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DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0104.11

From the Ghetto to Auschwitz and Back – Transgenerational Trauma. The Case Study of an Oradea Jewish Family that Survived the Holocaust and of their Descendants[1]

Abstract

A city in present-day Romania with a multicultural, multiethnic and multiconfessional history, Oradea (Nagyvarad, Grosswardein, Varadino, Magnum Varadinum) has had from its very foundation an entirely distinct geopolitical reality, its century-long existence being marked by a wide variety and continuous differentiation, which penetrate deeply into every aspect of everyday community life. The Jewish community, actively present since the 18th century, carved out a place for itself and represented a hub of Jewish emancipation in the episcopal city, which was often a battleground for the hegemonic local forces, the reformed Transylvanian ones, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. After a long and relatively

1 This article represents one of the case studies carried out and presented in the PhD thesis in History (The Doctoral School of International Relations and Security Studies, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, România) publicly defended on 20th October 2023.

Lazarovici-Vereș R. (2023). From the Ghetto to Auschwitz and Back – Transgenerational Trauma. The Case Study of an Oradea Jewish Family that Survived the Holocaust and of their Descendants. *Trimarium. The History and Literature of Central and Eastern European Countries*, 4(4), 266–286.
DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0104.11

Submitted: 15.11.2023 / Accepted: 21.11.2023

peaceful period of Romanian rule (1918–1940), following the Second World War the population of Oradea was shaken by racial laws issued first by the Romanian authority and afterwards by the Horthyst occupying forces (1940–1944) in Northern Transylvania, which concentrated Jews for deportation in the second biggest ghetto in Eastern Europe after Budapest. The demography of Oradea showed the loss of one third of its residents. Out of nearly 30,000 inhabitants, barely 2000 survivors returned, and the transgenerational trauma sent its echoes through time to the fourth generation, that of today's teenagers. Their grandparents and great-grandparents, returned from deportation, had to go through another trauma and persecution, with the communists' coming to power in 1948 and soon afterwards, that of the ‚red antisemitism'. The ways this trauma passed down across generations and deepened during communist totalitarianism, its masks during the postcommunit period, as well as the means of limiting and combating it are the ramifications of the topic which was examined not only theoretically, but by concrete examples of original case studies based on face-to-face interviews and microhistorical accounts received from the descendants of concentration camp suvivors. To these we shall add several examples from post Shoah memoirs of Oradea survivors and their descendants.

Keywords

Oradea, Holocaust, Jews, Transgenerational Trauma, Survivors

A Brief History of the Jews in Oradea

Oradea (Nagyvarad, Grosswardein, Varadino, Magnum Varadinum) has been from its foundation a multiethnic city, favoured by its position as a geographical and cultural border between two worlds. Throughout its history, except for some instances of radicalisation of different interest groups, particularly under Habsburg rule, which was markedly oppresive, there was a certain representativeness in the public service of all ethnic groups.

The earliest records of the presence of Jews date from the period of Habsburg rule in Oradea, from the late 17th century onwards, after the pashalic period (1660–1692). By and large, the Ottomans were tolerant towards the Jews, and at times of persecution and pogrom in Western history, the Ottoman Empire was preferred by Jews, as a temporary homeland and a safe haven. There are thus strong premises from which we can conclude that there were Jews in Oradea at the time, all the more so as both trade and crafts, prevalent occupations in Sephardic communities, were highly prized in the Ottoman Empire. Thus, as Tereza Mozes points out in her monumental *Monograph of the Jewish Community of Oradea*, "In order to understand the rate of Jewish settlement in Oradea, we have to go through the relevant laws and provisions in force at the beginning of the 17th century." (Mozes, 1997, p. 20)

The information on the first synagogue in Oradea and the satellite--villages is vague. It probably refers to a house of prayer. In 1772 the Sacred Brotherhood was planning to build a synagogue. There is an inscription *Juden Tempel*, next to the former church of the monastic order of the Clarisses in the Velența (Venice) district and, according to the data gathered by Balogh Jolan, in his volume *Varadinum*, there is also a reference on the occasion of the 1752 Conscription, from which it can be concluded that east of the house of worship of the Clarisses there was *Synagoga Iudaeorum*. (Balogh, 1982).

