The Prophet*,” Sherry would recall, “after which they promptly shared a single glass of champagne.”

During the summer of 1956 they sublet Arnold Westwood’s house in Urbana, where they had a “thesis corner” with two separate tables; George continued work on his doctorate and Mila Jean on her master’s thesis. In August they returned to Kansas City, moving into an apartment at 4112 Walnut north of the KCU campus. George was now an assistant professor and Mila Jean discovered she too had been promoted: the frog test’s results were positive, with the ultimate result due to arrive the following March.

---

<sup>237</sup> George had formally joined the Unitarian church in the spring of 1955, following a rollover car accident the previous December that left him with bruises and a wrecked Oldsmobile. George would resign a few years later rather than actively oppose what he considered an impractical plan to build a new All Souls Church in Kansas City MO; yet he still often attended services there, being a great admirer of pastor Raymond Bragg.



It made its presence increasingly felt in various ways, earning the working name of “Thumper.” George and Mila Jean got a Baby’s Diary and prepared to begin chronicling; Thumper had other ideas and stayed put where it was. The diary’s first entry was made on March 20, 1957, when Mila Jean disgruntledly wrote: “Due, but that’s all.” Not till April Fool’s Day would labor pains commence, and on April 2nd the thoroughly-overdue Thumper arrived with a full head of hair and a disgruntled expression of his own.

Three days later the KCU *News* announced that “the latest Production announced at the Playhouse last Wednesday was Paul Stephen Ehrlich”—the Little Postscript.

---

Sherry Renée now had her “first first cousin,” and mightily resented his existence. All the treasures her longtime bachelor Uncle George owned that Grandpa’d said *she* would someday inherit, such as the twenty-four volume set of Mark Twain’s Complete Works, were now going to go to This Boy<sup>238</sup>. Grandpa and Grandma had This Boy for a grandson, and it seemed inevitable to Sherry that she would be relegated to second place. On Memorial Day Grandpa and Grandma even went to Kansas City to see and be photographed with This Boy, and Grandpa almost never left Chicago nowadays except for the annual vacation to St. Petersburg!

But Sherry need not have worried; she hadn’t been the Little Princess for nearly eight years for nothing. In July the Mlinariches came out to Kansas City and a picture was taken of Paul Stephen in Sherry Renée’s lap. She had on her prettiest smile and he a “what the hell’s going on now?” goggle.

So by mid-1957 Joseph and Mathilda could look about and see both their children teaching for a living, both married, and both with children of their own. The Ehrlichs’s splendid dream of achieving an all-around Good Life had apparently come true; and the future seemed very bright.

---

<sup>238</sup> I would indeed be presented with this set in 1975, despite having managed to topple its bookcase trying to extract *Tom Sawyer* back in June 1968. At the time George had gone to Los Angeles to visit the seriously-ill Mathilda, and gotten entangled in a massive security clampdown after the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. When Mila Jean phoned him to report my mayhem, George snapped “What do you expect *me* to do about it?”



top left: *Muszka bácsi*, 1950 — top right: “Aim Less” and her daughter: Halloween 1954

bottom left: 4505 N. Western Avenue, 2004 — Copyright © 2004 by Matthew C. Ehrlich

bottom right: Grandma and Sherry at the new house on Western, May 1955





top left: Joseph, Mathilda and Sherry, June 1955



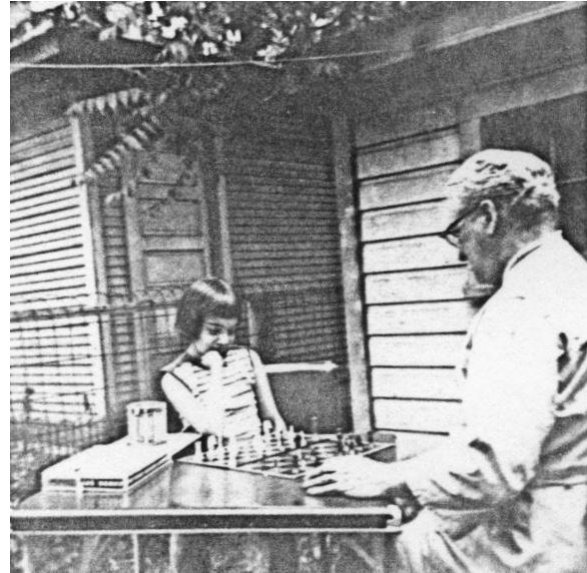
top right: Nick Mlinarich, Sherry and Martha: June 18, 1955

bottom: George, Mathilda and Sherry Renée join Nick and Martha on their wedding day: June 18, 1955





top left: Joseph and Mathilda in Kenosha, March 1956



top right: Sherry playing chess with Joseph, June 1958

below: Nick Mlinarich and his Camel, circa 1958







top left: George sampling bourbon, July 1950 — top center: George sculpting wood, July 1950

top right: “Poor George: Thesis to Do / No Money / No Job in Sight,” April 1951

below left: George sculpting stone, February 1951 — below right:

bottom left: The Omega watch in 2016 — bottom right: The University of Kansas City





top left: Mila Jean Smith abroad in Bristol, February 1955

top right: George and Mila Jean, April 1956

bottom left: George and Mila Jean on their first wedding day: May 26, 1956

bottom right: George and Mila Jean on their second wedding day: June 16, 1956

L to R: Nick, Mila Jean, George, Martha and Mathilda with Sherry







top left: Mila Jean in the squirrel stole Joseph made for her, April 1957

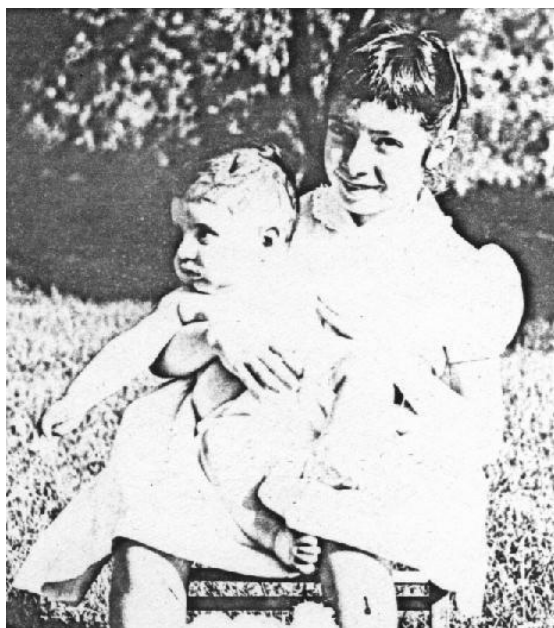


top right: Paul Stephen with his four grandparents, May 1957

L to R: Francis See (Frank) Smith, Ada Louise Smith, Mathilda, P.S., Joseph

bottom left: Paul Stephen and Sherry Renée: July 1957

bottom right: Sherry in costume with Grandma: June 1957



## 18

*Fortitude and Delicacy*

After the Soviet Union crushed Hungary's rebellion in November 1956, thousands fled the country; one family, the Luksanders<sup>238A</sup>, eventually came to Urbana, Illinois. They had escaped in a novel fashion: Mr. Luksander brought his pregnant wife across the border on a motorcycle, then went back and rescued his nine- and three-year-old daughters, piling them both on the motorcycle with him. The Luksanders were almost penniless when they made it to Urbana, and soon were joined by a newborn third daughter.

The Catholic Church sponsored a certain number of refugees, promising them work and housing till they could adjust to America and get to their feet. The sponsoring committee discovered that Martha was a native of Kolozsvár/Cluj and could still understand spoken Hungarian quite fluently. (George sometimes needed to have a phrase repeated before he could figure it out.) Martha befriended the Luksanders and became their interpreter, accompanying them to supermarkets and Woolworths where they would look at every object on the counters, amazed and intrigued by the plenty everywhere in the United States.

However, there was not plenty of room at the Mlinariches's apartment, crowded as it was with three people and two dogs<sup>239</sup>. In November 1957 they moved to a house in "the suburbs": Fithian, a rural community some fifteen miles east of Urbana. "Oh, what bliss!" Martha wrote her parents. "This place is beyond description, and we resent having to leave it tomorrow to go to school."

---

<sup>238A</sup> Frank Luksander (1924-2015) and Elizabeth Kladler Luksander (1926-2002) of Sopron (Ödenburg), Hungary, where Frank—a radio engineer—had erected a jamming beacon to hinder Soviet military movements. The Luksanders brought daughters Elizabeth and Edie to Illinois, where they were joined by three more children: Kathleen, Frank and Louis.

<sup>239</sup> Mike (no longer so Little) and Gypsy. In Fithian they were joined by Wimpy the raccoon, Caspar the lamb, and June Bug about whom Sherry wrote her grandparents: "I have had my wish come true. I have a beautiful black *horse!*... She is 23 years old!"

**1957 November 28.** “Thanksgiving day.” My Darling Sherry! You and your parents were here for the day, we hadn’t seen you for three months now... Somehow you are getting to be so grown up, and smart too. You helped Grandpa do a lot of work, writing out a storage list... You also brought your school papers to show how well you are doing in your new school in Fithian. Every page shows the mark a 100. We are so proud of you darling, and so’s your Mother and Nicky. You were wearing a T-shirt with Illinois and an Indian head on front. Nicky bought that for you as a surprise with a date 19-??? Grandpa figured it out, it will be 1966 when you will be old enough to enter the University of Illinois. Hope we all will be here to enjoy that date with you my sweet... So long my dearest, till next time, we are planning a Christmas reunion with you all and George, Jean, and Paul at your house. Till then all our love to you from us both.

Just after Christmas, George and Mila Jean brought Paul to Urbana<sup>240</sup> to visit the Holshousers (“Paul charming, but schedule shot to hell,” was entered in the Baby’s Diary). Then Joseph and Mathilda came down from Chicago and they all went out to Fithian to stay with the Mlinariches. This was the first and, as it turned out, the only so complete an Ehrlich family gathering to ever take place.

In May 1958 Martha sent Joseph the results of Sherry’s Stanford-Binet intelligence test, showing her reading at a ninth-grade level. “The enclosed little chart should make you very happy,” Martha wrote, “and proud enough to pop a few vest buttons. If you’re not wearing a vest, I’ll wait till you put one on... By the way—are you planning to teach her algebra this summer? I hope not...”

**1958 June 21.** My Dearest Sherry! Your parents picked you up today and took you home again after a three weeks vacation with us here in Chicago. Darling I have to tell you what a wonderful time we all had together. We took you to see the Adler Planetarium, Grandpa took you to see the Science & Industry Museum and the Field Museum too... Grandpa gave you \$2 for your birthday, and told you to buy what you wanted with it. So we had lots of fun, you and I went to shop in a toy shop. After a long time, you chose a set of chess game, and of all things, a cap pistol. But I let you buy it, because we want always for you to be a

---

<sup>240</sup> Via Ozark Airlines with me sleeping the entire way in George’s arms, my head “like a bowling ball” on George’s shoulder.

happy child. I never let your Mommie or Uncle George buy any, when they were small, but I let you, even though I don't approve of children playing with guns... Grandpa took you fishing and you caught one little perch, but it made you just as happy as if it would have been a real big fish, and Grandpa was just as happy you could catch anything, it's hard to fish in Lake Michigan, the fish stay very deep down in the water.

Nick earned his industrial education degree in 1958, but he and Martha were not allowed to both teach in the Urbana school system. Moreover, Nick lacked certain credits and his teaching credentials were therefore limited. The first place to make him a firm job offer was Mojave, California; Nick accepted it and the Mlinariches prepared to move west.

Coincidentally, the extended family was doing likewise. After Markus Temmer's death in January 1956, his son Ernie had sold the laundry business in Wisconsin, got himself and wife Ruth and their children settled in southern California, then persuaded his mother Margaret to move there too. By 1958 the others followed: Rose and Béla Ruhig, their daughter Evelyn with husband Albert Sessler and their kids, Ted and Nan Ruhig and theirs.

Joseph and Mathilda would be the last to leave Chicago, but they had a different direction in mind. St. Petersburg, Florida, had been their haven and vacation spot for over twenty-five years, and long ago they'd decided to retire there in due time.

**1958 July 27.** My Dearest Sherry and her Parents! We just got home from Fithian seeing you all and for the day before you are leaving Illinois to go to live in California. It was a lovely day together, but oh, when the time came to say goodbye, it was a sorry affair. We too left feeling very sad, thinking how far away you'd be from us. Even though we didn't see you too often while here, we still could get together four or five times in a year. Now who knows how long we will have to wait till we see our little Princess?... It took all my willpower to keep my tears from spilling out, and I sure cried on the way home. My darling children I do hope you will all be happy in your new home, and you Sherry will find a lot of new good friends there. We both love till it hurts. *Your Grandparents.*

Nick took to Mojave and the desert atmosphere very quickly, but his womenfolk decidedly did not. Sherry never would: "There's nothing GREEN out here!" was her initial reaction, and it was not to change. As for Martha, when her first days in Mojave featured 85 m.p.h. winds blowing semis off the roads, she responded with: "Let me out of this place!! I

want to GO HOME!!!”

The local high school’s junior high wing was not yet finished in 1958, so there was no teaching position available for Martha. Principal Tom Kelly<sup>241</sup>, who’d hired Nick to teach shop, gave Martha a job working half-days in the high school office; the other half-days she worked in the elementary school office. By October she’d adjusted somewhat to the desert: “So far, the L.A. weather reports have nothing to do with Mojave,” she wrote her parents. “We definitely have no trace of smog, and though it is summer weather, it’s not a bit unpleasant and evenings are wonderful. The only hitch to our staying here permanently is the California philosophy of Education. Things may get better in our school, but it’s still too early to tell. Maybe by mid-semester we’ll know whether we stay here, try another town in California, or try another state.”

Martha would witheringly define the California Philosophy of Education as “Pass the kids on—no challenge.” And Nick (who’d come home from University of Illinois classes “bitching about the tripe they came out with concerning teaching”) went to war with it after he found boys making brass knuckles and switchblade knives in the Mojave High shop. Hoodlumism was a major problem, and not just among boys; certain girls “with razor blades in their hair” were conducting a reign of terror over other students.

How was juvenile delinquency dealt with at Mojave? “The administration never did beans, *ever*—the teachers did it all!” Martha was to snort. She made an exception of her friend Tom Kelly, who tried his best; but in the Mojave shop it was Nick who ended the Reign of Terror with his own form of brass knucks: flunking *everybody* one semester, an action almost without precedent and completely contrary to the California Philosophy of Education. And despite a storm of protests, Nick stuck to his guns.

“He could outshout anybody in that school, anyway,” Sherry would observe<sup>242</sup>.

