

MY LIFE

Part V

By Otto Feller

We arrived in New York and then changed planes to Milwaukee. On the flight to Milwaukee (our first American plane), we were served a hot black beverage which turned out to be coffee. We had no idea what this was, as we were used to strong coffee.

We carried our belongings through different doors, and for the first time, I realized that the doors opened automatically. For us, that was something new. Sabina, John, some of their friends, and some friends from Romania were at the airport waiting for us. We were taken to my sister's former apartment at 2636 N. Newhall Ave. as they had moved to a nicer one. For us, this apartment was wonderful. It was cheap, had enough room for us and my mother-in-law, and we didn't have to live with strangers like we had in Timisoara. We received money from the Jewish Family Service (JFS) for food and necessities, and we later paid back my sister and JFS. The trip from Italy was paid off, too, once we started working.



Now, we started our new lives. A Jewish organization the Jewish Family Services asked about our professions and told us what was available. I had experience as a textile engineer designing materials for women, but there was nothing like that

available locally. However, there was a job in silk screening, designing and printing T-shirts. I also hoped to pursue my cantorial knowledge.

While looking for jobs, we were happy to see that the Bel Canto Choir was advertising an upcoming concert of Verdi's Requiem. Since we both had performed it several times in Romania and knew it by heart, we auditioned and were both accepted. They were happy to have us, and we participated in two concerts. After the concert, we naively asked how we would be paid. We were surprised to learn that the performers all volunteered and even had to pay membership fees. We had been in the country for only a few months, so we couldn't afford to pay the fees. Regardless, we enjoyed the prestige of singing in America.

Aggie soon started working at the Milwaukee Investment Company. My sister's friend arranged auditions for me in three different synagogues, but there were no openings. The rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel was very excited to hear me sing, but he couldn't offer me a job because the current cantor was under contract. We received a free one-year membership at Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun, a Reform congregation, which we accepted. For us, a Reform synagogue was strange, as we'd never had one in Romania. Slowly, we got used to it.

Now I tried for a job in the T-shirt business. I interviewed with Eder Flag and Shirt Company and with Crown Prince, and both companies offered me a job starting at \$2 per hour. At that time, this was a nice beginning salary. I chose Crown Prince, where the Jewish owner, Howard Schudson, was impressed by what I had gone through. He introduced me to one of his sons who was working at the shop during his summer vacation. Today, that son is a well known scientist. My job was good, and I felt appreciated. The company, which had 15 employees, mainly produced printed bowling shirts and T-shirts. In June before my birthday, Mr. Schudson invited us to his home. That was very exciting for us. His son David picked us up and took us to the families beautiful home in a wealthy neighborhood. The conversation was a little difficult for us, but it went OK. After dinner, Mrs. Schudson brought out a big cake, and they sang Happy Birthday to me. I was very moved.

After two months, I got another part-time job at Collegiate Sportswear doing artwork for shirts and baseball caps. This job paid \$3.50 per hour. Without a car

and a driver license, I had to take the bus at 7 am. to my full-time job downtown, and at 5 pm. I took a bus to my part-time job on west Center Street. I got home at 9:30 pm. It wasn't easy, but I was happy doing it. Here, too, they liked me and my work, and I became very friendly with the owner's family. I started taking driving lessons and bought a used Chevrolet; in just three months, I got my license.

Aggie and I had been married for 17 years when she became pregnant. Her delivery was very difficult (26 hours of labor), but we were overjoyed to see our daughter for the first time. Judy was beautiful, and all of our friends and family adored her. She was the first baby born in our group of Romanian friends. After two years, we moved to a bigger apartment that had more living space.

After six months, Collegiate Sportswear offered me a full-time job at \$4 per hour, and I accepted their offer. It was a smaller shop that had been open for about two years, but they introduced a new technique called heat transfers. Their business really went up. After one year, Mr. Schudson from Crown Prince called to offer me a better salary if I would introduce them to the heat transfer technique. I accepted the offer. They gave me a very nice raise, and I took over as the production manager with responsibility over all departments. In just one year, the company doubled the number of employees, business was booming. I began traveling to trade shows across the country where we displayed our merchandise like die cut letters, heat transfers, T-shirt designs, bowling supplies, tote bags, etc.

Aggie was working as an accountant in a stock brokerage firm, where she was very much appreciated, and later she became a manager in the accounting department. I was still doing some art work on the side for Collegiate Sportswear, so I was working long hours. It was hard for me to be with Judy as much as I would have liked. We spoke Hungarian and German in our home, we were afraid that Judy would pick up our English accent. It wasn't until kindergarten that she heard and learned English words.

We made many friends, most of whom were immigrants from Romania, Hungary and Germany. Before we had a car of our own, our friends drove us to the lake on weekends and to picnic areas in local parks where we enjoyed grilling and playing games. We even got together with our co-workers. Judy became very popular with all our friends.