After the 1848 Revolution, Hungarian became the only language of instruction and intracommunity communication recognised by the authorities in Oradea. Jews went through a process of Magyarization out of a willingness to adapt, a desire to change their social status of accepted, tolerated, but also in order to achieve their social, economic and political aspirations (particularly the Neolog Jews). Oradea was predominantly Magyar, but the Bihor area was predominatly Romanian, with Magyar ethno-linguistic enclaves or, more recently, Slovak ones (in the area of villages Loranta, Pădurea Neagră, Voivozi, Șinteu).

After the great emancipation at the end of the 18th century, Jews became thus a stable and visible presence in all areas of activity in Oradea, mainly in the learned professions, but also in industrial entrepreneurship which, in the context of rapid urban development,

brought them prosperity and the desire for social advancement. In Oradea the number of Jews reached one-third of the total population. The urban planning and architecture of Oradea changed radically and definitively with the Jews' socio-professional ascent. Some of the most iconic buildings, mentioned in the case studies analysed in the present work, are Darvas-La Roche House, Sonnenfeld Palace, and we add Black Eagle Palace, Moskovitz Palace I and II, Stern Palace, Ullman Palace (which would have the unfortunate fate of housing ghettoized Jews), the two Adorjan Houses, Goldstein House, Rimanoczy Sr. Palace, Deutsch House, Pannonia Palace (currently Transylvania Hotel), Weiszlovits Palace, Müller Salamon House, which houses the "Ady Endre" Museum, the Freemansonry Temple which at present houses the Museum of Freemasonry etc., whose Jewish founders, most of whom were Reformed / Neologs, managed to achieve success after hardships and frustrations experienced for generations and began to settle in the central area of the city.

At the opposite end of the social scale, Jews could also be found in the old neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city, Velența and Seleuș, poor Orthodox families without prospects, from which, in order to cope with constant basic needs and social inequality, emerged forcefully, standing in contrast to religious parents, youngsters who embraced the already prevalent and very attractive Marxist ideology. These joined the ranks of illegal resistance fighters, against the bourgeoisie, the same bourgeoisie supported by and often including their co-ethnics. In the above-mentioned volume, the only complete monograph to date devoted to Oradea Jews, Tereza Mozes describes the struggle of Oradea Jews, some striving for assimilation and borrowed ideals (which would soon backfire on them terribly and irrevocably), particularly the Neologs, others involved in the class battle with an unflinching sense of self-sacrifice, others conservative, almost anachronistic, staunch guardians of a traditional lifestyle, like the Hasidic Jews led by the Rabbi of Vișnița, and still others, illegal communist activists. Therefore an extremely torn, divided community, in which even the more moderate Jews in the Status Quo Ante community did not manage to bring to the negotiating table and to reconciliation a huge variety constantly under presure, marked by radical divisions, the

result being emancipation, which brought with it truly democratic values, freedom of thought and a social and political effervescence without precedent in the history of the Oradea Jewish diaspora.

The WWI saw a multicultural and multi-confessional Oradea, brought to life by the Jewish socio-economic ferment. Through the anti-Jewish legislation, the interwar Romanian rule set the stage for the great offence and offensive carried out with an iron fist by Miklos Horthy's troops, when, following the Vienna Diktat, Northern Transylvania was annexed by Hungary, and when the whole of Hungary was haunted by the Fascist Arrow Cross Party (*Nyilaskeresztes*). Nothing was ever the same after September 1940.

The Chief Rabbi of Cluj, Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger offers a painful explanation for what happened in Northern Transylvania, followed by a collective accusation embodied in the manifesto "J'accuse":

> If the Christian population in Cluj or any other Transylvanian city had opposed the setting up of the ghetto, if they had surrounded it and prevented with their own bodies its being emptied, if they had blown up the railway between Cluj and Huedin (or, we add, between Oradea and the Diocese of Bihor), then the German and Hungarian assassins would have been terrified and would not have been able to carry out their insane plan. In the places where the local population offered their help and did not watch passively as their fellowmen, elderly people and children, babies, were being forcibly moved out of their homes, the deportation of Jews did not take place. Romania also massacred many thousands of Jews, but did not give in altogether to German demands, did not permit the systematic deportation of the salekastner Jewish population, of Romanian citizens, to the extermination camps in Poland and thus over 300,00 Jews stayed alive. That's what happened in Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Austria, France. No Jewish community remained though […] where the local population not only witnessed passively the Jews' everyday suffering, their struggle between life and death, but almost rejoiced on becoming aware of these (Carmilly-Weinberger, 1994, p. 171).