In the summer of 1959 the Mlinariches revisited the Midwest, where Martha re-encountered humidity. After that she wanted nothing more than to return to Mojave, and

---

<sup>241</sup> Thomas P. Kelly would resign as Mojave High’s Principal in 1977, telling the Bakersfield *Californian* that “contrary to published reports,” this was *not* related to a walkout by Mojave students in protest of the school district’s dropping a regional occupational program.

<sup>242</sup> That first year in Mojave, Sherry “scored so high, and [had] so much poise,” she was skipped from fourth grade to fifth. Her cousin Paul Stephen would later skip second and his brother Matthew would skip first; all three skips being of questionable benefit to the children involved.

from then on it would be *her* desert. That September the Mlinariches moved to a ranch house at 8125 Nipa Avenue in California City, a grandiosely-named new community about fifteen miles northeast of Mojave<sup>243</sup>. The high school's east wing was completed by this time and Tom Kelly hired Martha to teach junior high science. Joseph captioned a photo of his daughter, back in the classroom, as "My favorite teacher."

---

"Erratic behavior during the day," went the entry in Paul Stephen's diary for November 28, 1958. "Very active—alternates charm with brattiness."

What with teething, temper tantrums, and toilet training, life with Paul had all the intensity of Wagnerian opera. This did not ease things<sup>244</sup> for Mila Jean or especially George, who was unhappy at KCU but had decided not to seek another job until completing his Ph.D. And he was struggling to do this, wading through the necessary preliminaries while keeping up continual enrollment at the University of Illinois. George had just sent off the current term's \$80 check<sup>245</sup> in May 1959 when a financial crisis overtook his family.

They had perhaps ten dollars left in the bank. Bills and debts were straining George's limited income but had to be promptly attended to; that was a lesson drummed into him by his parents. He did not have tenure at KCU, so his job there—however unsatisfactory incomewise and opportunitywise—was by no means guaranteed. Mila Jean did not have an outside job, there being "more than enough to cope with" at home with Paul<sup>246</sup>. George had little more than a year left to complete his doctorate; the Ehrlichs's old refrigerator chose Memorial Day weekend to give up its ghost; and the family was left "really in a don't-know-which-way-to-turn" situation. (Paul would later claim that at this time, when his parents read him "Hansel and Gretel" and came to the part about abandoning the children in the woods, they got a dreamy look in their eyes.)

Then the telephone rang. It was Homer Wadsworth of the Kansas City Association of Trusts and Foundations, getting back to George a year after he'd applied for a small grant.

---

<sup>243</sup> In California City the no-longer-Little Mike ran off with a pack of feral desert dogs.

<sup>244</sup> In August 1958 the Ehrlichs moved from their apartment to a little bungalow at 4310 Highland.

<sup>245</sup> Almost \$840 in 2023 dollars.

<sup>246</sup> Mila Jean did receive her master's degree in June 1957, and appeared the next two seasons in a couple of KCU Playhouse productions directed by Al Varnado: as Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* (May 1958) and Dorimène in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (March 1959).



Wadsworth offered him a “discretionary gift” of \$500.

“Even now I get a strange feeling when I think about it,” George would say long afterward. “How did he know that I was at the edge of financial chaos, filled with despair, wondering what next to do? Or was it pure coincidence? I never had the nerve to ask; some things are best left as minor miracles unexplained...”

So, despite everything, Martha and George were each set and established by 1959, though both would have many more moments of doubt along their individual paths. These had become widely divergent in various ways, but both were teaching—with the likelihood they would be able to *continue* teaching—and this was a great and deep satisfaction to their parents, particularly Joseph.

He celebrated his sixty-fifth birthday on March 17, 1959, and promptly retired from the fur business he had diligently (if not wholeheartedly) pursued for over thirty years. Among his final productions was a miniature raccoon coat for Paul<sup>247</sup>, whimsically echoing George’s “collegiate” one in the 1920s. Joseph and Mathilda sold their house and shop on Western Avenue and also their furniture, partly to save the expense of moving it, but more because they wanted “nice new things” for their new home in Florida. The front pages of the *Chicago Tribune* that Joseph had collected over the decades were sold too, and he realized a small but tidy profit—as indeed he and Mathilda did from their fur business.

They had lived frugally all their lives, and now were going to enjoy themselves. By April they began a happy retirement in St. Petersburg, living comfortably and (thanks to the Nice New Things) a bit plushly in their little pink one-story house at 2451 36th Avenue North. Joseph had always anticipated the future by carefully providing for their Social Security; and though the elder Ehrlichs didn’t have money to burn, neither did they have financial worries.

Mathilda, outgoing as ever, quickly began joining clubs and making friends; Joseph fished and read the *St. Petersburg Times* and worked out algebraic equations to his heart’s content. “He loved to do math problems very much just for his enjoyment,” Mathilda would say. “It was his Hobby.” For awhile he tried getting her interested in it, but “I got tired of dealing in thousands when we had sixty dollars a month.”

---

<sup>247</sup> Joseph had earlier made Mila Jean a squirrel stole that I as a child dubbed “Soffffffit.”

And when people asked Joseph what he had done for a living, he told them he was a retired teacher<sup>248</sup>.

The only cloud on the Ehrlichs's horizon was having their family spread across the continent, but there was always the promise of vacation visits; the Mlinariches came for a stay every summer. Sherry enjoyed a wide range of recreations in St. Petersburg, from swimming in Tampa Bay to watching Joseph make fresh orange juice with a gadget on the garage wall, to fighting a fullscale paper-boat war with him on the dining room table. Joseph devised the various boats, including battleships complete with smokestacks. And sometimes he would share snippets of the past with his granddaughter, such as telling her about his little sister Eszter with the long blonde hair, and that Sherry reminded him of her.

In February 1960 Martha underwent a hysterectomy, and Mathilda journeyed to California to be with her. Mila Jean's mother wrote Joseph a letter of cheery commiseration and on February 24th he wrote back, having labored over this reply to George's in-laws, trying to weed out errors in grammar and spelling:

Dear Folks: It is a big relief to know that Martha's operation was a success. To tell you the truth I was very nervous but helpless, glad Matyu was with her. The next few days will be painful for Martha, but time is a good doctor.

If you feel blue and lonesome you really can appreciate your neighbors, who like to help you in every way. We have wonderful neighbors and we are like brothers and sisters. Our 36th Avenue blocks are occupied with old couples, no children. [On the] fourth of the month in every mailbox is a check from Uncle Sam. We all live in the present and talk about the past, our children, grandchildren, our sickness. Maybe you would not like this kind of life, but wait till you will be in our ages.

Right now everybody is talking, Matyu Ehrlich went to California and lonesome Joe maybe need some help. Yes I am very lonesome. I don't think our house is not so nice no more, the rooms are so big and cold. I wonder why??

It would be a good idea, to go to K.C. and wait for Mother there. If I could drive I would do it, but my driving days are over for a long trip. I would love to be

---

<sup>248</sup> This was a habit he had in common with his son's mother-in-law Ada Louise Ludeke Smith (1907-2011), who always called herself "an old social worker" though she'd only been one fulltime for the last half of 1929, between graduating from Miami University (in Ohio) and eloping with Francis See Smith (1896-1973).

with my grandson Paul, play with him, teach him [a] few tricks but this has to wait.  
When Matyu will see him, she can tell me all about him.

Excuse my shaky handwriting. Hope you can read this letter. Thank you for your letter it is a pleasure for me to read it. My love to you all. *Joe.*

In October 1960 George at last received his Doctor of Philosophy degree<sup>249</sup>. After all the years of pressure and frustration he sorely needed a sabbatical leave from KCU, and when the University awarded him tenure that fall he was able to arrange for one<sup>250</sup>. The Ehrlichs acquired a Volkswagen Beetle and took off on a trip to St. Petersburg in February 1961. Paul had begun to read (to a certain extent) by this time<sup>251</sup>, providing his parents with considerable relief in the ensuing quiet.

George brought his dissertation along to show Joseph. His father was not especially interested in its topic (the influence of technological development on 19th Century American pictorial art) but he turned *Technology and the Artist's* pages lovingly and wanted to keep it. Over the years Joseph had built up the status of “teacher” in his mind until it ranked with “movie star,” and this token of his son’s Ph.D. was a precious thing indeed. However, it was a considerable disappointment for Joseph to learn that George’s students did not stand up when he entered the classroom.

While George and Mila Jean explored Florida in the Beetle, Paul stayed with his grandparents in their little pink house. He took note that they used foreign words such as “cushion” when everybody knew the thing was called a “pillow.” He would recall watching Joseph fish, and making fresh orange juice with the garage-wall gadget (juice that Paul did not care for, since it had Things in it), and Joseph trying to teach him to whistle, and long fascinated periods of observing ant colonies in their back-garden hills, and being taken to the Tampa Bay beach and refusing to wade—certain that creatures with pincer-claws were going to assault his feet.

---

<sup>249</sup> Having spent the summer painstakingly typing a dissertation free not only from errors but erasures, drawing upon his experience as a draftsman to eliminate both.

<sup>250</sup> The full story of which can be found in *George's Navigations: The First Sabbatical (or Ten Thousand Miles in Four Months by Volkswagen Beetle Over Pre-Interstate Highways)*, at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Navigations\\_First-Sabbatical.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/Navigations_First-Sabbatical.htm)

<sup>251</sup> Also, with *The Shari Lewis Show* having premiered in October 1960, Paul now regarded his cousin (an automatic target of Lamb Chop jokes) as the OTHER Sherry Lewis.

One night Joseph and Paul were sitting on the front porch and Paul decided to start barking like a dog, which caused lights to go on in the house next door. “They think you are a little dog,” Joseph told him, and Paul stopped, and the lights went off, and Paul began barking again, and the lights went back on—and the two boys had a fine time until Mathilda came out, her hair in pins, to take them by their ears and put them to bed<sup>252</sup>.

**1961 March 12.** [*Martha to her parents*] Dearest folks: This is a nostalgic day somehow. I was thinking of Dad’s birthday, and reread bits here and there of my baby diary—of our troubles about my practicing, reading in bed too late at night, teasing George, and the stories you told us at night about L[aci,], P[ali] and S[anyi]. I’m sure you remember too. In a way it’s almost impossible for me to realize you’re 67, Dad, and I’m in my 40s. When I really think about you—not just “daily thinking”—I’m still in my early teens and you’re the one in the 40s. I wonder if you realize what wonderful parents you were, and how very much I have to thank you for...

Spring is coming rapidly to the desert. Our trees are budding, flowers beginning to bloom, and though the nights and early mornings are still cool, the days are warm and sunny. Two weeks more until Easter vacation. I need it, and so does Nicky. Then only ten more weeks, and another year is over... Happy birthday, Dad. We love you. *Martha.*

The troubles about Martha’s piano-practicing had not been in vain. At Mojave High School’s 1961 baccalaureate service she was able to provide selections from Sibelius, Beethoven, Chopin, the “Triumphal March” from *Aida*, and “Pomp and Circumstance.”

In the spring of 1962 Mathilda gathered together all the letters and memorabilia saved from Sherry’s first thirteen years, and put them together in a book.

**1962 May 1.** My Dearest Sherry: Sorry, this book isn’t as pretty looking as I would have liked to make it. But I’m hoping you’d like it, after you browse around in it just the same. Your dear Mother and I tried to record the most important happenings in your life ever since you were born. She sent me letters from Miami, and wherever you two lived, to tell us how you were developing, and I saved them all so when you got old enough to understand, you

---

<sup>252</sup> In August 1961 the elder Ehrlichs visited Kansas City, Grandpa bringing me an abacus (which I mostly shook like a maraca, to make the beads slide back and forth) and reading me an early *Flintstones* book, doing Wilma’s lines in a falsetto voice and needing Mathilda to come rub his neck afterward.

could see how much happiness you gave us all, and how much we loved you at all times. Now you will be thirteen years old this coming June, and old enough to enjoy reading about when you were a little baby. To your Grandpa you still are a baby, but I know better than that. I know you are a young lady, and soon you will be completely grown up. We just hope you will always be our darling Princess. We both love you more than ever, and miss you even more.

**1962 May 10.** Well, my Darling, your book's put together, I read nearly every page over, and enjoyed it so much to reminisce, and live over those lovely years with you. I can still see you as you were. Such a tiny and so sweet a baby, and what a joy to us all. When you and your parents moved out to California, and we here to Florida, it seemed we just couldn't stand the distance between us. We both missed your smiling face, and still do. Grandpa and I feel terribly lonesome for you, and Paul too. More so for you, because we know you longer, and saw you grow up. So now we just have to live on the memories of those days, and hope we could spend a few weeks each year with you. As the years speed by, you are growing up to be a fine girl. And your grandparents are growing old (gracefully I hope?). All I have to say my dearest, is that you be happy, and love your Mother as she deserves to be loved by you. She was a very understanding and a loving Mother to you. Hope you will think of us kindly too. We always will love you with all our heart. *Grandma and Grandpa.*

By the spring of 1962 rumors were circulating that the University of Kansas City, which seemed on the verge of going under fiscally, might become affiliated with the University of Missouri in Columbia. This would necessitate KCU's losing its autonomy and changing from a private to a public institution, but George decided such a merger could only bring improvement. He hadn't been enthusiastic about returning to KCU after his sabbatical; the Art Department "had not grown or improved one whit" in seven years, "and the university was seemingly going down into a whirlpool of a deteriorating fiscal crisis." George had felt there was no future for him there; now he resolved to stick around awhile longer.

There was also the fact that Mila Jean was again pregnant (this time hosting "the Little Stranger") with a resulting need to find a larger place to live. The Ehrlichs bought a two-story house at 5505 Holmes, a few blocks south of the University and Nelson

Elementary School<sup>253</sup>, where Paul began kindergarten that September.

Matthew Carleton Ehrlich was born on October 30, 1962, and George went to see his new son expecting another dark-visaged infant such as Paul had been. He was bemused to find a red-faced reddish-haired blueish-eyed boy, whose resemblance to Winston Churchill was stronger than the average baby's.

---

Meanwhile the tremors affecting Joseph's hands were growing worse. They had been diagnosed as a symptom of Parkinson's disease, a mysterious and baffling disorder; no one could say for certain what caused it, and there was no known cure. Many cases were traced back to 1918 and the Spanish influenza epidemic that had caused encephalitis, damaging nerve cells deep at the base of the brain. Its effects sometimes took forty years or more to show themselves, and such was the case with Joseph: the past had caught up with him.

Parkinson's disease was being intensely researched, and neurosurgeries of various experimental sorts—using radioactive beads, electric cautery, or proton rays—were showing some promise. One of the field's surgical pioneers was Dr. Irving S. Cooper, who had successfully treated *Life* photographer Margaret Bourke-White by injecting drops of alcohol that permanently deadened the brain's damaged cells. But Dr. Cooper now considered that method outmoded, and in July 1962 *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Look* magazines featured his new technique: cryogenic surgery, the rapid deep-freezing of a pea-sized portion of the brain. Dr. Cooper emphasized this could not cure Parkinson's or guarantee improvement; but his prospective patients were eager for any chance to relieve the uncontrollable shaking of their rigid, half-clenched hands. Prospects were carefully screened before being sent to Dr. Cooper, but he would operate on only seven out of every ten; he felt that sufferers should be treated early while they were still strong, and doubted that surgery would be beneficial for those deemed too old or too severely handicapped.

