

MY LIFE

Part IV

By Otto Feller

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

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

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

About four years after we had applied for a passport, we were denied permission to leave the country. In addition, we had another big problem. My mother-in-law's new husband didn't want to leave the country, she could apply for a passport only if he gave her permission and divorced her. Aggie didn't want to leave without her mother, so what were we to do? It was a very hard decision. We had to convince her husband either to join us or to divorce her. His daughter and grandchildren didn't want to leave. I traveled to Brasov to convince him to make a decision. He finally agreed, and my mother-in-law applied for a passport. Years later his daughter and family emigrated to the USA where his son-in-law had a brother. Sadly, he died alone in Romania.



The temple in Timisoara where I performed as cantor.

After we lost our part-time choir jobs, we joined the choir at a nearby Conservative synagogue. It was a beautiful building built in 1899 in a traditional Moorish style, with two floors reserved for women, a big electric organ and an impressive Bimah. The choir had eight singers, and in a short time, Aggie and I were singing duets and solo pieces. After about one year, the cantor left for Israel, and there was no replacement. Because they liked my solos and duets, they asked me to take the position. I laughed, saying I was not prepared for this! But an older gentleman offered to give me free lessons. I

accepted because I loved the Hebrew compositions, and we started with the Friday evening liturgy. It wasn't easy. There was some written music, but I had to memorize or write down most of the prayers and melodies as my teacher chanted.

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

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

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



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

a CD (which is not the best recorded quality), but at least I have something to remember it by.

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

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

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

Mrs. Fabian was a ballerina at the opera and Mr. Fabian was a dentist. They had two children. They had permission from the Italian officials to work and stay in

Italy. They helped us to get in touch with HIAS to change our destination to USA. We received some cash from them to return by train to Naples where our mothers were nervously waiting for us.

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

So HIAS gave us train tickets to Rome and paid for renting a two-room apartment. Money for food was minimal, but we survived with no money left for extras. We walked and walked around the beautiful city, and when we entered a grocery store, we still couldn't believe the sight of so many different products. It certainly was different from a Communist country store! We walked at least five miles to our daily English lessons, and our mothers took sewing classes to help them get jobs in the U.S. Our friends invited us often, and we were having a good time with them. A young Italian couple lived nearby, and they helped us a lot with their friendship. I once started singing Italian canzonettes to them - they couldn't believe how beautifully I sang and pronounced the words. Aggie started conversing in Italian in just one month, since Romanian and Italian are closely related languages.

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

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

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

While in Italy, we walked the streets of Rome and visited nearly every museum



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

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

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