The Romanian-speaking Israeli journalist Teșu Solomovici takes a more analytical and less idealistic stance:

> 191,125 Jews were living on 31th January 1941 in Transylvania annexed by Hungary after the Vienna Arbitration. The extermination of Transylvanian Jews, who had the misfortune of coming under Magyar occupation in 1940, is part of a tragic history of liquidation of Magyar Jewry.
>
> It is impossible to understand what happened to the Hungarians at the end of 1944. They were not too humane towards the Jews during the war years, but it was precisely then, in the summer of 44, as the Soviet troops were concentrated near their border, that Hungarian Fascists, showing an inexplicable zeal, hurried to liqudate the Jews. Only some insane maniacs, instead of worrying about saving their own skin, were able to organise the ghettoization of the Jews and their assassination.
>
> A bout of collective insanity rarely seen in history!
>
> Transylvanian Jews never believed, not to the very last moment, that something bad could happen to them under Hungarian rule. The traditions of the multiethnic existence of Austria-Hungary were still alive and many Transylvanian Jews considered themselves Hungarians, rather than Romanians.
>
> Hungary's official policy […] towards Jews was hesitant, Transylvanian Jews, despite being subject to all kinds of antisemitic laws and restrictions, still had their existence assured. The Hungarian leaders hesitated to take brutal steps to eliminate the Jews, who played a significant role in the country's economy (one third of Hungarian merchants and half of the doctors were Jews) (Solomovici, 2007, p. 286).

In her autobiograpy, *Bloody Decalogue*, Tereza Mozes, herself a survivor of the Oradea ghetto and of the extermination camp, acknowledges that, despite the warning signs, no one got worried:

> Nevertheless – up to this day I cannot understand how something like this was possible, perhaps the instinct for self-preservation came into play – we continued our lives as we used to. We paid little heed to the unfolding events. We naively tried to convince ourselves that something like that could not happen here. I found the strength to seriously continue to prepare for the high-school graduation exam (Mozes, 1995, p. 12).

The leaders of Oradea Jewry tried to reassure the population, the current state of affairs remained tense, but stable and apparently unperturbed, in a humble, concerned everydayness, in the expectation of an imminent end of the war, when once again in the millennia-old history of the Jewish diaspora, another crisis would be overcome. The condition of life under pressure, of fortress under siege, and of perpetual crisis alternating with long periods of community well-being and even prosperity, forms part of a modus vivendi in Jewish culture, and is even mentioned in the sacred books. That time they did not expect or foresee the scale and gravity, the uniqueness of destruction. Resilience and submissiveness, the fear of escalating violence, those however were not a substitute for resistance.

> What could we do? We became aware that the danger lurked in the narrow circle of our close acquaintances. We became more vulnerable and more cautious, more circumspect perhaps, but never did it cross our minds that we could put up any opposition (Mozes, 1995, p. 11).

In the late spring and early summer of 1944, Oradea and its communities were the centre of the ultimate Transylvanian evil. Never before had the city been plunged into such moral darkness and self-destruction. A heartrending testimony is the autobiographical volume *Nine Suicases* by the journalist Bela Zsolt. The latter was married to Agnes, the mother of the famous Eva Heyman, the young girl who, just like Anne Frank in Amsterdam, kept a diary for six months, until ghettoization, then she was put on the last deportee train for Auschwitz. After she managed to spend a long time into hiding and escape the gas chamber, she was found in the hospital by Mengele himself and shared the ill fate of most of them. The diary was rescued by the family cook, a Hungarian, who, after the war, handed it to her surviving mother. Agnes Zsolt published it in Hungarian in 1948, in Budapest. The Romanian translation came out through "Tikvah" Association from Oradea: A*gnes Zsolt, Eva, My Daughter*, IInd ed., Hasefer, Bucharest, 2019.