Joseph went to New York and was examined by Dr. Cooper, who told him there was no way that further deterioration could be prevented. Worse than this news was Joseph's seeing patients with advanced cases of Parkinson's: the disease, though not itself fatal, was progressively degenerative and made helpless invalids of its victims. They grew stiffer and

---

<sup>253</sup> At 5228 Charlotte: closed in 1981 and converted to the UMKC Conservatory of Music's Grant Hall by 1990.



more bent each year until they could not get up and walk alone, or dress or bathe or feed themselves unaided. Minds and memories were not notably affected, but faces would take on a wide-eyed unblinking stare with mouths half-open and drooling saliva.

“It was terrible,” Joseph said. “What I saw was terrible.”

He decided to sell the house in St. Petersburg and move Mathilda to Los Angeles, saying he would not be able to rest until he saw her standing between her cousins Margaret and Rose. Mathilda was reluctant to leave Florida, and it was not really necessary for her to be looked after and taken care of; but to Joseph the idea of turning to the family for support was by now the unquestionable key to survival.

Since their lifestyle hadn’t changed much in retirement, Mathilda had been able to continue saving from her housekeeping allowance, and she contributed these rainy-day reserves to help finance their departure. However, it was at this time that she discovered Joseph had deliberately destroyed many relics of the past. Gone now were most of the carefully-captioned photos brought from Kolozsvár, the pictures of comrades on the Eastern front, of relatives lost over time and in the Holocaust; gone too were old glass negatives Joseph had kept from his childhood in Győr, and the little silver wine cup he’d had in memory of his father.

<i>A mult idő nagy mezein,</i>	<i>On great fields of the past,</i>
<i>Hervadt lombok emlékeim;</i>	<i>dried leaves of my memories;</i>
<i>Összeszedem őket,</i>	<i>I gather them</i>
<i>Kötöm egy csomóba,</i>	<i>into bundles</i>
<i>Ugy vetem bele az</i>	<i>and cast them in</i>
<i>Égő kandallóba.</i>	<i>the burning fireplace<sup>254</sup>.</i>

George was acquainted with an osteopath, Joe Markine, who attended the Unitarian church and taught physiology part-time at KCU. Markine was working with a team at the University of Kansas Medical Center, experimenting with Parkinson’s treatment using

---

<sup>254</sup> From Sándor Petőfi’s “Borús, Ködös Őszi Idő” (“A Dark and Foggy Autumn”), written in 1846; translation © 1973 by Anton N. Nyerges.

ultrasonic waves. One day over lunch George mentioned his father's case, and Joe Markine said he could arrange for Joseph to be examined by the ultrasonic team's principal physician and so get a second opinion.


In April 1963 Joseph and Mathilda stopped in Kansas City on their way to Los Angeles; it was their first opportunity to see their newest grandchild Matthew. George took his father to the KU Med Center for examination, and the doctor pronounced him a candidate for ultrasonic surgery. Since there would be a fairly lengthy convalescent period, it was decided the surgery should be performed in California, and the doctor made arrangements with a friend doing similar surgery at UCLA.

So there still was hope, and cause for somewhat renewed optimism. Joseph still lived in the rational and enlightened world of reality, where modern technology could find cures for all diseases; the world where science held all the promise to solve all the problems. *Jedes Warum hat seinen Darum*: every Why did have a Wherefore.

He hoped to at least ease the palsy in his hands, which by now was so bad (and so embarrassing to him) that he spent much of the time with arms folded and hands tucked tightly under his armpits. Having turned sixty-nine in March, he told George, "I have lived longer than any man in my family has lived, and I would like to reach seventy."

The elder Ehrlichs went on to Los Angeles and got an apartment at 577 N. Grevillea in Hawthorne, choosing this community because the Ruhigs lived there. In due course Joseph underwent the first half of the ultrasonic surgery; two operations were necessary when both sides were afflicted. After it was over he took a look at his hand, found it still palsied, and shrugged a little.

On Sherry's fourteenth birthday in June, she and Martha and Nick went to visit Joseph in the hospital. Sherry would recall that he did not look like himself; he had a vacant expression, unfocused on what was going on around him, and did not have much to say. Nor was he eating, so Martha "in her best schoolmarm voice" told him that he had to eat, and fed him. He was taken back to the Hawthorne apartment, still in an invalid condition, and died there on July 6, 1963. The funeral took place at Hillside Memorial Park in Culver City on a bright sunny summer day. Mathilda and Martha were devastated by it all, but to Sherry it did not sink in—it didn't seem real.



He would not have viewed his fortitude in adapting to life as an accomplishment, because he had not been able to achieve the goals he had set for himself. First and foremost he had wanted to be a teacher, and to a lesser extent a musician and an artist; Fate (as he saw it) had frustrated him in all these pursuits when he was a young man.

To the end of his life Joseph wanted to go back to Budapest, if only to see the school he'd taught at, to see if it was still there. Otherwise he stopped dreaming of what he could have done. Instead he dreamed for his children, hoping they would want to achieve what he had not, and be able to achieve it with his and Mathilda's encouragement and support. And the dreams had come true—if not in the most straightforward manner—and this gave Joseph that great and deep satisfaction which is born of fulfillment.

At the end of the Spring 1963 semester, Martha and George between them had been teaching for twenty-five years. Martha had just received a Life Diploma from the California State Board of Education, allowing her to teach for as long as she lived; George's hopes for his own academic future were refreshed as KCU merged with the University of Missouri and became the new University of Missouri at Kansas City (UMKC). Twenty years after Joseph's death, both his children would still be teaching.

"The fatalist in Joseph would mean he would shrug his shoulders, not give in but reconcile himself to the fact that he had once again to cope with adversity, this time without any hope of winning," George was to write. "But he had seen more than Canaan from the hill; he had actually enjoyed, if briefly, the milk and honey of the promised land. He saw his children successful in his eyes. Therefore, I think he died relatively content."

---

In June 1962 Martha received a certificate noting her fifteen years as a schoolteacher, and sent it to Joseph for Father's Day with a note:

Dearest Dad: During observation of Public Schools Week this year, I was awarded a certificate which rightfully belongs to you. Since my name is on it and can't be removed, we'll have to share it, just as we've shared so many things during the past forty-plus years. This then is my own "Certificate of Appreciation" to you for all the love, sacrifices, and wonderful philosophy of life given so generously and unfailingly when I deserved it, and also when I didn't.

On Joseph's birthday in 1976, George wrote Mathilda a letter in which he remarked:

How different my life has been than Dad's had been. I think he would have liked to be able to skip the bad parts, but still our lives and experiences were very special and it made us the type of people and family we were (and are). Despite all the problems we face these days, I know it has been a good life and things for us are really pretty good. And my Dad had a lot to contribute to the fact that this generation has a good life together. When I think of the things we can do and have done I really marvel.

Writing to Paul Stephen in 1974, Sherry Renée said of "our mutual grandfather":


I have one of his fountain pens. I never use it, just keep it put away in a drawer. It's all I have that was his... He had to have been one of the really good people of the world. He was always so gentle though and always had time to care... He was quiet too, but fun, and he had so much love in him. I guess he had his faults too—people do—but I never saw them.

And when Mathilda wrote her own minihistory of the Ehrlich family in 1976, she concluded:

Our firstborn daughter's a graduate with a Master of Biology from the University of Illinois. Our son is also a graduate of Illinois, an Art Historian and Professor with a Ph.D. They're both teaching school and love it just as their father hoped for. He learned to be a furrier in trade here, but he never stopped being a teacher at heart. He died in 1963, but never forgotten by his family. Thank God he at least had a chance to see his children succeed also, and to enjoy the three wonderful grandchildren...

The marker at Hillside Memorial Park reads BELOVED HUSBAND AND FATHER / JOSEPH EHRLICH / 1894-1963. To that, alongside the tributes from his family, might be added a line from Shakespeare:

*To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.*



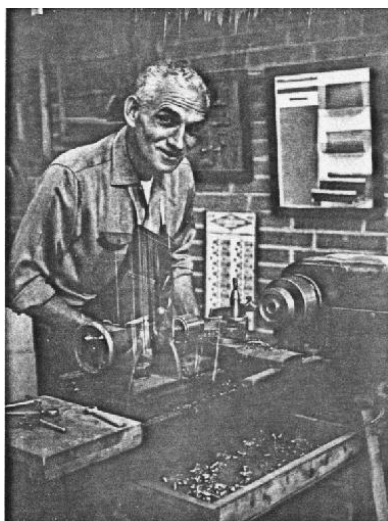


top left: The Mlinarich house in Fithian, 1985 — top right: Mojave High School, 1958

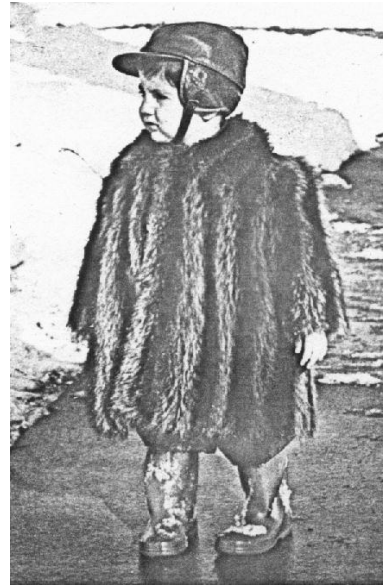
below left: Nick the shop teacher at Mojave High, circa 1958

below right: Martha teaching again, 1959 (with insert of Nick's 1960 yearbook photo)

bottom: 8125 Nipa Avenue in California City, 2008 (courtesy of Google Street View)







top left: Mathilda with Paul Stephen in Kansas City: August 1958

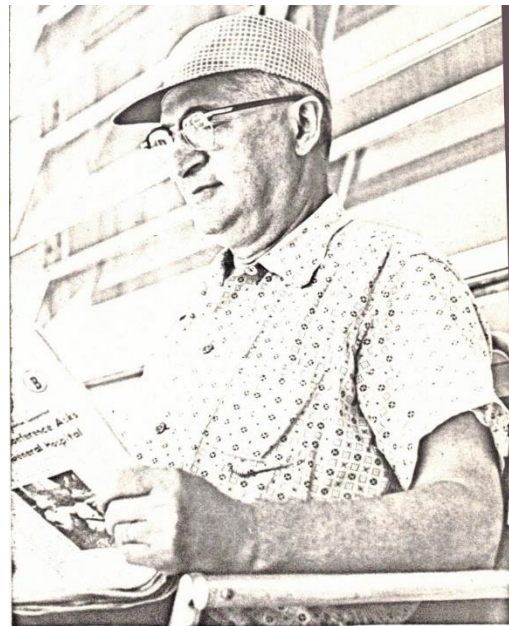
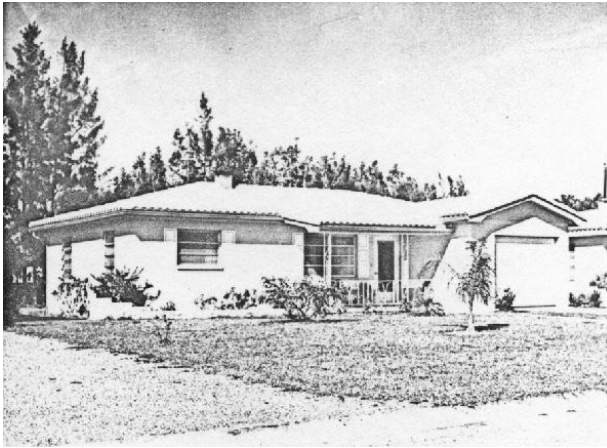
top right: Paul Stephen in his raccoon coat, November 1958

bottom left: Crisis resolved in Kansas City, 1959

bottom right: Paul Stephen by Robert MacDonald Graham<sup>255</sup>, 1960

<sup>255</sup> Robert MacDonald Graham Jr. (1919-2000) studied with Thomas Hart Benton at the Kansas City Art Institute and served as a combat artist in World War II; he was with the KCU/UMKC Art faculty from 1958 to 1975. Bob Graham's 1960 portrait of me shows one hand upraised because I thought, when told to lower it, that he wanted me to dunk it in the can used to clean his brushes. (My earliest pinpointable memory, predating the trip to St. Petersburg by a few months.)





top left: The little pink house in St. Petersburg, February 1961

top right: Interior of the little pink house, February 1961

bottom left: Retirement in St. Petersburg, April 1959

bottom right: "The happiest man in retirement," March 1961



top left: Paul Stephen with his mother and four grandparents, September 1961

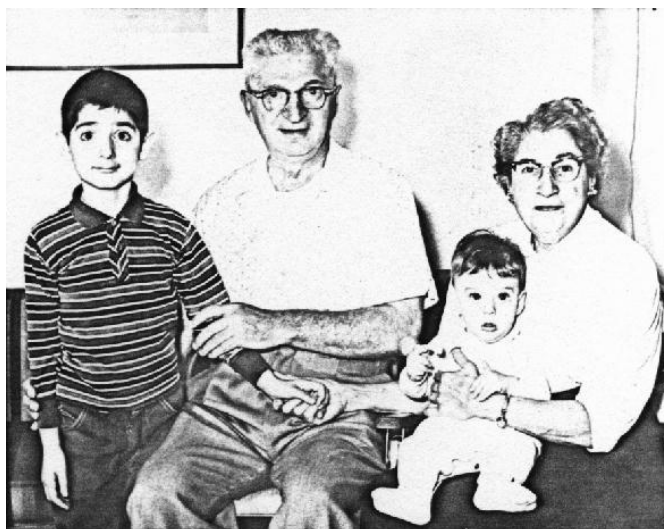
top right: Matthew Carleton: December 1962

below left: Paul Stephen in front of 5505 Holmes, the New Ehrlich Place: October 1962

bottom right: 5505 Holmes sixty years later, after a tiny acorn grew into a mighty oak  
(courtesy of Google Street View)







top left: Joseph and Mathilda, December 1962

top right: Grandparents and grandsons in Kansas City, April 1963

bottom left: Sherry on her 14th birthday, June 1963

bottom right: Joseph's grave marker at Hillside Memorial Park, 2011

## Afterward: From Being Honest

### *Mathilda*

Mathilda shared apartments in Los Angeles<sup>256</sup> with her cousin Margaret Temmer from 1963 to 1981. For many years she was the family's champion correspondent, whose letters and phone calls kept her children and grandchildren informed of what the others were up to. She never allowed English to daunt her as it had Joseph, sometimes consulting dictionaries but more often spelling as seemed best at the moment. Her family tried to keep up with her communicative pace but seldom matched it, and Mathilda was seldom shy about pointing this out. If she sent a letter to someone mentioning she hadn't heard from him or her for awhile, and got a prompt reply, she might say "Love and telepathy goes out together" and close with thanks—plus hopes that "it won't be a whole month till the next one."

