

CHAPTER

8

New Life in America

I traveled by boat across the ocean with many other refugees. We came across on a Swedish ship, the *Drotling Holm*. Ill as I was from seasickness during the voyage, I made the best of it. On the boat, people made friends with one another. There were many survivors among us. When the boat arrived finally in New York Harbor, an announcement came over the loudspeaker: "Margit Buchhalter, please come to the captain's quarters."

At that moment, I began to die inside. I said to myself, "Now they've discovered something wrong with me and they will send me back." I went through a lifetime of inner torture in the few minutes of that interminable walk to the captain's quarters. As I entered (and this is a scene I will never forget), I was amazed to discover my aunt, a man I took to be my Uncle George, and my Uncle Sam's sister-in-law, who had helped to make the arrangements to meet me and to welcome me into the country. They had gotten permission to come onto the boat in order to take me off of it. How did I know immediately that one of the women was my aunt, my father's sister? She had a face nearly identical to that of my father! For a moment I had truly thought I was looking into my father's face!

All at once I fell completely apart. I had traveled thousands of miles, and I saw someone who looked like my father standing before me. It took me a few minutes to compose myself and to resume speaking rationally.

Because my family took me off the boat, I never had to go through the endless immigration processing of Ellis Island—the continual checking, cross-checking, and questioning that others had to go through. We were taken by tugboat into the landing area. I know of no other fellow survivors who were received by the United States and their families in such a remarkable way. There were cars waiting for us when we got off the tugboat. The rest of the family was there—aunts, uncles, cousins. These were members of both sides of my family. We drove to the Bronx, where my Aunt Minnie lived at 2147 Starling Avenue, and we had a joyous reunion. I felt that I was floating on air. I could not believe that all of this could be real: family, food on the table, warmth, and joy. Instinctively I began peering at the faces of the group, looking for my father and mother. But they weren't there. I discovered later that this was a "normal" reaction.

My Uncle Fred, Minnie's husband, who had stayed at home while the others came to the boat, was the maître d' at a Hungarian restaurant in New York. While they were gone he and his two daughters, Clara and Miriam, had set a table fit for royalty. I had not seen food like that for over two years, since I had been taken from my home. The aroma was so pungent and inviting that I can still close my eyes and smell (and even taste) that food, though that was over fifty years ago. This display of family unity and love helped me to regain the sense of security I had not known since my departure from Tolcsva.

At this gathering were aunts and uncles, their children and grandchildren, and my father's first cousins, the Weiss family

(the children of my paternal grandmother's twin sister). I had never met any of the people who now surrounded me, but their faces bore family resemblances to those of my mother, father, and grandparents. The Weisses gave me the best of all possible gifts: the independence of a savings account in my own name. They had deposited into it \$500, which was a great deal of money at that time, so that I could purchase necessities and be independent and self-sufficient.

Communication between us was difficult. The only ones who spoke Hungarian were Aunt Minnie, Uncle Fred, and their daughters, Clara and Miriam. My mother's brothers and George's wife also spoke Hungarian. Their sons Philip and Willie understood the language, but did not speak it very well. The others, however, communicated with love in their eyes and smiles on their faces and with hugs and kisses. These wordless gestures proved to be medicine for my soul, which no doctor could have ever prescribed.

Amid the joy of being with my newfound family was another satisfaction: the realization that Hitler had not completely succeeded. A remnant of us was still here!

I continued living in the Bronx with my Aunt Minnie and visited my uncles and their families in Brooklyn on weekends. I realized immediately that I had to learn the English language. Since it was August, Aunt Minnie was anxious to enroll me in some form of school where I could begin to learn English and resume my education. She was able to register me in James Monroe High School, but my time as a pupil there was short-lived since my English was so poor at the time. Then my family found a school near the Hunts Point area of the Bronx. This school was strictly for new immigrants, and it was there that I learned enough reading, writing, and spelling of English to

qualify as a worker and to enable me to get through everyday life in the United States.