Bela Zsolt gives testimony of the sharp and inexplicable cleavage of Oradea society around the time of the persecution and ghettoization

of Jews, in some of the most eloquent and emblematic pages of memoir ever written:

> At the other street corner, a syphilitic newsvendor was shouting in a hoarse voice the opening headline of the official newspaper of the Catholic Diocese of Nagyvarad: "The Jews got what they deserve! A Christian Nagyvarad is no longer a dream!"
>
> We were carried on a parade down the Big Street, the favoured ground of irredeemably corrupt abusers and obsequious minor nobles, of the pompous officer corps in all the splendour of their cruelty and stupidity, of wealthy merchants who mocked the Jews' lax business morals and of respectable middle-class ladies who were having their promenade. […]
>
> After the unforgettable clatter of the procession died down, silence followed… (Zsolt, 2022, p. 20).

Shortly afterwards, the Oradea Jews were moved into two ghettos, where concentrations took place starting from the 3rd May: a bigger ghetto, located around Ullman Palace, the Great Orthodox Synagogue and the Big Square, and bounded by the current Deported Martyrs Street, where around 27,000 Jews were packed in a tiny space, and a smaller one, virtually outdoors, in the yard of the Mezey timber factory, where around 8,000 Jews had been brought from around the county. The ghettos were emptied on 23rd, 25th, 28th, 29th, 30th, 31st May and on 1st, 3rd and 5th June by loading onto animal wagons around 3 thousand Jews, most of them women, children and elderly people (many of the men had already been deported to labour camps in the Ukraine, similarly with the ones considered stateless, who were deported and killed in Kamianets-Podilskyi) on 50-wagon trains, which left from Rhedey Park (Braham and Tibori Szabó, 2019, pp. 66–67), currently Nicolae Bălcescu Park. On the spot of the ultimate humiliation, Livia Cherecheș and Emilia Teszler, two sisters whose mother was deported to Auschwitz, erected, through „Tikvah" Association which they founded, a life-size bronze statue representing Eva Heyman, a girl with pigtails, sitting on a bench, waiting …

The way in which the Oradea ghetto operated and the tortures suffered by the Jews concerntrated there, especially the tortures inflicted on them in the Dreher beer factory, which was found on the

ghetto premises, presumably to force them to reveal where they hid their wealth (a pretext actually, since the same treatments which combined medieval fantasies with modern technology, such as the electroshock, were administered to 13–14 year-old girls, who could not have been suspected of having hidden treasures), were described at length by Antonio Faur, on the basis of testimonies in *The Trial of the Ghettos in Northern Transylvania*, IInd vol. *(Testimonies)*, *The Trial of the Ghettos in Northern Transylvania*, Ist vol. *(The Indictment)*, AERVH, Bucharest, 2007, *The Martyrdom of Jews in Romania (1940–1944)*, Hasefer, Bucharest, 1991 etc., in the dedicated volume: *The Oradea Ghetto (1944). A Brief History*, Mega, Cluj-Napoca, 2022. Important sources such as those found in the digitised archives in Yad Vashem Museum shed further light. In the ghetto, many chose voluntary death, taking their own life, others died during tortures or as a result of the ordeals to which they were subjected, from disease and physical debilitation. The ghetto existed for only six weeks. On the last days of May and at the beginning of June, Oradea was losing, defintively and tragically, one third of its population, that which had helped it grow and turn into a modern metropolis at great personal sacrifice, aligning it with the progressive West (Cf. Alberto Castaldini, *The Mimetic Hypothesis. On Jews and the Origin of Modernity*, Ratio et Revelatio, Oradea, 2023), which however caused them an unsuspected and irreparable harm.

Oradea was liberated from the Fascist occupation on 12th October 1944. The first Jewish citizens of Oradea were those still incarcerated in forced-labour camps in the city or nearby. Several families that had gone into hiding in Vineyards Hill came out, followed by others from neighbouring villages and some of those who had fled to Romania. The deportees started to arrive and there was a frantic search for survivors in order to reunite them with their families, Red Cross trains arrived, lists were being drawn up, people went to the railway station everyday waiting for the arrival of their family members, for whom careful preparations were made to welcome them back by setting up, within their financial means, canteens, sanitary accommodation, hospital beds etc.