Mathilda belonged to several senior citizens's clubs and frequently went to meetings or luncheons or away on tourist jaunts, occasionally sniffing at Margaret and Rose Ruhig for preferring to stay home and play cards. ("Nothing else interests these two?")

She paid many visits to California City and made it out to Kansas City every year or so, well into her eighties. In May 1978 she commented on photos George had taken during her most recent trip to KCMO:

I look OK too I guess, except it's hard for me to get used to see[ing] me as a really old person now. I am sure you both are laughing at my saying this, but I haven't had a picture taken for so long, and I don't feel my age, so it's hard to accept it as is.

That August Mathilda got mugged and her injuries, including a fractured pelvis, were misdiagnosed; so Martha the onetime wallflower took action (telling George "I haven't been in a good fight for a long time") and won a legal settlement after threatening to contact ombudsmen, state medical associations, and David Horowitz. By the following summer Mathilda resumed her "merry-go-round of activities with friends" and clubs, but never fully recovered. "Seems that my age's trying to catch up with me or something," she admitted in 1980. "So I['m] just being lazy, and wait for a miracle."

---

<sup>256</sup> At 1533 S. Hi Point in Faircrest Heights until 1974, then half a mile west at 8555 Saturn Street.

After suffering a stroke in 1981 she was brought to stay with the Mlinariches, but her condition continued to decline and in January 1983 her children placed her in the Lancaster Convalescent Hospital, an above-average nursing home. Mathilda went there resigned to ending her life, occasionally muttering in Hungarian about hurrying up and getting it over with. After a difficult year she grew stronger and “graduated” from therapy, able to read again and perambulate with a walker; in 1985 Mathilda even wrote a few letters, her first in several years. But she was devastated by Martha’s predeceasing her (“a mother ought to go first”) and went into passive limbo till her own death on June 4, 1992, aged 96.

On his final visit to Lancaster, George had to rack his brain for things to tell his unresponsive mother. When he mentioned that he and Mila Jean had recently prepared chicken paprikash but couldn’t produce its dumpling-like egg noodles, Mathilda stirred long enough to say, “Try rice.”

I had one more visit with her early Sunday afternoon. She and I mostly sat and held hands... There was something in how she kissed me goodbye the Sunday I left which (even then I knew) was different from all the other times. So, she finally was able to slip away as she clearly wished to do... [and] take the trip for which she had waited so long<sup>257</sup>.

---

*Martha and Nick*

The Mlinariches remained at 8125 Nipa in California City for the rest of their lives. Nick had to give up teaching shop after a series of minor strokes but never let his health slow him down, continuing to smoke unfiltered Camels and tool around the desert on a motor scooter. Martha finally learned to drive in 1964 and visited Paris in the later 1960s, meeting her Aunt Ily and cousin Márta Kun (“the other Martha”) but not her childhood playmate Violet “Bébi” Ladner.

During another trip in 1971 Martha first became aware of having a sacral chordoma—a malignant tumor at the bottom of her spine—and had to be brought home in great pain.

---

<sup>257</sup> Mathilda’s death certificate said she was born in “Hungry” and her father’s name was “Maurice Kunz.” Mathilda was buried beside Joseph in Hillside Memorial Park on August 24, 1992, at which time it was discovered that her marker was the wrong size and needed replacement. The new marker was the proper size but displayed Martha’s year of death.

The tumor was surgically removed but another slowly grew to the size of a tennis ball. She soldiered on teaching high school Biology and Psychology, remarking in 1985 that “a teacher should imbue a kid with the *desire* to learn, and do the best he can.” Martha was ceaseless in her fight against the student anthem of IT’S BORING, as well as the California Philosophy of Education and the double wall of *can’t-afford-it* and *can’t-be-done*. Always vocal at faculty meetings, she carried the courage of her convictions and the strength of increasing seniority into battle with a series of Mojave superintendents. At an assembly where students voiced grievances against the incumbent superintendent in 1979, Martha marched up and took her formidable turn at the microphone, arms resolutely folded, brows knitted, jaw set.

At the end of each school year, students would send her messages or inscribe yearbook pictures with sentiments that shone through their spelling and grammar: “Your a great teacher who relley understands alot of the kids problems.” “Your the first teacher who had ever had an interest in the students... You might get mad at us, but you have a good reason too.” “Mrs. Mlinarich, your my favorite teacher. I’ve had you for three years now and have loved every hair of it.”

It was widely known that anyone who felt lonely or depressed or troubled by some problem could talk to Martha about it, and she would always try to help<sup>258</sup>. Some of her pupils regarded her with the same adulation she’d once felt for Mrs. Eckaros and Dr. Brown, writing essays in grateful tribute: “Mrs. Mlinarich is truly a hard-working, dedicated teacher, for whom a wasted minute is a bit of knowledge that could have been learned, or a bit of help or service that could have been performed.” In 1975 she was named one of the Outstanding Secondary Educators in America, Top 25 in California.

But by 1983 her tumor was giving Martha terrible pain, with the threat of paralysis and death if left untreated. She hemmed and hawed about retirement until George asked if she were afraid of disappointing their father by again choosing to leave the classroom. “It was like a light bulb went off”: until then she hadn’t been able to figure out why she was hesitating. In June 1984 Martha retired after a quarter-century of teaching in Mojave.

That October at the University (of Washington) Hospital in Seattle, she was the first

---

<sup>258</sup> The Mlinarich home was also a haven for lost, injured, and abandoned creatures. Owls, hawks, and ravens were often present, as well as a garage full of pigeons, cartons of turtles in the den, cages of guinea pigs in the utility room, and a succession of house dogs.



patient in the United States to undergo treatment by a fully-operational medical cyclotron. This was the latest tool in radiation therapy, using an atomic particle accelerator to fire streams of neutrons to kill tumor cells; and besides hoping to ease her pain and gain some retirement time (“There are thousands of books I haven’t read”), Martha took professional interest in this new procedure. It added more years to her life than anticipated, but did not relieve her discomfort for very long nor spare her from unpleasant side effects.

It was announced at the Mojave High Class of 1965’s twentieth reunion that a Martha Mlinarich Mojave Alumni Scholarship Foundation had been established<sup>259</sup>, and the 1986 Mojave *Mustang* yearbook was dedicated to Mrs. Martha Mlinarich: “We thank you for caring enough about us to make us learn what we wouldn’t have learned. Thank you for unfailing devotion as a teacher and as a friend.”

Martha died on Earth Day, April 22, 1991, aged 71. A week later George wrote:

Part of me has been numb for years, since it was in the summer of 1985 that she had been given no more than six months to live. So when the news did come, there was in one sense a genuine feeling of relief, since her pain was now forever stilled. Yet there is also a void which can never really go away. Indeed, it will become ever more real to me. I know this because as the years slip by I find myself thinking more often of my father, and often wish I could sit with him to visit and tell him news which would make him happy, or simply to let him know that I better understand him, and that I appreciate how well he managed things when the circumstances were difficult.

Nick Mlinarich followed Martha on February 2, 1993, aged 74; and their ashes were scattered over Red Rock Canyon in the Mojave Desert.

---

### *George and Mila Jean*

George and Mila Jean remained at 5505 Holmes in KCMO for the rest of their lives. In 1964, a year after KCU became the University of Missouri-Kansas City, George became chairman of its Art Department; he spent the next decade putting “teaching and scholarship

---

<sup>259</sup> By former student William R. (Bill) Morris, who called Martha “an excellent teacher and excellent counselor and a confidant in time of need... She strove to new heights in her profession, and in that she gave us meaning in our striving for perfection.”

on a lower priority than managerial concerns” while building up his department facultywise, facilitieswise, and curriculumwise to realize its potential. He stepped down in 1975 partly for reasons for health, and partly in order to “rediscover the professor in the administrator.”

In 1968 Kansas City’s eighty-year-old Board of Trade Building, “an exceptional work of architecture,” had been torn down “to make room for nothing more than a surface parking lot.” This sparked a local preservation movement, with the Landmarks Commission created in 1970 and the Historic Kansas City Foundation organized in 1974. George was prominently associated with both from their inception, stating that “Central to the preservation movement is the objective of halting unwarranted demolition or radical remodeling of historically or architecturally significant buildings.” KCMO’s monumental Union Station was threatened with destruction, and a crusade was mounted to save it; in 1972 George organized and moderated a symposium on Union Station’s future, asserting that

We do not advocate preservation of every old building. The key element is finding new uses for many of our old buildings... I resent deeply that things can be done without explanation. If they do tear it down and put up a Holiday Inn or something, I want to be convinced that there was no other alternative. So far I am not convinced.

Nor were many others; but their campaign would go on for decades as Union Station withstood neglect and decay. Numerous other vintage buildings of eminent importance were in need of safeguarding, so the preservationists were kept vigilantly busy.

1979 saw George’s book *Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History 1826-1976* published by the Historic Kansas City Foundation. This was not intended as a scholarly work, but one bringing together the various social, cultural, economic, and artistic forces that had shaped Kansas City’s architectural heritage. It was illustrated with nearly two hundred photographs taken by George over the years. A revised and enlarged edition came out in 1992 (its subtitle extended to 1990); this was followed in 1996 by a *Guide to Kansas Architecture* in collaboration with David H. Sachs, published by the University Press of Kansas. That same year Union Station’s long-sought restoration was finally approved, with renovation completed in 1999 and train service resumed in 2002.

After George retired from UMKC as Professor Emeritus in 1992, the University offered a George Ehrlich Scholarship for Art History majors, and the Historic Kansas City

Foundation established an Achievement in Preservation Award in his name. George was an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects, and in 2003 the Kansas City Architectural Foundation presented him with a Legends Award. A year after that, the Kansas City Public Library Board of Trustees selected *Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History* as one of the titles to appear on 25' x 9' book spines decorating the façade of the Central Library's parking garage.

Mila Jean taught part-time in the UMKC English, Theater, and World Literature departments from 1964 to 2000. Upon retirement she hoped she and George could devote themselves to traveling, one of her favorite activities<sup>260</sup>; but George took a bad fall in November 2000 that required surgery<sup>261</sup>. Coincidentally or not, from that point he began a gradual yet unrelenting descent into dementia. In 2003 he gave up working on a biography about pioneer architect Asa Beebe Cross, as well as keeping a day-at-a-glance reminder book and trying to correspond by letter or email. Mila Jean's attempt to jog his fading memory by showing him photos of Joseph and Mathilda only reduced him to tears.

George died on November 28, 2009, aged 84. He'd arranged that he and Mila Jean would be laid to rest in Leavenworth National Cemetery, where the Department of Veterans Affairs would provide interment space and suitable markers free of charge. Mila Jean was disinclined to follow through with this plan, thinking the destination too martial; but went along with it rather than seek an alternative (such as scattering his ashes over Union Station). "Well, they took George to Leavenworth yesterday," she dolefully announced—followed by a Mila Jeanesque laugh at how that could be interpreted. She joined him there after her own death on February 21, 2016, aged 83<sup>262</sup>.

---

*Sherry Renée*

In many ways Sherry Renée's life reflected the 1960s in which she grew up, not least in the often fractious relationship she had with her mother and stepfather. This was due in

---

<sup>260</sup> Several of their travel journals, transcribed and annotated as *The George & Mila Show*, are available at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/George-and-Mila-Travel-Journals.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/George-and-Mila-Travel-Journals.htm).

<sup>261</sup> He came out of the anesthesia thinking he was in the hospital to visit Martha.

<sup>262</sup> Her obituary noted that "for half a century, Mila Jean was associated with the KCU Playhouse, UMKC Theatre Department, and Kansas City Repertory Theatre as actress, crew member, lecturer, play reader, and devoted follower. Her love of drama, music, and other lively arts lasted all of her life."

part to widely differing viewpoints on financial matters: Martha having learned frugality from her parents and, like George, making it a lifelong style of living (often out of necessity), while S.R. went by “Why save for tomorrow if it means starving yourself today?” Yet Martha was the first to admit she was unable to deal with her own child as she could with anybody else’s; and S.R. was the first to praise her mother as a teacher, having in fact been her student for five years in Mojave Junior/Senior High science classes.

After graduating in 1966, Sherry wanted to go to San Francisco (with or without flowers in her hair) but settled for college at Fresno State, where she distanced herself from Lamb Chop jokes by going by her middle name Renée. Leaving school after a major confrontation with her parents in 1968, she headed for Los Angeles and worked there as a waitress, model, and movie usher, then at banks and an answering service and in the garment district. She moved around considerably, at one point every week, and at times was out of touch with her family. Finally in 1974 she “got burned-out, yelled at the boss’s son, cried in the restroom, went out for lunch and couldn’t bring myself to go back.”

Packing her suitcase and sewing machine, S.R. moved with friends to Olympia, Washington, where Mathilda sent her a letter that September mentioning the Ehrlich Family History. “If and when Paul writes the book he started” (already sounding dubious about this happening) “hope he’ll really do it up some time.” S.R. in turn sent Paul Stephen a letter in October:

For some reason it has come into my mind to write you. I’m feeling rather contemplative tonite (you can tell by my language—I’m usually much more casual), and since Gramma mentioned that you’re writing a family history I thought I’d ask about it. I know she has Mama’s diary and will either send you the whole book or excerpts from it. I’ve never read it, though I’d like to. For a long time she (Mama) didn’t want me to—perhaps I was too young or we were still too caught in the parent-child relationship instead of being friends—and later I was home so seldom that it never came up. Anyway, I’m sure there must be many interesting things in it. But what (who, rather) I really wanted to write about is our mutual grandfather. I doubt if you remember him too well. He died when I was 13 or so and I think I’m about 8 years older than you are. But he has to have been one of the really *good* people of the

world. There is so much I remember—I wish we could talk instead of writing. I don't know what you're interested in. Oh well—here goes...

After seven pages of reminiscences she added:

I wish I could tell you more. Pictures keep coming but words don't—at least, not to write. Talking would be easier. Maybe sometime... If you're making a carbon of your writing and wouldn't mind loaning it out, I'd love to read it. There's a lot I don't know that I'd like to find out. OK! My hand is breaking, my stomach is empty and I'm exhausted, so this is it for now. Write, if you have the time and inclination. I'd like to hear how you and the rest of the family are doing. Please give them all my love. *Sherry*. P.S. It's beautiful up here. You should see it sometime.

