CHAPTER

2

Faith and Aspirations

As a child I always looked forward to the Jewish holidays. Because we were Orthodox, our extended family, which was spread around the whole region in which we lived, was forbidden to travel in order to be together for the high holy days and the major festivals. Yet I will remember forever the wonderful smells of cooking and baking in preparation for these special times of the year.

Most precious to me was the weekly Shabbat (Sabbath), which Jews celebrate from sundown Friday till sundown Saturday. I would awaken early every Friday morning in order to work by my mother's side at Sabbath preparations. She wanted to prepare me to do my own household chores when I grew up. On Friday afternoons when I returned from school, I would experience the intoxicating odors of chicken soup and roasting poultry and noodle pudding, as well as challah and *babka* baking in the oven, in preparation for our Sabbath meal.

On Friday nights (and on Sabbath mornings) I would accompany my father to the synagogue. I would carry his prayer shawl in its little sack. Once we returned home after service on Friday evening my father would conduct a beautiful kiddush (the blessing said over the wine and the challah), and I would

say the prayer with him. My mother, father, grandmother, and I would then sit down to our Sabbath meal.

My mother never knew how many people would be at our Sabbath (or holiday) table. My father often brought to our table yeshiva students far from home and strangers from other towns to share in our hospitality. He believed in the literal application of the Biblical admonition to welcome the stranger in our midst. He would say to the strangers he met at our synagogue who might be from another town, "No, you're not going to walk back. Just come back with me, and take a seat at our table." My mother would always have more than enough prepared for all of us. Even today, I cannot cook merely for the immediate members of my family; I invariably remember that anyone might unexpectedly come by. This was part of my parents' heritage to me.

There were always two sets of Sabbath candlesticks, one for my grandmother and one for my mother. These were made of sterling silver and were polished vigorously for each holiday. Late in the evening as we readied for bed, our gentile neighbor, whose name was Huszak, came to extinguish the lights. (Jewish law forbids Jews to light fires, turn lights on or off, or perform any other kind of work on the Sabbath.) On a recent visit to Hungary I met Mrs. Huszak again. She reminded me that she had been our "Shabbat goy" (a gentile hired to perform the tasks that Jews are forbidden to do on the Sabbath).

Our synagogue was located on the main street of Tolscva. On Sabbath mornings when I was very young, I divided my time in the synagogue between the downstairs, where my father and the other men prayed, and the upstairs, where the women sat. When I sat with my mother, she would open her "goodies bag" and give me pastry or *babka* to munch on. Once

I reached my early teens, however, I had to sit upstairs and pray "seriously" alongside my mother and my grandmother.

Our rabbi's name was Kornitzer. His nephew, Bela, who immigrated to the United States, became a famous historian and an advisor to Presidents Roosevelt and Eisenhower. I revered Rabbi Kornitzer, and I even had a "crush" on his son during my early adolescence. His daughters were dear friends of mine. In the last tragic days of the Holocaust, I witnessed the deaths of his wife and youngest daughter in Bergen-Belsen.

Years later, while living in Bound Brook, New Jersey, I went with the Ladies Auxiliary of the Bound Brook Hospital on a fund-raising excursion to Plainfield, where a cosmetologist had a salon. Her name was Alicia Karpati. Once we arrived and she made some introductory remarks, I began looking around and saw diplomas from Budapest and heard her discussing matters with her husband in Hungarian. I asked Alicia when they had arrived in America and where they were from in Hungary. I told them I was from Tolcsva.

At this point she turned white, approached me, took my arm, and immediately saw the numbers tattooed on them. She then led me upstairs to her living quarters, where she revealed that she was the niece of Rabbi Kornitzer of Tolcsva! She asked me to tell her if I knew what had happened to the members of her family. I told her I had been with her aunt and her two cousins in Bergen-Belsen and had seen her aunt and her younger cousin die of diphtheria and starvation. We were both overcome with emotion and tears. Once she composed herself, we went down and told the rest of the group what we had discovered. Shortly after that we left, but Alicia and I developed a warm friendship that lasted until she left the area and moved to Florida. After that we lost contact with each other.

I remember Rabbi Kornitzer as a sagacious teacher, a compassionate rabbi, and a commanding presence in the synagogue. His family always welcomed me into their home.

Once I was older, following service I was dispatched to pick up a traditional Sabbath dish: *cholent*, a casserole made of beans, meat, and potatoes that was cooked overnight in a baker's oven. We were not allowed to cook at home on Friday night or Saturday. I would bring the *cholent* home, where we would eat it as the Sabbath midday meal. This dish was so delicious that just the smell was enough to arouse my appetite.