Resuming their lives was extremely difficult, not solely because of the traumas and the realization that nothing of their pre-war

possessions was left, but very soon the Romanian Workers' Party, subsequently renamed the Communist Party, developed the Soviet-inspired, red antisemitism' – ethnic cleansing mainly directed towards the Jews. Many Jews were dismissed from their jobs, expelled from the Party, trumped-up charges were brought against them and summary trials were staged, they were convicted of high treason, sabotage, liaisons with foreigners and espionage, and served heavy prison terms, were tortured and even went missing without a trace, a situation documented not only in Romania, but in the entire communist bloc. The Jewish religious diversity was concentrated in the generic "Mosaic Religion", the controversial Moses Rosen serving as Chief Rabbi thereof from 1948 to 1994. The new persecution, the uncertain social status of the Jewish minority in communist Romania, with the different manifestations of its totalitarian rule, created a desire to emigrate to Eretz Israel. Waves of emigration – subject to the whims and foreign interests of the communist authorities – were possible after the creation of the State of Israel, and the 'sales' of Jews, particularly during Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorship, are famous.

At present, the Jewish community of Oradea consists of merely several hundred people, most of them undeclared Jews, assimilated through language in the Magyar minority, and having an aversion to anything coming from the past or anything reminding them of their own experiences or those of their families. It is not easy to find any more avowed Jews in Oradea, to identify them as such and to talk to them. The aged Jewish community looks back into the past, being rather "survivors of their own parents" returned from deportation, with a huge baggage of traumas which, no matter how much they wished to hide, were passed on "through the mother's milk", as stated by Maria, one of the nieces of survivors Ilona and Marton Berger. The most severe trauma is undoubtedly, that of the Holocaust, and at the microhistorical level, that of the repeated experience of daily antisemitism and of betrayal by the hegemonic Magyar community which the Jews traditionally supported. The consequences of these are not only a post-traumatic syndrom, but also a state of uncertainty and identity ambivalence: the Oradea Jews are mostly Hungarian-speaking by tradition and choice and assimilated in the Magyar community, which however at a time of major

crisis not only did not defend them, but rejoiced and contributed to their collective tragedy, greedily appropriated their possessions, of which no restitution was made on the return of the few survivors. Antisemitism and the feeling of betrayal are therefore two transgenerational traumas which left their mark on the Jewish community of Oradea. In the case studies we carried out, the survivors' children and grandchildren, who identify themselves as survivors, even if indirectly, feel themselves to be the bearers of a historical transgenerational trauma and some of them also remember the 'Magyar betrayal', although they are all native speakers of Hungarian.

The Bergers – A Case Study

In the present paper I have chosen to describe the case of the Bergers which, out of the real-life cases gathered and analysed for my PhD Thesis in History, which was completed in 2023 at the Doctoral School of International Relations and Security Studies at Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, is the most illustrative of the phenomenon of transgenerational trauma, not solely historical and collective, but also intra-family transgenerational trauma.

I had met Maria on a number of occasions in informal, convivial situations, at some friends' house. Nothing betrayed such a dramatic family history in any way. Later she acknowledged that that type of dissmulation was common in her family. After several casual encounters, when we discussed about my interests and research, Maria dropped a hint. "My grandparents returned from the concentration camps". We started to meet regularly only for this purpose. To search together in the family's past.

Maria Berger (married name Lontiș), an economist by profession, born in 1976, in Oradea, in a family whose native language was Hungarian, is married to Dacian, a Romanian ethnic, entrepreneur, and they work together in the family business and have two daughters, Bianca and Sofia. Maria owns release papers from the camps and "notebooks" which contain handwritten accounts of the experience of internment in the concentration camps Auschwitz-Birkenau and Mauthausen, which she inherited from her grandparents. The "notebooks", as she calls them, contain some pages which

are yellowed and worn thin with age, written painstakingly, by hand, in Hungarian, as her grandparents were simple people and not highly educated, who came from poor Jewish families. Maria struggled to understand them, read them carefully and translate them into Romanian. It was slow going though, not only because of the spelling which was unreadable in places, the intricate phraseology, the heavily colloquial style, but especially because of the emotions which overwhelmed her constantly and uncontrollably and which only allowed her to go through and translate only a few lines at a time, in short and poignant sessions, during which she was crying and felt physically and emotionally ill, similarly with her daughters, who helped her and offered translation suggestions. She needed to take breaks for several days between translation sessions in order to rework the text so that the depth of emotion came across. The author felt haunted by the events in the translated fragments, relived the experience of deportation of her family, especially her grandparents, to whom she was very attached, who loved her and gave her a happy childhood, despite the crushing emotional baggage, which they carried quietly. Today the amount of effort put in digging up an extremely traumatic past in their writings, so as to hand down a rich spiritual legacy, is all the more obvious to her.