In Olympia S.R. found all the verdancy she'd missed in Mojave. For several years she worked for the state Department of Labor and Industries, then the Department of Licensing's Driver Improvement Office. She also got involved with a dramatic group that put on *The Agony: A Passion Play* every Easter, appearing in 1976 as Mary Magdalene as well as assisting with sets, lighting, and makeup. Also in *The Agony* was Tim Morta<sup>263</sup>, and soon after Easter he and S.R. learned she was pregnant with their child. But not till Thanksgiving would Martha and Nick hear that S.R. was expecting a baby—and that it was due in two months. Their reactions were characteristic.

Amber Joanna (*Jo* for great-grandfather Joseph) Lewis was born on January 15, 1977 and made her stage debut three months later in that Easter's production of *The Agony*.

From 1979 to 1982 S.R. attended Evergreen State College, founded in 1971 in the middle of a rainforest. It offered grade-free multidisciplinary programs of coordinated studies, and there S.R. earned her Bachelor of Arts degree<sup>264</sup>. During the brutally hot summer of 1980, she and Amber traveled across country by bus to Boston and back, stopping in KCMO to visit the Ehrlichs and urge Paul Stephen to visit Olympia. This invitation would be extended repeatedly till he headed west in 1984, partly in order to complete *An Honest Tale Plainly Told*.

---

<sup>263</sup> Timoteo John Morta (born 1948), son of Timoteo Mones Morta (1912-1997) and Isabel[le] Gloria Morta Cheek (1931-2022).

<sup>264</sup> Mathilda wrote: "We are very glad she decided to do that—finally."

In July S.R. and P.S. discussed this project, deciding to work on “a composite volume of some comprehensiveness.” They “shaped up the Definitive Edition as 1894-1963, emphasizing Grandpa’s influence on family—S.R. anxious that it not be done ‘dry,’ but with popular bent, with view to publishing.”

Over the next year Sherry Renée was preoccupied with Martha’s health and her own love life, the latter culminating in a June 28, 1985 wedding to Nick Layden<sup>265</sup>, a softspoken easygoing postman. Despite marked differences in temperament, Nick Layden shared a number of traits with Nick Mlinarich: both were mechanically-handy “lapsed” Catholics who smoked Camels and had gone through a marriage and divorce. In fact it was S.R.’s friendship with Nick’s ex-wife Myriam, and Amber’s with Nick’s daughter Nichole and stepdaughters Marcella and Monique, that led to S.R. and Nick becoming acquainted.

As her engagement ring Sherry Renée wore the one Grandpa Joseph had gotten from his mother Sarolta in 1916 to be Grandma Mathilda’s. The newlywed Laydens’s honeymoon was an arduous trek by truck (with Amber and Paul Stephen in the back seat) to California to visit the Mlinariches and Mathilda. Grandma could not have asked for a better ninetieth birthday present; at long last she was able to proclaim “I have a third grandson!”

In 1986 S.R. reported having found “OUR HOUSE. Caps definitely necessary”—the suburban Seattle domicile<sup>266</sup> she would occupy with husband, daughter, and several cats for the next decade, and which Paul Stephen would dub “Laydenland” when he joined Sherry Renée & Co.’s household in 1988.

S.R. was employed by the University of Washington from 1988 to 2009 as an office assistant, secretary and program coordinator with the Extension, Developmentally Disabled Rehab, Admissions, Minority Affairs & Diversity, and Lab Medicine departments.

When they turned sixty Sherry Renée and Nick decided to retire to an acre of land in Republic, Washington, a onetime goldmining town (originally called Eureka Gulch) surrounded by the Colville National Forest. Except during the depths of winter, S.R. has never had to say “There’s nothing GREEN out here!” in Republic.

---

<sup>265</sup> Nicholas John Layden (born 1949 in Colorado), son of James Caron Layden (1907-1993) and Geraldine Pearl Stepp Layden (1913-2005).

<sup>266</sup> A split level at 24713 21st Ave. S., in a cul-de-sac where Kent, Washington jutted west across Pacific Highway South into Des Moines, Washington.



*Paul Stephen*

“Paul is adapting well to the college work,” George wrote Mathilda in October 1974. “He doesn’t mingle much (as usual) but he is working quite hard and long on coursework.”

Actually Paul spent more time working harder and longer on fictional enterprises than scholarship or “dayjob” employment; and to a great extent that priority has gone unchanged for nearly half a century. For awhile he considered becoming an accountant, but instead took a general Bachelor of Business Administration degree at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. From 1975 to 1988 he was employed by the UMKC Bookstore as a student assistant, then a fulltime clerk, and finally Supplies Buyer. In 1984 Paul Stephen began vacationing in Washington state—first to escape from KCMO summers, then KCMO winters, then KCMO altogether. From 1988 to 1994 he roomed-and-boarded in the Laydenland rec room before shifting to his own place; thirty years later he is at the same apartment complex in Des Moines, Washington. Since November 1989 he has worked in what evolved from Patient Data Services (i.e. Medical Records) at the University of Washington Medical Center, to Enterprise Records & Health Information (still Medical Records) at a conglomeration of hospitals called UW Medicine. As he writes this, he is beginning his third-person-singular descent pattern toward unmingled retirement.

And through the last half-century Paul Stephen has devoted the bulk of his free time to creative writing. George and Mila Jean always tried to encourage this, but were frequently baffled by his methodology and often by his output, or lack of the same. All through the 1970s he constructed enormous novels in thorough detail, but achieved next to nothing in the way of actual text. That threshold was crossed in the early 1980s, but seldom reached final-draft form. Not till *To Be Honest* did he bring a large-scale writing project to completion—and that one was *non-fictional*. Output improved after his relocation to the Puget Sound area. From 1989 to 1993, and again from 2002 to 2006, numerous poems and stories and novel excerpts were published by “little” magazines in print and online. Since then Paul Stephen has been content to hang his literary and genealogical oeuvres out to dry on [www.SkeeterKitefly.com](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com), the website he launched in 2002, for anyone to read or ignore as they see fit.

As P.S. has told his brother Matthew on several occasions: “I’m glad one of us took the academic career route, and that it wasn’t me.”

---

*Matthew Carleton*

“Matt” became involved with journalism while attending the Pembroke-Country Day School, where he also took part in theatrical productions<sup>267</sup>. Combining these endeavors, he engaged in radio broadcasting through the 1980s as reporter, producer, and anchor at several NPR or nonprofit stations<sup>268</sup>. In the meantime he earned a Bachelor of Journalism degree at the University of Missouri-Columbia (1983), a Master of Science from the University of Kansas School of Journalism and Mass Communications (1987), and a Ph.D. from that old Ehrlich alma mater, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1991). Following a year of teaching at the University of Oklahoma, it was at the U of I that Matthew settled down in 1992. He was promoted to full professor with tenure in 2006, and took early retirement (due in part to Illinois’s underfunded pension system) as Professor Emeritus of Journalism and the Institute of Communications Research in 2016, but continues to teach.

Matthew has also written a series of books published by the University of Illinois Press or its imprint: *Journalism in the Movies* (2004); *Radio Utopia: Postwar Audio Documentary in the Public Interest*<sup>269</sup> (2011); *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture* (with Joe Saltzman: 2015); *Kansas City vs. Oakland: The Bitter Sports Rivalry That Defined an Era* (2019); *Dangerous Ideas on Campus: Sex, Conspiracy, and Academic Freedom in the Age of JFK* (2021); and *The Krebiozen Hoax: How a Mysterious Cancer Drug Shook Organized Medicine* (2024).

Matthew also inherited Mila Jean’s partiality for widespread travel. In 2020 he nearly got trapped in Ireland when the coronavirus pandemic lockdown began, but made it safely home and staged a successful return (this time nonviral) to the Emerald Isle in 2023.

---

<sup>267</sup> Pem-Day merged with the Sunset Hill School in 1984 to become Pembroke Hill. In 1979 Matthew appeared as Tevye in the Pem-Day/Sunset musical *Fiddler on the Roof*.

<sup>268</sup> As George and I began our research trip to Champaign-Urbana in April 1985, we listened to Matthew broadcasting on KCUR-FM.

<sup>269</sup> “Dedicated to George Ehrlich (1925-2009) / Father, teacher, scholar.”

*Amber Joanna*

Sherry Renée's becoming a single mother was not among her grandmother's hopes and dreams; but Mathilda wrote Paul in August 1977 about getting "a nice long letter from Sherry the other day, she seems to keep busy, and sounds happy with her baby. So I guess I should feel the same and stop worrying ha?"

Mathilda would be smitten by her great-granddaughter's<sup>270</sup> vivid charm, and comment about her in much the same way Mártuka and Sherry had once been described:

**1978 July 15.** ...Amber's a sweet little girl, for 15 months she knows and does so many things I was surprised. I haven't seen a young child for so many years, I forgot how they [are] developing. Amber was crazy for her grandpa. She used to climb up to his immense easy chair and sit in Nicky's lap hugging him and pushing her tiny face up to kiss him on his cheek. Naturally Nicky was tickled about that. She imitated every word she heard and was very happy to hear us laugh, and she laughed with us too...

**1980 January 14.** ...We [Mathilda and Martha] were very surprised that Amber was so good, all day walking around with us at a "Kay Mart." When it came lunch time she a three year old packed away a full meal [of] spaghetti and meatballs. I only had a cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee...

**1980 December 30.** ...We had a good visit with Sherry and Amber. She is such a smart four years old, she already can write her name and tries to read also... When she saw us at the Airport she greeted us with, "I haven't seen you guys for such a long time, I'm glad you came." She constantly amused us both while we were there...

Including Amber Joanna in *To Be Honest* does not change it to "FOUR generations of unexpectedly dramatic family saga," since being dramatic has always been an integral part of her parcel<sup>271</sup>. Like Great-Grandma Mathilda in her youth, Amber could play *csipi csóka* pinch-and-slap games while having "three other boyfriends at the same time." After many adventures she became a massage therapist at various spas and a vocal musician with various


---

<sup>270</sup> Mathilda also considered Maureen Mlinarich Boone's daughters Nikki, Debbie, and Missy to be her great-grandchildren.

<sup>271</sup> For instance: after I left Laydenland and moved into my own apartment in 1994, Amber popped by to inspect the contents of my refrigerator and exclaim "I can't **BELIEVE** you were hiding all this food from me!"

groups, as well as a wife<sup>272</sup>, stepmother and eventual stepgrandmother (or “Gramber”).

In 1990 the thirteen-year-old Amber read Paul Stephen’s second Skeeter Kitefly story (“The Demon Bag Lady of Skeet Street<sup>273</sup>”) with qualified approval, saying “You should’ve left her a teenager” (as in the first Skeeter story, “Initially Illustrated<sup>274</sup>”). Putting thought to more Skeeter-as-a-teen stories led P.S. to the full-length *The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly*, its sequel *Skeeter Kitefly’s Sugardaddy Confessor*, and [www.SkeeterKitefly.com](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com) plus its weblishing adjunct Split Infinitive Productions—which now includes the Revised Anniversary Edition of *To Be Honest*.



---

<sup>272</sup> Marrying Tristan John Wogoman (born 1975) on February 27, 2006.

<sup>273</sup> Readable at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/sksc\\_15.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/sksc_15.htm).

<sup>274</sup> Readable at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com/udsk\\_11.htm](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com/udsk_11.htm).

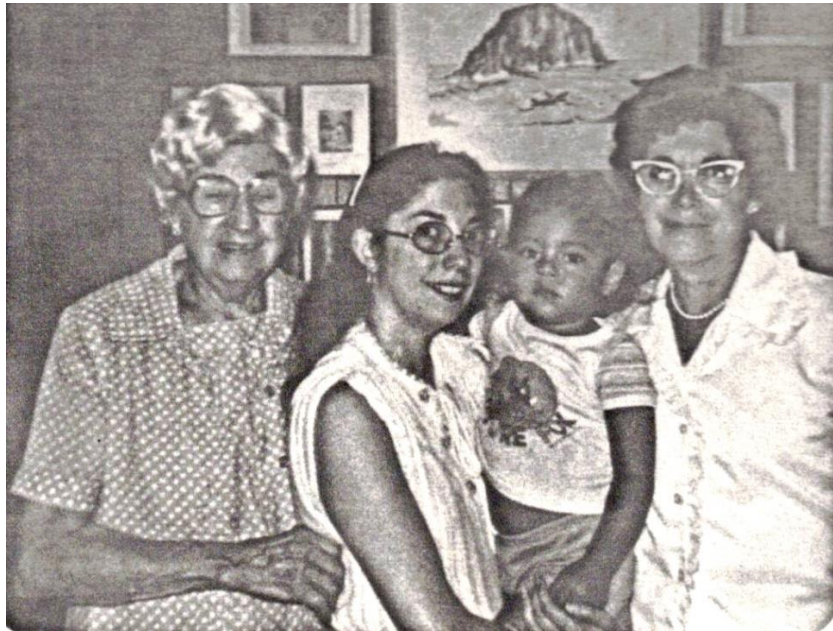


top: Mathilda and her three grandchildren, August 1963

bottom left: Mathilda and Margaret Temmer, March 1964

bottom right: Mathilda, S.R. and Martha, November 1967





top left: Family "portrait," June 1970<sup>275</sup>

l to r: Matthew, George, Mathilda, Paul Stephen, Mila Jean, Sherry Renée

top right: Martha and Nick, June 1979

bottom: Four generations of dark-eyed ladies: Mathilda, S.R., Amber and Martha, September 1979

<sup>275</sup> Taken by Rose Ruhig after battling with her camera. When the flash cube refused to go off, Rose removed it from its socket, said "I SPIT ON YOU!," proceeded to do so, then replaced the flash cube and took the photo.





top: Nick, Amber and S.R. on the Laydens's wedding day<sup>276</sup>, June 1985

bottom: "I have a third grandson!"—Amber, S.R., Mathilda and Nick, July 1985

---

<sup>276</sup> Amber holds the photo of the elder Nick, Sherry and Martha on the Mlinariches's wedding day in 1955.





In "Mustang" of 1986  
Mojave H.S. yearbook.