In 1970, we were able to buy a home in one of the best area of Whitefish Bay with excellent schools. The house looked like it came from the pages of Hansel and Gretel, and it had two bedrooms upstairs and one bedroom on the first floor for Aggie's mother. We weren't sure that we could afford the house, but it worked out. I enjoyed the home, especially the backyard where I could plant flowers, trees and even vegetables. We planted an apple tree, which in later years gave us thousands of beautiful apples. We made many improvements in the home, like carpeting, painting and tiling the kitchen. I did most of the work myself. Looking back now, I don't know how I had time for everything! We had a busy social life and hosted many dinner parties, with my mother-in-law's help.

Judy did nicely in kindergarten and she learned English quickly. She also took ballet lessons. Years later she took piano lessons at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music with the best piano teacher, Ms. B.(Banaszinski) who was Liberace's and Ralph Votapek's teacher. Judy played classical pieces in recitals and won many contests. We built a nice rec room in the basement where Judy and her friends could play. Aggie, meantime, switched to a different investment company The Loewi Co. where she earned a better salary.

In 1970, we passed our exams and became American citizens. This was definitely a special event in our lives. In 1971, I traveled to Romania and Israel. In Romania, I met my father-in-law, who was in very bad financial shape. I also visited with Aggie's uncle and his family, the Bercovicis, and our former rabbi and his wife who invited me to a nice dinner. It was depressing to learn that none of my former schoolmates or friends remained in Timisoara.

After five days, I traveled to Israel, which was incredible for me. When I saw the ground for the first time from the airplane, I cried. Many family members and friends were waiting for me, and it was a very emotional, happy get together. I split my stay between my twin cousins, Tibor and Victor Kallai's family. On a Saturday, they took me to a very crowded Mediterranean beach where they stuck a pole in the sand with a sign that read, "Reserved Only for People from Timisoara." I can't begin to describe my feelings when I met 40 people -- family, former friends, and schoolmates with their families. Being together with Tibor, Victor, Elisabeth and their mother Melanie, was always fun for me, and I laughed my heart out. It was special! What I missed in my hometown, I found in Israel, since all my family and friends emigrated meantime.

In 1974, Aggie and Judy traveled to Romania to visit the Bercovici (Aggie's uncle) and Ernsti and Ani Wargha (friends). From there Lidia Bercovici (niece) and the Wargha's traveled with them to the beautiful Carpathian Mountains (Dracula's castle!), and Bucharest, and Judy had a nice time with Lidia.

We often enjoyed outings to lakes and museums; we even traveled to Chicago and took some of Judy's friends along. We had great fun on driving trips to Florida, Disney World, California and Arkansas. We visited Israel twice to enjoy time with our families, the twins, their sister and children.

Judy finished Cumberland School, and she was an outstanding student at Whitefish Bay High School.

In 1977-78, Cantor Garber invited me to join the Wisconsin Jewish Music Council, a group of cantors and professional musicians who performed on special occasions. I even performed a solo piece on national television!

In 1979, we learned that a new cellist named Wolfgang Laufer – originally from Timisoara -- was joining the Fine Arts Quartet. We used to sing with his father in the synagogue from 1958-1962, when they emigrated to Israel. He at that time was 15 years old (it's a small world after all). I phoned the cellist, and he immediately remembered us. Sadly, his father had died two weeks before in Israel. We became very good friends with him, his wife Mariana (a former ballerina in Bucharest and Israel), and his children Judy and Danny. When he passed away suddenly in 2011, we lost a very dear friend, and the world lost a famous artist.

Judy earned straight A's and was the school's valedictorian at graduation in 1985. She continued her studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and then was accepted at many of the best universities in the country, including Harvard. She chose the University of Chicago's Law School, where she earned her law degree in 1992.

To Our Daughter, Upon Receiving Her Law Degree:

Today, our daughter graduated from law school. Only yesterday, two people arrived from Romania, moneyless, jobless, and in the prime of their lives. Our first blessing showed up in the form of an adorable little girl after 17 years of marriage. Our job situation improved, and we could offer our daughter a home in a good neighborhood with excellent schools. Throughout the years, she won all

the school, piano and foreign language competitions she participated in. Our hearts were filled with pride and joy watching her become valedictorian of her high school, leading a procession of about 200 students.

And then came her first move from home to UW-Madison, where she earned excellent grades. What should she become, and which universities should she apply to? She was accepted at six wonderful schools and chose the University of Chicago. Hopefully, she made the right choice. Where did those three years go?

Today, our daughter has a good career, and we know that she will be a winner no matter what she does in life.

We are very proud of you, Judy, and we love you always,

Mom and Dad



After Judy's graduation from law school, she traveled with a group of young people to Italy, France and England. We flew to Paris and London, where we spent two days together with Judy. Returning home, Judy took a job with a firm in Chicago.

My mother died in 1989 at age 98. We were very close, and I will always miss her. Three years later Aggie's mother died. Those events were difficult for us.