What is indeed remarkable is the joint effort and at the same time the individual effort of the two survivors, Ilona and Marton, to decide, at an advanced age, to write, each of them in their own notebook, without reading each other's notes and influencing one other, about the tragic events from the time of deportation until their homecoming, to Oradea. Undertaking to expose themselves to the painful (re)living of the past, through (des)cription has an explanation which coincides with the testimonies of their descendants: the sense of duty and the love for those who would come after them – ideal readers, directly targeted and named, of this virtually assymetrical dialogue, actually a one-way and monological communication. From the manuscripts, it emerges that the experiences were distilled, reworked throughout their lives, the authors managing to filter, through a synthesis dictated by the ‚stream of consciousness', a concept developed by Virginia Wolf, and by a mnemonic effort, doubled by one of lexical choices, to encapsulate and at the same time bring to the surface of the present

and to the targeted recipients' capacity of reception (and acceptance), details of the dehumanizing experience of the Holocaust.

The dialogue with the descendants shows that, although they had some knowledge of the subject – for example, the explanation for the tattoo on left forearm of grandmother Berger, which showed number 76418 and a triangle over number 4 (the grandfather had no tattoo, because in the forced labour camps and different transit camps where he had been interned, including the one at Mauthausen, no tattoos were done) – the topic was never discussed, and when it came up, it happened spontaneously, accidentally, or as a result of an involuntary narrative ‚slip', as in a ‚valley of tears', for instance at some gatherings of women in the neighbourhood, attended by Ilona Berger and her daughter-in-law, who offered us details in an exclusive interview conducted for our research project. In the Bergers' house, people kept silent for a long time, half a century, and only the granddaughter Maria, the third generation, started to speak and delve into the family past. Their son, Adalbert (the first born after Mircea, the child lost in the gas chamber at Auschwitz) still keeps silent today – the interview with him was forced, almost disowned. Nobody discussed about what happened during deportation for generations, either out of shame, post-traumatic reserve or out of fear not to cause a turmoil in the quite life of the famiy or perhaps there was also a silence around the subject which was imposed by the authorities throughout the communist period and involuntarily accepted by the population and even by those directly concerned. Even after the fall of communism, a certain unease about raising the subject of the Holocaust publicly, irrespective of the regime, persisted and thus the silence dragged on and is also preferred today. It seems the Holocaust bothers and one wants to have it downplayed, assimilated with other types of ethnic genocide, and anyway, to see it as having been "brought about", "triggered" somehow by the Jews themselves.

Writing a number of pages by the two direct survivors was the necessary compromise, breaking the silence, in silence… Stylistically, both texts are characterised by an involuntary expressiveness, which stems from the informality of language, also accounted for by the limited formal schooling. The narrative is simple, informative, graphical, descriptive, ordered diachronically, with emotional flashback

reflections, due to the writing in stages, depending on the available time and the mood. Few comments are made on the events, they remain closely linked with the personal microhistory, events are not described and possibly the author lacks information on the macrohistorical context, but the rhetorical questions show emotional involvement, which is however repressed probably in order not to lose credibility or perhaps to overcome more easily the anxiety of reliving the past by means of a self-imposed writing pace, set by chronogical marks, as reference points in the uphill journey of autobiographical exploration. We do not know whether these writings also had a liberating or therapeutical effect. We are inclined to believe that they did not to a great extent. It was already late for them, the writings being elaborated some time in the 80s. By then they would have used other coping mechanisms. The time gap only helped in the decanting, ordering of thoughts and in gaining control over the chaos of memory, so that the textual fabric was culturally and historically intelligible without disrupting the recipients' lives, to which the authors were emotionally attached, trying to find a balance, diminish the impact of the trauma and at the same be authentic.