## MRS. MARTHA MLINARICH



**TO MRS. MLINARICH:  
WE WOULD LIKE TO DEDICATE THIS TO YOU  
FOR YOUR TIME AND EFFORT  
TO MAKE US GROW,  
AND YOUR KNOWLEDGE  
TO EDUCATE US FURTHER,  
AND YOUR SMILE  
TO MAKE US WARM.  
WE THANK YOU FOR CARING ENOUGH  
ABOUT US TO MAKE US LEARN WHAT WE  
WOULDN'T HAVE LEARNED.  
THANK YOU FOR YOUR UNFAILING DEVOTION  
AS A TEACHER AND AS A FRIEND.**

top: P.S., Mila Jean, George and Matthew, November 1985

bottom: Martha's Mojave *Mustang* yearbook dedication, 1986





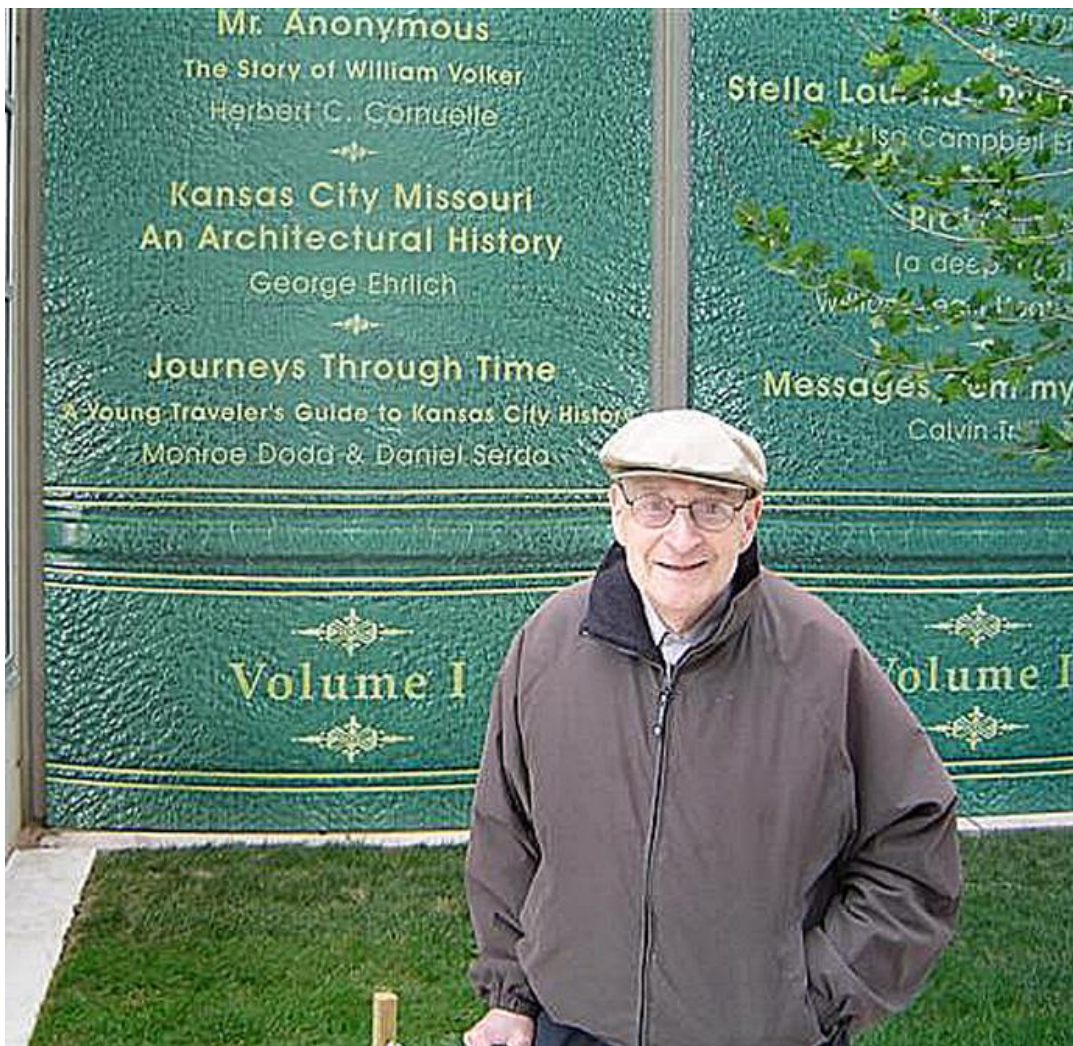
top left: Martha and George, circa 1987—top right: P.S., Mathilda and S.R., August 1987

middle left: P.S., Matthew, S.R. and Amber, December 1991

bottom left: The embroidered lithograph that Joseph obtained in France circa 1918

bottom right: Amber, S.R. and Nick, December 1991





top: George and his title on the KCMO Central Library's "Community Bookshelf," May 2006

bottom: Mathilda's grave marker at Hillside Memorial Park (right size, wrong year), 2011

## Appendix H: Mathilda and *To Be Honest*

In June 1975 I was unable to accompany my parents and brother on a visit to Grandma Mathilda in Los Angeles, because I'd gotten a summer job as busboy at a Kansas City dinner theater—from which I would be fired after two weeks of ineptitude. On July 22nd Mathilda wrote me a letter of consolation:

Too bad you are unemployed again, but we have to be thankful for the short time they gave you now. This work sounds quite hard and messy too. So you learned something at least, to keep clear of busboy's jobs in the future. Paul dear, you do remind me more and more of your Dad when he was getting a first summer job too. He was a lot younger than you now, and he had to work and not for experience, but for food to have for all of us in the summer<sup>277</sup>. I am sure you heard about this before from your Dad and from me too... I am very glad to know your good spirit has not changed during work. School will start soon and all this will be forgotten, except the experience...

Mathilda must have begun to suspect that the Ehrlich Family History which I'd undertaken to compile a year earlier was now an *All This Has Been Forgotten* (Except the Experience). And after she'd gone to the trouble of re-translating the American half of Martha's Diary:

**1974 August 25.** Dear Paul, I'd been to Martha's and had a very nice time with them too. I brought her diary home with me, but decided to copy it for you, instead of sending the book as it is. I think if I start writing it out again I am sure things will come back to my mind and probably could tell you more this way than just sending it as is. It will take a lot longer that's for sure. But I am sure you wouldn't mind if I could remember things way back when? And tell it to you as it comes up... Now I am back home and try to take it easier and no more traveling<sup>278</sup> for a while, but do some work for a change. Wishing you good luck Paul dear when school starts. Much love to you all. *Grandma E.*

---

<sup>277</sup> As described in Chapter 13.

<sup>278</sup> Earlier in 1974 she had visited her sister in Paris and her brother in Israel.

**1974 September.** Dearest Paul, I am hoping you can read and understand what I am writing to you in these pages. From now on I'll try to follow Martha's Diary as close as I [can] for you to understand it? Translating might not be as you'd like, but if you want to ask some questions after you see it's hard for you to understand some of the things, just write to me and ask it, OK? I also appreciate if you'd let me know whether I should continue with it or you'd rather wait until you have more time for writing. I'll send the installments little by little as I finish a few chapters if you like. These'll be all for a little while, as I have other things too I must do... Paul, if the pencil written copies [are] hard to read, or even my spelling, please don't hesitate to say so. I'll try to use the pen, even if I have to cross out words, instead of erase them? You know translating from Hungarian to English [is] not so easy for anyone. Especially for me. But if you think I should I'll do it which way is better for you...

**1974 October 8.** Dear Paul, I love to get letters from you, and like to think you really enjoy my installments? But as long as you don't start it until you get more of it, or all of it? I am very glad for that, because I won't feel rushed to do it so fast, but could take a lot more time to translate it more up to the point. I am surprised at myself when I read some earlier translations I did a long time ago, and see the spelling mistakes I made then. Now, I have to correct that too, besides translate them, so you at least could figure it out what I am trying to say in these now... So as you can see I still have quite a lot to translate and write for you to read and select whatever you want to use out of it. But I don't mind, dear, just be patient with me, OK[?].... Here's something to read. Hope it interests you too. Isn't it something? Much love to you and family too. *Grandma.*

Regrettably, it was me with whom Mathilda had to be patient. In my own defense it might be noted that I'd just started my first semester of college at UMKC; yet as time went by I could at least have typed up the Diary's re-translation, particularly after I bought an electric typewriter in 1976. That same year Mathilda composed and sent me a mini-family-history of her own, still trying to prime the pump:

**1976 August.** Paul dear, I am hoping you could connect all these things with the rest of it?... Martha helped while here to remind me of these things to add to the biography. When I'll see you at Christmastime we could probably remember more and you could



correct my spelling and mistakes. It's 2 A.M. now and I must go to bed although I am not sleepy, only a bit tired. It's high time to let you see it now<sup>279</sup>...

But I failed to take the bait, and the Ehrlich Family History lay fallow for another seven years. As they rolled past and Mathilda's health deteriorated, she often asked me for "a nice and funny story... You'll choose some happier subjects for a change?... Thanks for not finishing sadly. Somehow lately especially, I can't stand to read or watch on TV sad stories... I thank you here on this paper, and imagine I had kissed your forehead OK?"

I finally earned this kiss in February 1984 with the rush-job production of *An Honest Tale Plainly Told*, plus my plans to visit California that summer. In March my father reported that Grandma was very pleased with the first and looked forward to seeing me (without my beard) during the second. At the Lancaster Convalescent Hospital in July she introduced me (still bearded) to her nurses, all of whom had heard about myself and The Book<sup>280</sup>. In September Grandma was said to be "ecstatic" with the typed-up-at-long-last Diary as Volume II of *An Honest Tale*; and after Volume IV came out to conclude the saga, I received two valedictory letters from Grandma herself:

**1985 September 3.** Dearest Paul! It was so wonderful to see your Dad, and have him for a couple of days here with me. But it was the Birthday gift you sent me that made me happiest and proudest of all. I showed it to [every] one of my friends... I really love it and I'm reading it until I finish it all. Sorry I can't send you a longer letter, I'll try again soon. With all my love lovingly *Grandma E.*

**1985 October 28.** Dear Paul! Your last letter didn't make me sad, it made me laugh out loud, it struck me funny instead. It brought me back lots of things I forgotten a long time, it kind of made me remember? The Cholent<sup>281</sup>, I used to make them in all my life here in the U.S.A. and baked in the Oven for several hours. Delicious, I loved to eat it, even

---

<sup>279</sup> This mini-autobiography included Mathilda's only written reference to her family in the Holocaust. After describing "the beautiful hand-embroidered trousseau I worked on for years during the war, all cutwork linens," she mentioned giving it to her sister Milli who'd gotten married in 1922. "She loved them and used them until [she and her family] were taken away by Hitler to Concentration Camps and killed there"—a sentence Mathilda then scored through.

<sup>280</sup> Which recalled my first wholly original literary production, commissioned in 1963 to cheer up Grandma after Grandpa's death. It had the Milnesque title *I'm Writing a Book for My Grandmother But It Isn't Finished Yet*.

<sup>281</sup> The slow-simmering stew of beans and barley, traditional Jewish Sabbath fare, mentioned in Chapter 2.

warmed over. I still don't remember Kolozsvár just even though you describe it well. Just some of the parts, but can't visualize it... I don't have good pen to write with, hope you can read and understand it? I'm always happy to [hear] from you. Your loving

*Grandma Ehrlich.*

I saw her again in May 1986, when she was in poor shape but enjoyed hearing me describe the novel *Csardas*; and once more in July 1987 when she'd staged a renaissance and was in fine fettle, being very particular about how her new wig was dressed by Sherry Renée and which earrings should be worn with it.

All the accoutrements of a lady, from start to finish.



## Appendix J: Martha and *To Be Honest*

“Time is really a problem to me, and chronology a fairly lost cause,” Martha wrote in November 1974. She would always recall the trip to America as having lasted four *months* instead of four weeks. Every year S.R. would take her and Nick completely by surprise by reminding them of their wedding anniversary. And when George visited the Mlinariches and asked if Martha had any photos from the old days, he let out a meticulous recordkeeper’s squawk of pain when she extracted huge plastic bags of unmounted unorganized snapshots from a closet.

Like her mother and daughter, Martha was pleased out of all proportion when the slapdash first stab at *An Honest Tale Plainly Told* belatedly saw the light:

**1984 February 20.** My dear Paul, UPS stopped by this afternoon with “THE VOLUME.” ...I intended to read it as soon as some papers had been graded<sup>282</sup>. Then I came to my senses and realized I need not be ruled by the miserable test papers I tote home. I threw them back into my briefcase, and read “it” from cover to cover. I smiled a lot, shed a few tears, and loved every page of it... I think you’ve done a remarkable job, Paul. Your patience and perseverance are, for my bulldozing type of personality, truly enviable... Let me know if you need fill-in info for Vol. II. I’ll dig into my memory bank—such as it is...

When I visited California City<sup>283</sup> that July I interviewed Martha and harvested her memories, including the only clear one of Europe: her parents buying *Szent János kenyér* or St. John’s Bread, a “very thin seed pod about the size and shape of a flattened banana, with a nutlike flavor.” Also her only clear memory of the voyage to America: watching cargo being loaded in the ship prior to departure, and workers suddenly jumping into the hold to bring up an injured man covered with blood. And there was a recollection about the Division Street apartment where George was born: it had a potbellied stove, around which Joseph would hold a *dunyha* (eiderdown) on winter nights before running to spread it over Martha in bed.

I gave her a live reading of her Diary’s rediscovered 1953 translation, though Martha

---

<sup>282</sup> George did his papergrading in our living room, using a large lap board he’d devised for the purpose. This was later given to Matthew to grade *his* papers upon.

<sup>283</sup> Where Martha’s vast menagerie had been joined by a neurotic Hungarian Vizsla she called Cluj.

admonished that “I don’t want to hear anything *I* wrote in it!” But she applauded when the Diary was fully transcribed and printed as *An Honest Tale Plainly Told* Volume II:

**1984 September 8.** ...To be honest, the trigger for this letter is G’ma. She finished Vol. 2 and gave me all sorts of rave words to send on to you in her name. She also said she is amazed at how much she had forgotten, which your book has now brought back. I haven’t finished my own copy as yet, but I’m sure you know how much I too am enjoying it. It is infuriating to have the time, finally<sup>284</sup>, and still not be able to read as I would wish. Pain and medication do not always adjust to each other and I no longer can, nor try, to push myself... Hope I won’t/haven’t been hold(ing) you up on your Vol. 3 work. Maybe my system will soon adjust to the new combo of routine of meds and I’ll function better...

While recuperating that autumn from cyclotron treatment of her spinal cancer, Martha valiantly deciphered Joseph’s handwritten entry in George’s 1935 diary (a task beyond George’s limited grasp of Hungarian):

**1984 November.** Paul—the only way this seemed to work out was to keep “looking at it” until a word jumped into my vision as letters “declared” themselves. At times a K suddenly became an R or some other letter, and a word popped in... A Hunky dictionary (even English) would help...

By February 1985 she had convalesced to the point of writing lengthy letters, though “muscle spasms can be so horrendous at times I can barely move... Twenty minutes to get out of bed in the A.M. at ¼ inch at a time is ridiculous. The dead tissue needs 8-12 months to be absorbed, meanwhile I could join the Muppets as older sister to Miss Piggy.” A series of severe health crises followed, and by June Martha was down to skin and bones, suffering from nightmares and medication-induced hallucinations. Yet she rallied (emotionally if not physically) and by August resumed letterwriting. In September she reacted to *An Honest Tale* Volume IV:

I’ve been reading spots as I open pages at random. I told you I lived behind gauze curtains during almost the first half of my life: having things, people, occasions

---

<sup>284</sup> After she’d reluctantly retired from teaching the previous June.

brought back to me is like having drama so vivid as to come to life. Or perhaps rather—someone pulled aside those gauze curtains and allowed those people and scenes to come to life again. How could I have forgotten so much?... Reading certain parts (and incidences [*sic*]) were quite painful then, and bring back the same pain now. Putting it all together as you have done is a monumental task...

