

MY LIFE

Otto Feller

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

Otto

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

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

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

In Timisoara, my father opened The Chocolate King, but his chocolate store sadly went bankrupt in 1930. In 1931, he got involved with the biggest beer factory in the city owned by a German firm. They opened a small beer pub with appetizers and my father became the owner. He was a very hardworking person who quickly learned his new profession, and the little pub soon gained the reputation of having the best beer in town. In my early years, I attended a Jewish



← The beer pub



1945 - With my father in our restaurant.

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

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

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

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

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

The business began to thrive, and my parents worked from early morning to midnight, seven days a week. The cooking was my mother's job, and she worked in the kitchen in our second floor apartment and a maid carried the food down to

the restaurant. My mother's soups and stews were well known throughout the city, and customers often came from far away to enjoy her cooking.

When friends came asking if I could come out to play, my father's answer always was, "NO, Otto has to serve the customers." My mother even argued with him to let me go out and enjoy my childhood. I didn't really mind helping in the restaurant, I just wished I didn't have to work nearly every day, sometimes from 3-9 pm.

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

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

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

As a teenager, I loved music and singing. I studied violin for about three years (I'm sorry now that I didn't continue!), and I studied accordion when I was 16. I loved it! Two of my friends were learning to play clarinet and bass, so we started

a jazz trio, playing and singing mostly American compositions. For the front of our music stand, I made a design of Disney's three little pigs, each playing his instrument. We performed at high school events and at friends' parties.

The hard work in the restaurant and pub lasted for nine years. My father sold it because he was literally sick and tired. He developed a nicotine infection from smoking 60 cigarettes a day. Since my father couldn't get a Romanian citizenship and therefore couldn't own property, he had to pay costly bribes to state officials. He was forced to rely on the good will of a benefactor who would apply for the necessary licenses. In return, of course, those benefactors expected a sizable percentage.

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

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

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

When I finished high school, my father and I debated whether I should continue with school. Because of the political climate and being Jewish, he felt that I should learn a craft. Since I was talented at drawing, I decided to look for something in that field. So did all my friends. We found a textile factory that was introducing creative designs for printing scarves and material for dresses. I was 17 years old when they hired me as an apprentice for three years and in the

second year, I already became head of the art department and had four people working for me. During my three-year apprenticeship, I attended a master class school every evening. I was accepted into a special textile professional school, where I received a degree in textile engineering. At that time, I was the head of the whole "Imprime" department of 35 people.

The next part will be published in the next issue of the Timisoara Iudaica website, www.bjt2006.org