To my sorrow, my Uncle Fred passed away within a year of my arrival in the United States. Since he worked nights, he would sleep during the day and was available on school days to meet my bus in the afternoon. I remember how he would greet me with a hug and a kiss and a delicious ice cream cone. He had become to me a father figure whom I had come to love and greatly respect. His sudden passing was another blow I had to sustain, and it opened the wounds of my recent life all over again.

Early one morning he had come home from work and gone to bed. Suddenly we heard a terrible gasping noise, and I heard my aunt scream. Their two sons and I ran into the bedroom, where we found him prostrate and gasping for air; then we ran to get his daughters Miriam, who lived on the same floor of the apartment building where we lived, and Clara, who lived in the next building. By the time the girls and the ambulance had arrived, he was already dead. For a long time I felt inconsolable.

In the meantime I developed sisterlike relationships with both Clara and Miriam. This boosted my morale, and made my losses more bearable than they might have been. Miriam and Clara were only a few years older than I. Both were in their twenties and married, but it didn't matter; we were like contemporaries. They and their husbands showed me New York and helped me to become acclimated to America.

Miriam had two boys, Morton and Stanley. When they were little, Morton, who was about seven when I arrived in this country, used to try to teach me English by spelling out words for me. He thought that by spelling out the words he would be able to make me understand them. Unfortunately, this did not work.

I often visited my mother's brothers, Morris, George, and Sam, who lived in Coney Island. I would stay at George's house with him and Eleanor, his wife. They lived upstairs, and their son Stanley and his wife Ruth, with whom I still have very close relationships, lived downstairs. His other son, Alfred, did not live in the same area, so I did not see him often.

On the occasion of these visits, we spent time talking about Tolcsva and our lives there. George remembered it because he had returned to Tolcsva in 1927 to visit his parents. I had not yet been born at the time, but we had many memories to share of our family and the town. When I visited them in Coney Island, I remember taking long, pleasurable walks with George on the boardwalk. We also spent time on the beach. I loved the nearness of the ocean, and this love has stayed with me to this day.

Two blocks away from George and his family lived my Uncle Morris and his wife, Minnie. I was particularly close to their children, Louis, Jerry, and Rose. I remember on summer days enjoying ice cream cones with them and chatting on the front steps of the family house. Louis and Jerry had both been in the war, and they told me of their experiences and memories. Jerry had been in the Air Force and described the awesome experience of flying over enemy territory. He still has his bomber jacket, which he said he would never get rid of. Rose was married to Arthur, who still spoke Hungarian although he had been born here. He had a mischievous sense of humor, and told me jokes and stories in Hungarian that always made me laugh and bewildered my other cousins, who couldn't understand what we were saying. Arthur was able to bring lightness to my mood when I became despondent.

My Uncle Sam and his wife, Stella, also lived in Brooklyn, but to visit them I had to make a separate trip. My Aunt Stella's sister was the one who had helped get me to America. I devel-

oped a very warm relationship with their son Seymour and his wife, Helen. Sam had a daughter, too, from his first marriage, but I have not been able to recall her name.

Those of my cousins from my mother's side with whom I am still very close and with whom I still socialize are Rose, Jerry and his wife, Marion, as well as Stanley's wife, Ruth, Seymour's wife, Helen, and Alfred's wife, Stella. We still visit each other and continually strengthen the bond among us each year when we spend our winters in Florida.

On my father's side, Aunt Minnie's son Willie and his wife, Vera, are still alive. So are my Cousin Philip's wife, Harriet, and Gail and Sari Ellen, their children. Willie and Vera have three children, Fred, Linda, and Larry. Willie was like the brother I never had. When I first met him, he was still in his army uniform. He was always there to help me with my schoolwork, and at times he drove me to Brooklyn to visit other members of my family so that I did not have to go alone. We are still in very close contact. We speak by telephone at least twice a week. Philip was about ten years older. He had a car with a rumble seat where I used to sit. He would drive me around Manhattan, and I loved to gape at the sights, never having imagined earlier that I would see Times Square, the Empire State Building, or Rockefeller Center. Philip also introduced me to the American hot dog. We could not pass a kosher delicatessen without stopping and buying one, and hot dogs became an addiction for me. On certain evenings Philip would drive my aunt and me to the Hungarian section of the city, in the East Seventies, where we would stop at coffee houses for iced coffee and *dobbosh tortes*, wonderful Hungarian pastries. On other evenings he would take me to the movies, because he thought the experience of watching American movies would teach me English. He would explain words and their meanings, much to the annoyance of the other theater patrons.