The texts are thus aimed at the direct descendants. The authorial intention is clear and obvious in the dedication: ‚For my grandchildren, in memory of grandma Ilus' (the grandmother's notebook). Throughout the text, especially in Ilona Berger's manuscript, the appellative ‚grandpa' is reiterated as a deictic for her husband, thus indirectly identifying her interlocutors – the grandchildren and, only by extension and supra-significance their peers or, further on, the generations to come (we mention that granddaughters Bianca and Sofia never met their grandparents).

> On 9th April 1944 the Magyar Police (Magyar Kiralyi Rendorseg) arrested us, Reich Bacsi, Mancika's father-in-law, myself, Mancika and her mother-in-law, together with the two children, and on 26th April they took us to Pesta. In the morning of 27th April we arrived at TOLONC HAZ (concentration camp), there they separated the Jews from the Hungarians and interned us in separate rooms. On the following day they handed us over to the Germans and took us to the railway station, there another transport from Tarcea arrived and we got to be

> around 2,000 people. **Our only fault was that we were** JEWS (from Ilona Berger's notebook).

We do not know if, after the Holocaust, the Bergers intended to be happy or only wished to continue to survive. We know that the most important thing for them was that they were together again. They were among the few survivors, husband and wife, who were reunited after the Holocaust in Oradea. We do not know if they felt gratitude for the new and painful chance to be among the few survivors of their family and to their great distress, to have survived their only child, the first born Mircea (born 1938 Oradea – died 1944, Auschwitz). From their descendants' recollections, it appears they chose to live a life immersed in a sometimes rigid normality, not overtly religious (we lack first-hand information about their inner faith, only the accounts of their son and daughter-in-law), based on a daily routine, punctuated in places by festive moments in family life, every daily gesture being part of a set of unwritten and unspoken, implicit norms. They elevated normality derived from norm, not just etymologically, to the level of perfect happiness. They built a home where they had other children, went to work, joined in celebrations, went about their business day after day, and went on with their lives step by step, in spite the post-traumaic stress from which they never recovered and with which they coped through daily discipline. However their social life is affected, the unresolved trauma is brewing beneath the surface. They have few friends, most of them coming from the ranks of the old illegal activists and several survivors, coreligionists. It is a closed circle, there is a limited desire to socialise, life continues inconspicuously, discreetly, within the family. What surfaces is a loss of trust in one's fellow human beings, neighbours, a collective "others", who rejoiced and benefited from the drama of their family and community or took no action to show compassion and empathy when the Jewish population was ghettoized in Oradea and deported on animal wagons.

In the interview with the son, the daughter-in-law, the granddaughter and the grand-granddaughters, one can feel the disappointment not just with society, but with the ideology which they had embraced and through which they had hoped to find social harmony, equality and dignity, a safe tomorrow, under the communist regime

which both had supported. Even the abuses suffered, the demotions and the humiliations endured in the workplace, are mentioned, a testimony to the 'red racism' unleashed in the 50s-60s in Stalinist Romania. Trauma upon trauma! But this was overlooked, as nothing was more serious than the experience of the Holocaust and the daily encounter with death in the concentration camp.

Upon being released from the concentration camp Ilona agreed to be taken by the Red Cross to a hospital in Sweden, where she received care and treatment for almost two years, as she was seriously debilitated. Her return to Oradea was difficult and only happened in the autumn of 1946. The letters to her husband show an intense longing and a strong wish to return home, to Oradea, where Marton had put up a new house, using rescued furniture, as they had nothing left and had to start from scratch. Marton waited for her and arranged a little house to welcome his beloved wife whom he had no longer hoped to see again.

> I began to look for a house, so we would have a place to stay when she came home. We had to start over. I found a house on 22 Jokai Mor Street, with a room and a kitchen and I was very content. I received some furniture from one of my cousins. Everything was in place, only my wife was missing from home.
>
> Time went on and the spring came. I was assigned to a vineyard as a caretaker. The vineyard was called Demetrovici. I liked it there, because I was working outdoors, in the fresh air.
>
> I forgot to mention that, after I received a letter from my wife and I had her address, we began to correspond and I kept writing to her to come back home as soon as possible.
>
> The time finally came when she returned home, at the beginning of October 1946. I was very happy that she escaped from hell. (from Marton Berger's notebook)

After their passing (Marton, in 1992, and Ilona, in 2000), after a long and active "career" as parents and grandparents, the great-granddaughters were born – the fourth generation of survivors, each of whom was, knowingly or not, the bearer of a silence, if not of

a "transgenerational post-traumatic stress", which their mother, Maria, is talking about.