Lidia and her husband Paul Adler, arrived in New York from Romania. They started a successful new life in New Jersey, he as a computer analyst with a big

firm. Few years later they visited us for a week, bringing their newborn son Daniel and her parents, Eugen and Lizetta, who came from Timisoara.

Ernsti and Ani Wargha received permission to emigrate from Timisoara to Nuremberg, Germany. After two years, they were able to visit us. We had a wonderful time traveling with them to Washington, New York and Niagara Falls. About two years later, they repeated their visit, and we drove to Door County. They then traveled to California, and we met them in Seattle for a driving trip to Vancouver and the Canadian Rockies. We traveled to Budapest twice, and we once took a train from Budapest to Nuremberg where Ernsti rented an RV. Together we drove to Austria, Italy and Switzerland. That trip was unforgettable for our visits to Vienna, Florence, Pisa, Milan and Venice.

I joined the choir at Congregation Emanu-El, which I enjoyed, and a year later got the job as cantorial soloist at Congregation Sinai. I held that job for eight years. Congregation Emanu-El gave me the position of Hazzan Sheini, replacing Cantor Eichaker most Friday evenings and on the second day of Rosh Hashanah services. After the congregation moved to River Hills, we joined Congregation Shalom and I joined its choir. Throughout those years, I also sang with the Milwaukee Jewish Community Chorale.

After working for 28 years, Aggie retired. Her firm gave a big party for her, and she received a nice profit sharing check. Her work had been highly appreciated. In 1995, I retired at age 73 after 30 years of working. This meant we were starting a new and different lifestyle. It was pleasant and relaxing at first, but after a few months, we both wanted to find part-time jobs.

In 1996, Judy married Erik Hudson, a paralegal in her law firm. The wedding at the Hilton Hotel was beautiful. We had about 90 guests that included some of our relatives: Hedy (cousin) from Germany, Lidia and her family from New Jersey, and Usher and his wife from New York. Judge Audrey Brooks officiated at the ceremony, and Rabbi Barry Silberg and Cantor Ron Eichaker blessed the couple. I loved the music, and I enjoyed dancing to the orchestra from Chicago. Three years later, our grandson Sam was born, and after another two years, we were blessed with our granddaughter Ilana.

In 1999, we had an opportunity to work part time using our knowledge of foreign languages. AB Data, which represented the Swiss Holocaust Victim Assets Litigation, asked us to contact Jewish communities all over the world to help find

survivors or their families regarding their losses during the Holocaust. Aggie worked with Romania, Hungary and Italy, and I contacted Germany. We were paid quite well, but our satisfaction came from helping people get restitution for their suffering.

In 2001 John my brother-in-law died. A few years later Sabina had to be moved to a retirement home, she started having problems with a degenerative eye sight and dementia. I have a Power of Attorney and I am taking care of her medical and financial problems. She is 95 years old and in good physical health.

In our free time, we often drove to Chicago even for just one day to visit our daughter and her family. Those were wonderful times. Judy had a good job as an attorney, but after 10 years, she became a legal recruiter so that she could work fewer hours and spend more time with her children. In 2004, Judy and her family moved to Milwaukee where she was able to work from home and we could help with the children. It made us very happy to spend time with them.



In 2007, we made the big decision to sell our house and move to a two-bedroom condo at 1600 W. Green Tree Rd. apt.308 We were aging, and climbing the stairs to the second floor was becoming difficult for Aggie. I also was developing some health issues. I had some bleeding problems following surgeries. Even with a factor VIII transfusion before and after each procedure, I would bleed and develop blood clots. The doctors can't find the cause, as I have almost normal coagulation blood test results. I am evaluated each year at the Blood Center. I also was diagnosed with heart disease at age 72, and I underwent three

angioplasties and received a stent. I also have liver complications due to Hepatitis C, which I contracted in the labor camp. Every six months, I have an ultrasound to be sure it isn't malignant.

At age 87, I passed out once at the pool in Florida and twice during services while singing in the temple choir. This was very unpleasant, and I decided to finish my singing career so that I wouldn't cause any more commotion. This was a difficult decision for me, since performing brought me joy for more than 70 years.

In general, my life has been successful in many ways despite some unforgettable bad times. My teenage years were pleasant because I had so many great friends, and strict parenting by my father helped me to be successful in my later life.

I survived the labor camps, WWII and the Communist era -- difficult and hard times of my life. Singing, enjoying concerts and opera and having many friends helped ease my existence. Being married to Aggie for more than 60 years, Judy's birth, her marriage to Erik and later the births of Sam and Ilana, our sweet grandchildren, have made my whole life perfect. Most of these achievements would not have been possible without emigration to this great country; no wonder it is called the Land of Opportunity.

Today, as I write the story of my life, I am 90 years old and my health is relatively good. Hopefully, I will have many more years to enjoy life with my family.

To my dear family: I am confident that if your mother and grandmother survive me, all of you **will take good care of her.**

OTTO FELLER



My 90th Birthday

I would like to thank Jodi Peck for her tireless help with my story.