On Saturday night after the *havdalah* service, which separated the Sabbath from the rest of the week, my mother would take a fish my father had caught in the brook during the week, which she had prepared on Friday, and served it cold under a layer of dill. I still recall the exquisite taste—a recipe I have been unable to recreate in my own home. Nothing tastes the same as it did in Hungary!

Everything we needed for religious purposes was accessible to us. Tolcsva had a kosher butcher who served as a *shochet* (kosher slaughterer) and whose shop was located on the grounds of our synagogue. We lived in a community that was largely open and heterogeneous. Jewish families in Tolcsva were not concentrated in one sequestered, segregated area, as in a ghetto, but were spread around the entire town.

My father was so religious that when I took sick with scarlet fever and had to be quarantined with my grandmother in our guest bedroom, he would put on his prayer shawl and phylacteries and pray all day. When my fever ran very high, he made a pilgrimage to the famous Liskai Rabbi, considered by Orthodox Jews to be a miracle worker. From that town my father returned to Tolcsva with some earth from Palestine wrapped in a cloth. The cloth was tied around my neck, and

my father felt in the deepest recesses of his heart that this was what finally broke my fever and made me well.

I recall that when I was somewhat older my mother became very sick and was taken to Satoraljaujely to the hospital. I understand now that she was suffering from a very bad case of phlebitis, an inflammation of the veins in her right leg, and the doctor in Tolcsva could not cure her. In the hospital, the doctors wanted to operate on her leg, but my father again went to the Liskai Rabbi, who came to see my mother and told her to follow his orders—specifically, to cut off her beautiful hair and to begin wearing a *shetl* (the wig that Orthodox married women wore to show their reverence for God). The rabbi told her that this would make her well; he also promised to pray for her. To be sure, she did get better without surgery. That is how deeply my parents believed in their religion, in the rabbi, and in God.

In Tolcsva we also had a *cheder* (a Hebrew school) where the boys were studying the *Torah*, *Mishna*, and *Gemara* and all of the other interpretations and commentaries pertaining to Jewish law. In the schoolyard lived the shammes (sexton) of the synagogue. He was also one of our religious teachers. He had a wife and six children, some of whom were close to me in age and were my playmates.

Being an only child, I didn't feel the pressure of competing with siblings for my parents' attention and admiration. My only-child status made me somewhat demanding. I was a very fussy eater, and I often rejected the food my mother prepared. Perhaps this was the result of not having to compete with siblings for portions. My mother would insist on my tasting everything, whether I liked it or not; however, my grandmother would go stealthily to the chicken coop and fetch eggs, which I loved, and prepare them for me in ways that I liked. Thus

she kept me from "going hungry," something I would learn the meaning of all too soon.

Being an only child also made it easier for me to succeed in school, and thus to please my elders. School was a magnet for me. I looked forward each day to getting up and going there. In addition to geography, I excelled in mathematics. Spelling, however, was my nemesis.

My interest in school did not prevent me from exercising simple vanities. I desired beautiful clothes. When my father traveled to shop for his store, he would always bring back materials for a blouse or a skirt for me. I would then run to a dressmaker whom my mother used, and she would help me make the clothes from the materials that my father had purchased. We had a primitive sewing machine at home that we operated by foot, and the process of using it was always a joy to me. My mother also used to send me regularly to the home of a lady who taught me how to knit, embroider, and crochet.

During the time I was growing up, schools in the region were parochial, although they were supported by the government. The largest school was Catholic. However, Jewish children, who numbered somewhere around sixty, attended a Jewish day school. Most of the neighborhood children were, of course, Christian. Although there was always a degree of distance and tension between Christians and Jews, we generally got along tolerably. But I recollect more fondly the joy I felt playing in the schoolyard and outside the synagogue with my Jewish friends. I did have a number of Christian playmates as well, though I am certain that part of the reason we associated with one another was that I had an abundance of toys, sent to me by my family in America, with which they loved to play.

Even as a young child I was conscious of a prejudice against Jews. Very religious children, dressed in traditional clothes, were frequently tormented by gentile children both verbally

and physically. Most Jewish children and parents accepted it as a natural condition of being Jewish in a non-Jewish world. But I recall that when I went to school as a child, my father followed me at a discreet distance in order to make certain no harm came to me. I pretended not to notice that he was doing this. Neither one of us would acknowledge his reason, even later on, but I knew that his act was a sign of concern for me.

Education in Tolcsva was limited. Students of promise found little benefit in staying there. Even though I was their only child, my parents realized this. When I was about eleven they made arrangements to send me to Budapest to live with Danesh, my uncle, who was a skilled and relatively prosperous carpenter and furniture maker. I attended school in Budapest for one year. It was the farthest I had ever traveled until that time. That was in 1941, and the situation for Hungarian Jews was perceived to be worsening to such a degree that my father eventually became convinced that I would be safer returning to live at home in Tolscva.