Followed later that month by: “I’ve just finished reading Vol. 4, and laughed, cried a bit, and marveled at your acquisition of memorabilia thought to be nonexistent... I do think your organization of sections is wonderful. I would have stewed in complete confusion with so much material to sort through...”

In April 1986 Martha reacted to the consolidated draft version of *To Be Honest*:

*MY GOD!!!* You can tell, “It” arrived... I have *never* been *more* impressed, and certainly never *as* impressed, except by the fact that the self-proclaimed “Old Maid Martha” found in her lifetime not one, but even two husbands!! That rates self-impressedness because the self-image long ago deemed it impossible in this lifetime *ever!*

She was in high spirits during George’s and my joint visit to California that May, when I was able to quiz sister and brother together on points still needing clarification.

Circa 1988 Martha wrote an eleven-page manuscript, apparently intended to be part of a wider-ranging autobiography; but by then she was in the final stages of her battle with cancer, and “more about this later” gave way to “enough is enough.” Excerpts are presented below, slightly rearranged for greater coherence:

If my entire life were to be summarized, it could be done in five words—“Martha will be a teacher.” That was my father’s dream and his plan, and those were the words by which I was brainwashed, one might say, from the day I was born. Being a teacher was, to my father, the highest and closest to a sacred calling there could be...

Library cards—absolute treasures. For a shy girl with very few friends, my friends were books. I never missed people for that reason. Instead of going out to play or “hang out” with friends, I read constantly the library books.

In addition to books, there was music. For the first several years, my father

and mother taught me piano, and my brother violin. George gave it up after a very few years, but I studied until I went away to college... High school—four years—accompanist for choral groups and soloists. Pianist with orchestra and soloist on occasions... (I marvel yet that shy as I was with people, when I sat down at the piano, the world vanished and I was alone with Chopin, Sibelius, Rachmaninoff, and other masters...)

My first day of college had an unforgettable intro. I had been sent the name of my dorm roommate, but when I arrived, I found out that my blonde, blue-eyed Christian roomie had said no thanks to living with a Jew. A few days later I had been paired with another Jewish girl. It was a slightly stressful beginning, but not nearly as bad as it might have been. Having lived in Chicago from the age of five on, I was quite familiar with graffiti such as “niggers, dogs and Jews keep out...”

[When I began teaching in Urbana I was] about 150 miles from my parents’s home. My Dad would actually be able not only to *know* I was a teacher, but to come and visit me, and *see for himself!* And he did come when he was able to, and even to this day my eyes still puddle up when I visualize his face then, and our talks later in the evening in my apartment as we discussed the philosophies of educations. All the hardships and doing-without were forgotten forever more. “Martha was a teacher...”

Somewhere in mid-1950s or thereabouts... I was asked if, along with selected teachers of History, English, Librarians, Sociology, etc. I would be interested in being a guinea-pig... We were to fill out umpteen questions on current attitudes concerning Aviation and flying, and then fill out the same type of questionnaires *after we had had flying lessons!!* I not only screamed YES!!, I adored the lessons, and actually *soloed* at the end!... I not only flew a two-seater “Ercoupe” plane, I did it without ever having or knowing how to *ride a bike or drive a car!!...*

For many years after I first came to Mojave, I played [the piano] at school functions, programs, graduations, etc. etc. A most impressive (for me) evening occurred at a student-given concert at which the program consisted of bands and orchestras of elementary, junior high and high school, and I played a couple of solo numbers at the end... and accompanied several vocal and instrumental student soloists. I’ll never forget “J.B.” (I do remember his name but hesitate to say it) a




sophomore or junior that year, who had never really cared much for biology and even less for me. He loved music [and] at the end of the program I played a concerto—he said, “I never realized you could play anything. I thought you didn’t care about anything but biology. I feel differently about you now than I ever did before.” That meant so much to me. After that he was more of a friend-student than ever before.

It’s been many years now since I last played. Arthritis slowly ruined my hands, and slowly my back caused problems which for *many* years was also diagnosed and treated as arthritis of my spine. It wasn’t until 1970 that the reason answer was found—a *Chordoma*. (More about this later...)

1969+/-: Wrote (alone) the Curriculum for grades 5-12 called *Family Life and Health Education*. Accepted by Superintendent, school board, and kids, but “it” hit the fan when a group of “moral minority” parents realized it was actually Sex Education! I’ll never forget the mother who screamed that she would teach her kids what they needed to know, completely ignoring the fact that her son was awaiting three births for which he was to be daddy. The curriculum died a quiet death. After my having spent ten-to-sixteen hours almost every day all summer long putting it together from scratch. Ah, well...

1975: Appointed one of top 25 “Outstanding Secondary Educators in America.” The top 25 [were] among only those named in California. Have no idea how many there were from all of the state[s?], but it felt nice...

The rest were relatively minor, so enough is enough.



## Appendix K: George and *To Be Honest*

“Good God . . . this unveiling of my past is a little bit like listening to someone else’s history,” George remarked in June 1984 as I interviewed him for Volume III of *An Honest Tale Plainly Told*. He’d always thought his upbringing had been in no way extraordinary for a child of immigrants in the Depression, till I jumpstarted the long-stalled Ehrlich Family History and excavated numerous surprises, large and small—e.g. his participation in a high school round table discussion, broadcast over the radio, “in which the aims and objectives of Mechanical Drawing were set forth, as well as subject material of various blueprinting, architectural drawing, and aviation drawing.”

GEORGE [*over his wife’s loud delighted laughter*]:

Oh *surely* that’s wrong—we weren’t talking about *that*.

MYSELF: Well, not necessarily on the radio.

MILA JEAN: **HA! HA! HA!**

My father was the prime participant in reviving this dormant project and encouraging it through to completion. In March 1986 he responded to the draft version of *To Be Honest* with a four-page single-spaced professorial critique:

I’ve finished the manuscript, and I have dried my eyes. Yes, there were parts which really got to me. That means that I have a problem in making objective comments which can be useful to you. Nevertheless, I shall give it a try, and bear with me if I seem overly pedantic; it is my way of trying to distance myself from the details while concentrating on the overall narrative.

I read “To Be Honest” with two sets of eyes. In the first instance I read this as an editor. What is this story about; how it is organized; and how is it told? In the second instance, I read as a copy editor who happened to know the facts, and thus picked up on rather specific things. Unfortunately, I also read this as a character in the story, and that has created a lot of problems for me, more than being the author’s father. You have been on your own long enough to have reduced my parental anxieties, so I think I am writing to you as my capable colleague. But can I distance

myself sufficiently from the story to be useful in my comments? We shall see.

I will begin with some impressions. First, there is the obvious fact that the story of Joseph and Mathilda Ehrlich is worth telling, if only to delineate the why and how two people emigrated to the United States, and what happened as the result of this momentous decision. The story is more than that, it is also a story of coping with adversities. In this story, the children of Joseph and Mathilda are important (as are their children), since they represent for the “first generation” both a responsibility and a surrogate who would enjoy the better life. Nevertheless, the book is a narrative of *two Europeans*, born in the last decade of the nineteenth century, who lived to see and experience a great deal. Consequently, everything reported by you should be tested for its relevance to as well as be directly connected to the elder Ehrlichs.

Let me illustrate this last point. Consider the role unexpectedly but happily received by the elder Ehrlichs as “parents” to Sherry when Martha returned north. This is not a matter of Martha’s failed marriage, and reentry into teaching, though obviously these things need to be explained. Rather, it was the first and only time that the elder Ehrlichs had a chance to be with and raise a small child with much attention. Both in Kolozsvár and in Chicago, both Ehrlichs had to work long and hard hours when their own children were born and small. They were too tired to do the things they wished to do with or for them. Also, times were desperate. In Chicago, with Sherry, they had the time, they had the opportunity (and the resources) to do things. Thus the “Little Princess” was a chance finally to achieve what had been earlier denied them through no fault of their own. It is worth pointing this out; it explains much.

What I recommend then is that your “Introduction” be made into a “Preface,” and the new “Introduction” should be the Narrator (you) providing the reader with some insight into what this story is all about, and why it is worth the telling and the reading. It is true that I never gave much thought to “their lives” as being “interesting,” but you showed me that it was not only that but also more heroic, in a quiet sort of way, than even I recognized by myself. The reason it is worth telling us also about the children and grandchildren is that this aspect of the family, in the elder Ehrlichs’s eyes, *validated* their lives. For them, through the progeny the story has a

happy ending they can see, even though for *us* the story is one that is unfinished as we still have to cross uncharted waters undoubtedly filled with demons. You need to tell your reader these things before we get into the actual narrative.

This brings me to the fact that you, as Narrator, must be more consistently obvious throughout the story. I'll develop that point in a moment, but consider, we need to be reminded periodically of the fact that Joseph and Mathilda represent European and late Victorian values, while Martha and George are 20th Century and American. Thus, once we get to the USA, we have a story of two worlds, of split generations. This is true even though Grandma adapted remarkably well to America and the modern life. The Narrator needs to point out that with my entrance into military service, for the first time since coming to America, Joseph and Mathilda had the potential of getting ahead of the steady diet of always being in debt, or barely making ends meet. With the departure of their children from home, the elder Ehrlichs lost something precious, but they also gained, for the *first* time, financial independence.

Independence would be led by retirement, even though it meant leaving behind Chicago, the fur business (neither missed), but it also meant being removed from family. The Narrator should remind us of the significance of this. You refer to it, but do not make it as important as indeed the narrative preliminary to this point tells us it is. What is the significance of buying a proper home with new furniture, for people who lived so frugally virtually all their lives? Why must we wait to the last chapters to learn that both children's professional involvement in teaching is in a way both ironic and symbolic (of something larger)? Martha had difficulty getting into teaching, and at least twice interrupted that career. George really backed into it. What is the significance for the elder Ehrlichs of the facts that Martha got married again, and this time it took, and George, who seemed destined to be a bachelor for life, finally got married and had children, in addition to completing eventually his Ph.D.? The significance is that you finally have the achievement through the surrogates of the good (and proper?) life. Except for the tragedy of Parkinson's. The Narrator's reminder that the past would not let go its hold is needed (I think). The past had caught up with the elder Ehrlichs, but at least it was *after* having a taste of

the good life. The fatalist in Joseph would mean he would shrug his shoulders, not give in but reconcile himself to the fact that he had once again to cope with adversity, this time without any hope of winning. But he had seen more than Canaan from the hill; he had actually enjoyed, if briefly, the milk and honey of the promised land. He saw his children successful in his eyes. Therefore, I think he died relatively content.

As for Grandma, it is a story of continued spunk, puzzled a bit over why she and her two cousins have been given so many more years than their husbands, but at least each still having an opportunity to see what happens to their progeny...

This narrative, in my opinion, is then a story which is essentially optimistic, but that fact was not visible to the participants until near the end, and then perhaps only partially. I only now see it that way. That means that the role of the Narrator (Paul Ehrlich) looms much larger than you have allowed it to be. As a historian, you have to identify the relevant facts and fit them together into a coherent whole. However, *you* know how the story turns out, and that influences what you choose to emphasize and how to advise the reader to interpret the information provided. You are not only our guide through this story, you are, in turn, a teacher of history, geography, politics, etc.

For example, when you allow Martha's diary to take over a large part of Part I, it is because you hope it illuminates the immediate concerns of Joseph and Mathilda. However, much of what you include in Part I can be paraphrased, and *it should be*. The extreme love and protection of baby Martha is best told in your words with a few deftly inserted quotations. The same is true of other people, such as Sándor, Fáni and Jani. However, when you need to discuss Joseph and Mathilda's reactions to the world in which they must function, full quotations are invaluable and thus necessary.

As for the history of the nation and the Hungarian and Transylvanian Jews, this is obviously important, but the Narrator needs to tell us that we don't know how much of this larger history the elder Ehrlichs knew, other than those results which did impact upon them. That is why *we* must know more than they did. Similarly, the Holocaust is important, but I see the period of World War II as having three distinct sections (chapters?), rather than the integration which you tried to achieve. There is

the story of the elder Ehrlichs, seeing at a distance dreadful events in Europe (and in The Far East), and being helpless to deal with them. Their business slowly declines, their children are no longer at home. They manage (once again) to make do during a war. Then there is the story of Martha and George who are now “on their own,” caught up in the war in their own ways, as were all of my generation. The girls were married to people in service; all of the boys were in uniform. The older generation, despite its intense interest in world politics, was not really that well informed (who were in the United States?), but they were loyal and were proud of their children’s service. But they were separated from it in a way that was not the case in World War I. And then there is the grim reality of what in fact was happening to the relatives left in Europe. While I remember some Europeans who got away and came to Chicago (we knew they had been in camps of some sort), none of the immediate relatives made it out<sup>285</sup>. I really don’t know what my parents knew about the Holocaust. It was never really discussed. How could it be? Our family has always mourned very privately. For example, I wasn’t taken to Grampa<sup>286</sup> Kohn’s funeral (I assume there was one). I was not told for some time that Grandma Kohn had died (while I was in service), so I would not be upset. When the end for someone came, such as Alex Temmer, still a young man, there was no great family outpouring; each seemed to deal with it privately, and damn it all I suspect that will still be the case when Martha and my Mother go, which I fear will be soon.

The point in all this, Paul, is that you have to be even more ruthless than you have been in your writing/editing. You need to remove still more of the interesting things you have learned for the simple reason that they tend to distract from the principal story of two people coping. And you have to become more of a presence (and not as the little postscript) in your role as narrator. That puts you in a precarious position, but I think it is important you assume that role. After all, you are not acting as an editor of a diary, writing a few explanatory notes. You are holding up a lens and directing our view through it at the past.

Finally, I think it is wise to remind us periodically of how old Joseph and


---

<sup>285</sup> George has here forgotten about Jenő’s family, Ily and the Ladners.

<sup>286</sup> That is, *Samu bácsi*; George was also raised to call *Jenka néni* “Grandma.”




Mathilda are at key times in their lives. Joseph was only 29 when he left for what he hoped would be a better life. He went to a land where he discovered he was linked with Hunkies, but he had to face also the dreaded spectre of being taken for a greenhorn. He was not only a man of his word, he was a mighty proud man. Even in his 20s. I wonder if I could have coped half as well when I was his age facing what he had to face? And that is the sub-text, isn't it?