"Father Berger" kept silent even more than "Mother Berger". He silenced his words and suffering, which he replaced with a very elaborate Sunday routine, as, on his day off, smartly dressed and wearing cologne, he would go out for a walk. With an air of respectability and a smiling face, he would take his favourite granddaughter, the same Maria, by the hand, and strode along the streets of the city where his family members had been marched to the ghetto, to nowhere, amidst the indifference and mockery of the passers-by, as described by Bela Zsolt in his autobiography. We do not know if he ever felt safe and truly free and at home again in the city where, without warning and through no fault of his own, he suffered such great vexations, however the fact is that he chose not to leave the city, but to refound there an entire Berger family, which morally and physically defeated all predictions and aims of Nazi ideology as well as communist constraints.

His surviving descedants exclaim: "It is inconceivable that being a Jew or part of any ethic or social group is a fault in itself and anyway it cannot be a reason why a human being should feel empowered to murder another human being. It seems incredible even today that, aside from some accidental gesture, by a fanatic with diagnosable behavioural and psychological disorders, there could exist a state policy to annihilate an entire population group! This aspect and the thoughts on the family history during the Holocaust, were the topic of the common interview with Bianca (18 years old) and Sofia (13 years old), daughters of Maria and Dacian, the grand granddaughters of the family's (re)founders, Marton Berger and Ilona Berger, the fourth generation of survivors. Bianca emphasizes that something like that should never happen to anybody, irrespective of the ethnic, racial origin, political views or sexual orientation. The right to life and dignity is inviolable. Sofia reinforces, by her approving gestures, her sister's statements. I asked them if they believed that history could repeat itself and if the risk scared them. Bianca answers that at present or in a predictable future it probably does not, but yes, human beings can always have or adhere to an aberrant behaviour or ideology. (Therefore a certain state of alert was passed on). Both

of them asserted, reassessed and completed their own identity by bringing to light these manuscripts and the accounts of their mother and grandparents. It is difficult to foresee the manner in which each of them will choose to relate to this part of their family and kin identity, assuming it, at least in part, is however certain.

In an informal interview, recorded and transcribed for research purposes, Maria Lontis mentioned, while recounting dialogues with her daughter occasioned by their watching the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, at "Queen Mary" Theatre in Oradea: "Sofia asked me: «I wonder if life was as terrible for my grandparents as it is for us today when we hear about it? When you talk to me about communism, it sends a shiver down my spine! Did you feel just as intensely about it back then?» I answered that I didn't, because my mother did everything in her power to ensure that we didn't see the ugly side. She cooked as well as she could, she knitted, she did all sorts of things so that I lacked nothing. So I literally felt communism! And she said: «It is likely that if I tell my children about the pandemic, they will suffer more than I actually suffered myself!» Each generation carries the baggage of trauma of the previous one, to which it adds its own direct traumatic experience. Finally, in this family, the equation of the transgenerational trauma is at present confined to the level of memory of the Holocaust + Communism + Sars-Cov2 Pandemic... More recently, we experience a new fear for our family members who emigrated to Israel and of the global resurgence of anti-semitism, following the massive terrorist attacks recently launched on Israel, as well as of the looming spectre of a new regional war or world war with anti-semitic roots."

The Bergers' case illustrates the way in which the historical transgenerational trauma in an Oradea Jewish family leads to tensions and problems in intra-family and social communication, to social isolation, distrust, suffering which in spite of constant efforts they cannot hide and which is passed on through cultural and family determination to the descendants, who become perpetual witnesses and martyrs on the shrine of this suffering. The case of the Bergers, its members' testimonies and the "notebooks" of spouses Ilona and Marton Berger are in the process of being published in a volume, by Ratio et Revelatio Publishing House, under the title: *From Oradea*

to Auschwitz and Mauthausen and Back. With love, Mother Berger and Father Berger, for those who will come after us. Accounts and testimonies of four generations of survivors.

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