Had my maternal grandfather been alive at the time, I should probably never have been allowed to go to live with Danesh and his family, since he had intermarried with a gentile woman and they had a son who was raised as a non-Jew. Because of this, my grandfather observed the required seven days of mourning, known as *shiva*, for his son. He sat on the customary pine box, wept, and lamented. He regarded Danesh as dead. This was considered customary among Orthodox Jews whose children married non-Jews.

On his deathbed, my grandfather was urged even by my grandmother to forgive and make peace with his son. Indeed, Danesh himself came to Tolcsva to plead for his father's forgiveness. I will never forget seeing him standing outside my grandfather's window crying, looking into the house, and pleading for any sign of acknowledgement and pardon.

Yet my grandfather was unable to bring himself to forgive his son, and I am certain that he died filled with agonizingly conflicting emotions that both tortured him and yet made it impossible for him to relent. His family pleaded with him: "You cannot die in peace because you're not forgiving your son." But so imbedded in him was his Judaism that he resisted. My grandmother, however, did forgive her son. Ironically, Danesh was to die under Nazi rule as a Jew. I was never able to learn what happened to his wife and only son. When I went to Budapest in 1972, I tried to look up his family, but I could not find them or any record of them.

The school I attended in Budapest was a secular one. I remember that I had to wear a uniform there, and, in general, no one stood out in a crowd. Still, I was continually pointed out as "the Jewish girl." If one were Jewish, one didn't forget one's "difference." I worked hard to get good grades. This was not always easy, because the competition was keener and the teaching methods and the school system were far more rigorous than what I had known in Tolcsva.

Because I was diligent and got good grades, I was given a grudging acceptance by my peers. Often gentiles attributed academic success to the "Jewish brain" or to what they perceived as the competitive Jewish drive for acceptance. It made me unhappy to hear these opinions. I was being labeled; however, I knew that my diligence and academic success came not from being Jewish, but from the great sacrifices my parents had made to send me to Budapest. I knew my absence was a hardship to them, so I worked extra hard to justify it. When I was home they had counted on me to help with chores; now they were shorthanded, and life would be more difficult, particularly for my mother.

In Budapest, despite the tensions there seemed to be much more mingling between Jews and non-Jews than in Tolcsva.

There was little overt animosity; rather there was a subtle sense of "otherness" that was cloaked in outward civility.

While I was in the large city I got used to a very different life from what I had known in Tolczva. I was reminded of the fable of the country mouse that visited his cousin in the city. At home I reveled in the bucolic atmosphere, serene and predictable and familiar. The large city, however, throbbed with variety and excitement and color. All around me were theater, opera, and cafés, as well as finely dressed people—all the luxuries of modernity, and all of these appealing to the sensibilities of a naive adolescent.

My Uncle Danesh lived in a beautiful house with indoor plumbing and hot and cold running water. The young Jews I met in Budapest lived lives far more sophisticated and luxurious than the ones I knew from home.

Life in Budapest was not altogether pleasurable for me despite its "glamor." When I was invited to the homes of school friends, I would silently compare the modern luxuries they enjoyed with what now seemed the rural and backward character of my home in Tolcsva. I felt a pang when I considered how many more "refinements" of life they were accustomed to than I was. Furthermore, while living at my uncle's house I was required to do household chores, such as drawing the water for my uncle's bath. I was not catered to as I had been at home, and I must admit that I resented the state of "servitude" in which I suddenly found myself. At home the chores had seemed a form of play at being an adult; here they assumed the more serious nature of obligation.

If Budapest was different from Tolcsva, the Tolscva that I returned to seemed far different from the one I had left. Once I was sent home because of the increased sense of danger in Budapest, Tolcsva appeared to me even more rustic and I experienced a sudden void. Having tasted the big city, I felt I had "grown up" and was eager to spread my wings beyond the rustic limitations of my early years.

Life for all the Jews in our area was also becoming more ominous. Anti-Jewish discrimination had increased noticeably and had been codified into laws. During my absence, my parents had had to give up our domestic servants. They had been forced even to dismiss the woman who had done our laundry every other week. My mother became a domestic herself, cleaning, milking the cows, and doing all the chores she had previously been spared. Once I returned home, I had to help her so that she could assist my father in running what remained of our business. I did numerous chores: I learned how to milk a cow, how to knead the dough for bread and challah and cakes, and how to clean the house. The privileged life of childhood had suddenly been torn away from me. I could feel my life changing perceptibly. The "city mouse" was forced, once again, to become the "country mouse," and the transition was not easy.

Thus I entered my teenage years.