

MY LIFE

Part III

By Otto Feller

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

There were new elections that included at least eight different political parties. I voted for the Communist party, which was elected by fraud, because the Russian army was still in the country and somehow forced the Romanians to install a so-called labor government sympathetic with the Soviets. My father said, "My own son is my enemy," because the Communist party forbade private ownership of property. According to Communism, all property would belong to the state and citizens would be paid according to their knowledge and ability. Former so-called

Capitalists (those who owned factories or big farms) were all imprisoned or sent to labor camps because they had become rich by exploiting their employees.

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

Very often during the four years in the camps, I asked God what terrible sins the Jews had committed that he punished us. I stopped believing in God, and I didn't visit a synagogue for years. I surely changed my opinion years later when we lived next door to a beautiful Conservative synagogue. Although we didn't participate, we watched the big crowds of Jews from our windows during the High Holy days. Interestingly, this later was the synagogue where I officiated as Cantor for eight years.

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

have any. I once stood in line from 9 pm through 11am next day for a winter coat, and I didn't get my size.

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

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

The ensemble performances were so successful that the government sent us to perform around the country's major cities. Audiences were enthusiastic, and we had a good time. The relations among all the girls and boys were excellent. The government heard about our success and decided to send us abroad to three different countries. We left a few weeks later for Yugoslavia, Albania and Bulgaria. I left home worried about my father's health and his restaurant's situation. We enjoyed great success in many different cities. All three countries were affiliated with the Soviet Union's ideology, and our program was aligned with Communist political views. It was difficult for me to visit some of the places where I had traveled as a child to visit my mother's family – all of whom had been killed by the Germans and Croat members of Yugoslavia. It was very hard for me to see those places again. In Albania (a very poor country), we were served the best they could afford. We could hardly eat their food because even the bread smelled like goat. So we ate mostly canned herrings.

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

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



I started to cry painfully next to him and was pulled away by my mother and sister. My father recognized me and asked, "Did you go to the cemetery to visit my family's graves?" After I said yes, he closed his eyes and died. It was June 1948 and he was 59 years old. The whole time he was ill, he had been asking, "When is my Kaddish coming so I can die?" I was amazed that he was able to

wait for me to come home. For the next six months, I didn't shave, and I went to the temple to say Kaddish twice a day.

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

Meanwhile, my sister married John Gereb an accountant in Bucharest, where she lived. She worked for awhile with our cousin Hedy, making sweaters and scarves. I had to volunteer every Sunday to collect fruit, corn or whatever was necessary. Sometimes, I even cleaned buildings that had been damaged by bombardment.
(...)

After our return from touring in three countries in 1948-49, some new volunteer singers and dancers joined our group. People sold cookies during our rehearsal intermissions, and a new girl in the choir said, "I don't have any money. Could you buy me a cookie?" I bought her a cookie, we started talking and we decided to go to a movie after the next rehearsal. I accompanied her home from the movie, walking in the dark through the park. We talked for a long time on a park bench, after a few minutes, I kissed her. This was the beginning of my relationship with Aggie. Her mother was anxiously waiting outside her home because it was so late. We decided to get together again.

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

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

Aggie and I continued to be together at rehearsals and the ensemble received a free one-month vacation at the Black Sea (Mamaia). We all accepted this gift with joy. This month was especially happy for us because of our new friendship. We spent the time with some rehearsals and performances, and we enjoyed lots of free time and fun at the sea. This was when we decided to become engaged. Aggie had had a boyfriend for the past three years, but she decided to trade him in for an older guy – me! He was very angry and said, “What do you find in that horse head with glasses?” Three months after we returned from the month-long vacation, the Union of the Working Class didn’t have enough funds to finance the performances and closed the ensemble activities. A friend of ours who held a so-called political secretary position at the State Philharmonic Orchestra asked if I would be interested in a job as a musical secretary. I accepted the offer because of my experience in the musical field.



In 1950, Aggie and I were married without any religious ceremony (because of the Communist regime). We only appeared in front of an official at the State

Mayor's office. Some of our family members and friends joined us to celebrate. I moved to the apartment that Aggie shared with her mother. Our bedrooms were separated only by a glass door, so it was not very pleasant. The living conditions at this time were terrible. My mother had to share her apartment with two other families. The government then moved her to a different apartment where she had to pass through another family's room and share her own room with a young girl.

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

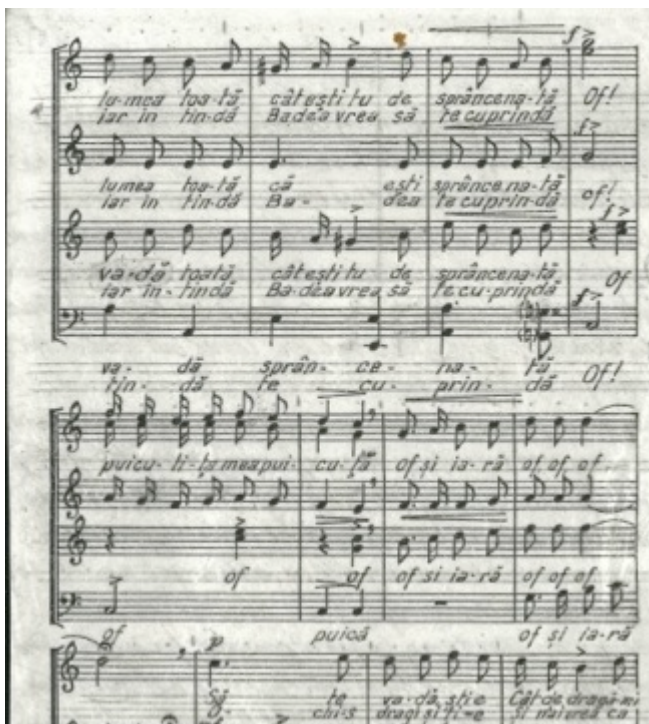
It wasn't an easy job to organize that choir. To start, I had to ask for an OK from the Art and Culture department of the Communist party. They accepted my proposal with the condition that each person who would be professionally accepted should be going through a political verification, because appearing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

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

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



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



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

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

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

By 1957, I realized that my ideology and sympathies with Communist Party had changed, and antisemitism was back because so many Jews held important positions in the Communist Party. Yet, applying for a passport wasn't an easy decision. To leave the place where you were born, quit your job and travel to a country where you don't know the language was heartbreaking. At age 36, I didn't know if I could make it. We were not free to just come and go. On a deeper emotional level, leaving meant saying goodbye to loved ones and possibly never seeing them again.

Part I http://www.bjt2006.org/OF_My_Life_1_0314.pdf

Part II http://www.bjt2006.org/OF_My_Life_2_0514.pdf