Many of these recommendations, including citations from this critique, were incorporated into the final 1986 text of *To Be Honest*. Others I respectfully differed with then (when Martha and George's stories were still ongoing) and more so now (when each has long since concluded).


Joseph and Mathilda's story does remain the heart of the narrative; yet their children didn't merely fulfill and validate parental hopes and dreams. Martha and George each had to overcome obstacles, survive ordeals, and elude potential sidetracks that could have left Martha in a Miami trailer park, never returning to the classroom; and George pursuing a career in computer design, with only a hobbyist's interest in art and architecture. Fate might even have caused the Vice-Consul to deny the Ehrlichs a visa on that momentous day in 1923, leaving them marooned in Cluj to ultimately perish and be forgotten.

But as Fate would have it (and Joseph would say), both of the Ehrlich children were able to grow up in America and have a beneficial educational impact upon generations of students, who might have gone without a trusted teacher's friendship and support; as well as entire communities, where historic buildings might have fallen to the wrecker's ball. And this Martha and George accomplished not just as their parents had brought them up, but to a very great extent from being honest.



## A Final Recap: George and His Parents

In recently-discovered correspondence George sent thanks to two ladies<sup>287</sup>, volunteers at the Lancaster Convalescent Hospital, who had befriended Mathilda in her final months. His June 9, 1992 letter after her death serves as a fitting final recap to this anniversary edition of *To Be Honest*.



Thank you for your card and especially for your letter, which I received yesterday. I was so glad to have met you at the end of May, for now I feel I know you even if our visit was brief. Perhaps I can best express my appreciation for the friendship you extended to my mother—right up to the end—by giving you some idea of who and what she was before she became the tiny, frail person you knew, though there were still hints visible in the invalid.

Mathilda was born in September 1895 in Kolozsvár, in the eastern province of Hungary that is called Transylvania (today in modern Romania). My father was born in March 1894 in Győr, in western Hungary. They met during World War I. There was a distant marriage connection between the two families, and it was hospitality for the soldier on convalescent leave in Budapest that provided the opportunity (he was an officer in the Austro-Hungarian army). Mathilda was learning to be a milliner, and was staying with relatives in Budapest. Their courtship was extremely formal, and of course mostly long distance. They intended to wait until the war was over to get married, but as the war dragged on they finally were married in July 1918. My sister was born in September 1919.

My father had had a very difficult youth, having for the most part to fend for himself once his father had died, when Dad was twelve. He never spoke of those years, even to my mother, except to indicate that they were difficult. He was willing, however, to talk a bit about his life as a university student. He managed to find the means to finance his education by tutoring boys with learning disabilities, and was teaching in a boys's school when he was called up for service in late 1914/early 1915. Thus, he never finished his university degree. In contrast, my mother had a comparatively affluent life, but even so she received the job training in millinery. Once her training was completed, she set up her own shop in

---

<sup>287</sup> Nancy Hartington and Stella Nugent, both of Lancaster CA.

Kolozsvár. If you know what women's hats looked like in the period 1910-1920, you realize that this was akin in its complexity to being a custom dressmaker.

My father was once again on leave after their marriage in 1918, when mutinies occurred in the Hungarian army. Transportation back to the (now the western) front was difficult, and officers were being killed, which made it impossible for my father to return to his unit when his leave was up. Then the political system in Hungary collapsed and soon the war was ended.

Kolozsvár was the capital of Transylvania, which in the 16th Century has been a major kingdom. Romania, which had been on the Allied side in the war, coveted that rich and fertile province, for Hungary was their enemy, being part of the Central Powers. With the transfer completed, those Hungarian-speaking natives of Transylvania were simply made inferior Romanian citizens, but my father being from western Hungary became an alien in Romania, without hope of returning to any kind of teaching job. A revolution in Budapest made it questionable to go there, and so Dad simply faded back into civilian life in Kolozsvár, and tried to help Mother with her shop until things settled down.

Life in Romania was difficult for them. The Romanians were strongly anti-Semitic and corrupt; petty officials were the worst offenders. Mother had an uncle, a tailor, in the United States (Chicago), married to a dynamic little woman, Eugenie (Jennie). They had been in the United States since about 1910 if not earlier. Jennie, who was skilled in embroidery, was the major link back to Europe, and she was the one who encouraged my parents to immigrate under under husband's sponsorship. This they succeeded in doing in 1923.

In Chicago Mother had no difficulty in immediately finding work, as a European trained milliner; Dad, on the other hand, had to take menial dead-end jobs that made the relocation seem futile. He was ready to go back, but Mom was convinced that things would get better. One of her aunt's daughters was married to a furrier. Their store was literally a mom and pop shop, for they worked together, with Rose the sales person the customers met, while her husband dealt with the shop work. They hired Dad to provide them some assistance in the shop during one of their busy periods. Dad found that he had the necessary skills and quickly learned the trade. And once he learned enough English, he was ready to set up his own shop.

I was born in January 1925. By the time I was two years old, Dad had learned enough about the fur business and had mastered enough English that he opened his own shop, and Mother was right there to help him besides her duties as housewife and mother. This was a time when there were all sorts of small neighborhood stores and shops, often family run. Mom and Dad made an interesting team. Dad was able to use his inherently gentlemanly ways (and accent) to impress customers. For that matter, so did Mother. She had been raised very much to be a lady, and always behaved that way in dress and deportment.

Dad was obviously a product of rather courtly European values, despite his difficult youth. He put a premium on proper behavior and, alas for me, seemed in those days to be rather authoritarian. Yet he was a fundamentally shy person, rather embarrassed by his inability to speak or write English as correctly as he could Hungarian. He did have a good sense of humor, and did his best to protect this family from a rather difficult world. He overprotected his daughter, but his son was at heart a bit of a rebel. Mother, on the other hand, despite her European-based sense of proper behavior, was fearless about speaking and writing English at whatever her proficiency, and was remarkably outgoing. It was Mother who sat with me to review my spelling lessons, or my other lessons while I was in grade school, thus also teaching herself. She readily joined the PTA and did all of those things that connected us to our neighbors; Dad was the reserved one.

Together they ran the shop, with Mother's needlework skills used in all sorts of ways. I might add that in the rather small community of the few relatives and Hungarian-speaking friends of which we were a part, almost all of the women worked at some sort of job, typically in a family business, and the daughters were encouraged to learn something by which they could support themselves, or help support their families. Thus my sister was directed to become a teacher, and in 1941 she began her career as a high school biology teacher.

In German the word *ehrlich* means honest or honorable, and I was taught "to live up to my name." My father put a great premium on making sure that his word was his bond. Thus when he obtained machines and materials on credit to start up his own shop, he made certain that all of his debts were paid off by the end of the year regardless of how tight a bind that left us in. This was the way he could be sure once again to obtain credit, and thus

somehow he survived despite some truly difficult times. By the time World War Two was upon us, Mother and Dad had endured more than twenty years of coping with difficulties, of making do but doing it as right as they could. They did this despite both having serious illnesses during the 1930s. Both had become citizens, and as it turned out, neither ever returned to visit Hungary or Transylvania.

It was only after I was called up to military service in 1943 that they could finally begin to put money aside in savings. Dad planned carefully for retirement, and always counted Social Security as a great blessing. He was able to take retirement in 1959, and he and Mother moved to St. Petersburg, Florida, a place they had known from the 1930s, when each in turn had gone there (by bus) on doctor's instructions to convalesce during the harsh Chicago winter. In Florida, Dad told his mostly retired neighbors that he was a retired school teacher, which in one sense he truly was, since he had taught me algebra, and helped start my suster on her musical lessons (the piano). He just erased away the many years of being a furrier, which was how he had to make his living, but which never controlled his spirit. Unfortunately, in Florida Dad's illnesses caught up with him. In addition to diabetes and other ailments, he suffered from Parkinson's disease. The latter got so bad that in March 1963 he insisted that they sell the Florida house and furnishings and move to Los Angeles, where both Rose and her sister Margaret (Jennie's daughters) now lived. My father was determined that Mom be near family when he died, which occurred in July 1963. Also by then my sister Martha and her husband Nick were teachers in Mojave High School.

After Dad died, Mother and her cousin Margaret, also a widow, shared an apartment until 1981. In that long interval Mother was involved in various senior citizen clubs, and she took advantage of almost every opportunity to take group sponsored trips in the far west. She regularly came to visit us in Kansas City. Of Mom's siblings only two still lived in Europe, a much younger sister in Paris, and an older [*sic*] brother in Romania. He finally succeeded in relocating to Israel.

Mother paid for her sister to visit her in the U.S., and then later she went there [to Paris] to visit her, and continued on to Israel to see her brother. He died a few years ago.

Nothing seemed to daunt Mom for very long, and whatever grief she held concerning the fate of her relatives she kept very private. Indeed, throughout the extended family that I knew, death was treated as something that happened, with no public mourning, nor any real

evidence of distress. I cannot explain the why or how of this, except that the emphasis was on making the most one could of what life provided, while trying to remain as moral and ethical as one could. To remember the best things of the life as lived is what is to be treasured.

One of the special things I think worth remembering about Mathilda was her skill as a pastry cook. She was on the whole just an ordinary cook, and she never received special instruction in pastry making. She claimed she got the recipes from American women's magazines. However, she had an intuitive understanding of how to adjust those recipes to produce at times truly extraordinary pastries, of the sort she remember from her youth (for the Hungarians can be remarkable in their baking). Many of her choicest recipes are now in the possession of my sister's daughter, who is gaining local fame among her working friends in Seattle, and is actually doing some custom Christmas baking.

When long ago I suggested to Mom that we set her up as *Matilde's Custom Pastries*, she scoffed. She said she just did them for family and friends. Alas, she never knew the true power of them. When I was in military service and I received a box of "cookies" from home, everyone gathered. They knew that out of that plain box would come an incredible assortment of delicacies, such that few had ever seen much less tasted. She was a truly creative person. She also made exquisite woven baskets while in Florida, using long pine needles; she learned it in a senior citizen's craft class, but they were also special after she got done.

So once she had her stroke in 1981, and Martha moved her out to her home in California City, she had to leave that life of travel and craft behind. Then as she continued to fail, and she required care that could not be provided by my sister and her husband, we knew she had to be placed in the convalescent hospital. She was sufficiently incapacitated when she went there in January 1983 that everyone was certain that she would not live out the year. She made it clear that she wanted to die, and was at first quite bitter that she did not.

When Martha's illness got so advanced that she no longer was able to visit Mother, Mathilda wanted even more to die; she felt it wrong that her child should die before she did. Yet she had to find a way to cope, and she did. After all she had survived a lot of difficulties in the past and had learned to adapt to what life gave her. When things evolved to where I assumed the principal responsibility of her affairs, my being so far away was a nagging



problem for both of us. But as I wrote you earlier, there was no way we could find as good a place for her near me; of that I am certain. For better or worse, the Lancaster Convalescent Hospital was her home, and the staff were her neighbors.

Then, providentially, you came on the scene in the last months of her life. You brought her far more than you can imagine, for you were a friend. I have no idea of how she might have expressed that to you, but you see you are about the same age as her granddaughter, and for her the children of all generations were special. I know you enriched the last months of her life, and for that gift you gave to my mother you are now special to me<sup>288</sup>.



---

<sup>288</sup> This letter was to Nancy Hartington, who'd told George that "Mathilda knew me better than anyone but my husband. She loved Stella's and my serenade a couple of months ago. I think she sang along—all traditional Jewish songs. She liked Stella's 'sing along' during the Mother's Day party ... Stella had everyone singing and stamping their feet (or cane) and clapping!" To Stella Nugent George wrote a similar letter, adding that for Mathilda "death was neither feared nor unwelcome. She was just patiently biding her time until her body finally gave out. My only regret is that neither you nor Nancy, or the long-time staff at the hospital, was able to know Mathilda before she became so seriously ill in 1981. Afterwards, only a portion of the vital, dynamic person was visible. And that is the person that I keep close in my heart and in my memory."

## Selected Bibliography

- Bandholtz, Maj. Gen. Harry Hill. *An Undiplomatic Diary*. Columbia University, 1933.
- Bauer, Yehuda. *A History of the Holocaust*. Franklin Watts, 1982.
- Braham, Randolph L. *Genocide and Retribution: The Holocaust in Hungarian-Ruled Northern Transylvania*. Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing, 1983.
- Braham, Randolph L. *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary*. (2 vols.) Columbia University Press, 1981.
- Cruttwell, C.R.F.M. *A History of the Great War 1914-1918*. Paladin Books, 1982 (original edition 1934).
- Dawidowicz, Lucy S. *The War Against the Jews 1933-1945*. Bantam, 1976.
- Encyclopedia Britannica*. 1959 edition.
- Encyclopedia Judaica*. Macmillan, 1971.
- Fischer-Galați, Stephen. *Twentieth Century Rumania*. Columbia University, 1970.
- Giurescu, Constatin C. *Transylvania in the History of Romania*. Garnstone, 1969.
- Ignotus, Paul. *Hungary*. Praeger, 1972.
- Illinois: A Descriptive and Historical Guide*. A.C. McClurg, 1939.
- Jewish Encyclopedia, The*. Funk & Wagnalls, 1901-05.
- Kovi, Paul. *Paul Kovi's Transylvanian Cuisine*. Crown Publishers, 1985.
- Leigh Fermor, Patrick. *Between the Woods and the Water*. Penguin Books, 1986.
- Levin, Nora. *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry 1933-1945*. Schocken, 1973.
- Marshall, S.L.A. *World War I*. American Heritage Library, 1985.
- Pascu, Stefan. *A History of Transylvania*. Wayne State University Press, 1982.
- Pearson, Diane. *Csardas*. Fawcett Crest, 1976.
- Starkie, Walter. *Raggle-Taggle: Adventures with a Fiddle in Hungary and Romania*. Albemarle Library, 1947 (original edition 1933).
- Stokes, Adrian. *Hungary*. Adam & Charles Block, 1909.
- Tőkés, Rudolf L. *Béla Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic*. Praeger, 1967.
- Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, The*. 1939-43.
- Völgyes, Iván, ed. *Hungary in Revolution, 1918-19*. University of Nebraska, 1971.





**P. S. (Paul Stephen) Ehrlich** was born, raised, and educated in Kansas City, Missouri. After enduring thirty-one summers and winters there, he exchanged Middle Western climate for Puget Sound's in 1988. Employed by the University of Washington (not necessarily as an instructor) he lives with himself outside Seattle.

As the author of *The Ups and Downs of Skeeter Kitefly*, *Skeeter Kitefly's Sugardaddy Confessor*, *13 Black Cats Under a Ladder*, and the multivolume *Bolster, Not Molest Her: Being and Nothingness with Vicki Volester*, he has since 2002 administered the Skeeter Kitefly Website and its Split Infinitive Productions at [www.SkeeterKitefly.com](http://www.SkeeterKitefly.com).