Philip passed away on November 15, 1987, the very day that my granddaughter Caryn was born, thus darkening an otherwise joyous event.

After Uncle Fred died, I stopped my schooling and found a job with Spear's Furniture Company on West Twenty-third Street. There I worked as a filing clerk. It was the easiest job for me to obtain, since the alphabet is the same in Hungarian as in English. I took the subway down from the Bronx every morning. At Spear's the people were friendly and helpful to me, and I felt comfortable with them despite the language barrier. There was a dark-haired Jewish girl there who helped me to socialize, to dress more attractively, and even to flirt. I also met a young man named Arnold with whom I began to keep company.

Just at the time I felt my life beginning to bloom, as any young adult's might, I became ill. It was May 1948; I was not yet nineteen. During a very short stay at Bronx Hospital I was diagnosed as having tuberculosis. With the help of my cousin Jack Weiss, I could be admitted to Brooklyn Thoracic Hospital. Over a month's time I had many tests. I took a great deal of medication, which made me ill. While I was there I celebrated my nineteenth birthday. A Doctor Rudolphe took care of me at the hospital. My own doctor was named Lou Green, and he is a brother to Adolph Green, the actor and writer. They were my father's second cousins. Dr. Green was the one who had referred me to Bronx Hospital.

While I was at Brooklyn Thoracic, I met several patients with whom I made friends, and my American family visited me daily. While I was there one of my cousins, Julius, married, and my family sent the bridal bouquet to the hospital. I met a young man named Murray Dennet, who was a patient there also, and we kept company for a while afterward. While we were in the

hospital, he wrote me letters from his room. My roommate Rose teased me about him.

I remained at Brooklyn Thoracic from May 14 until early December. On December 7, 1948, I was transferred from Brooklyn Thoracic to Bedford Hills Sanitarium, where my cousins Clara and Jack Weiss took me. Being there was very frightening and depressing. The physical distance between my family and me was now greater than ever. They were able to visit me only on weekends. Many tests were done on me, including a bronchoscopy.

In the spring of 1950, as I was approaching my twenty-first birthday, the decision was made to transfer me to Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx. The doctors thought I should have surgery. My Aunt Minnie and Clara and two of my mother's brothers, George and Sam, came to confer with me and with the doctors at Montefiore. After listening to the description of the procedure and the danger of the surgery given them by a surgeon, Dr. Rubin, my uncles felt that I should not attempt major surgery for fear of the outcome and the repercussions, which could have left me crippled for life. They felt it would be better for me to remain in the sanitarium for the rest of my life. Whether they felt this way out of fear or out of love I do not know to this day. However, I did not question their opinion.

Aunt Minnie and Cousin Clara did not agree. How could I, they argued, a young woman not yet twenty-one, give up the possibility of a normal married life, with the hope of having children, and abandon everything to a life in the sanitarium? In retrospect, I realize that they were absolutely right. I also had a talk with Dr. Rubin. He felt that because of my youth and energy I could survive the surgery and have a full and normal life.

The decision had to be my own. I opted for surgery. The doctors performed a three-stage thoracoplasty on my right lung.

My right lung was collapsed, and seven ribs were removed on my right side. For each of three months I underwent a stage of the procedure, and as a result, I was later able to meet and marry my husband, Harvey, and bear two wonderful children, Tina and Joseph.

Each time I came out of the operating room after a stage of the procedure, my Aunt Minnie and Clara were at my bedside for hours and hours. I remember Aunt Minnie wiping my forehead with cold water. She would bring homemade meals to Montefiore every day. With her care and her loving encouragement, she became the single most significant reason for my regaining my strength. My uncles were, of course, happy in retrospect, even though they had originally discouraged me from taking the steps I did.

After I became ambulatory again, I was walking around the veranda one day, and a young man called to me from his room to invite me in. He had been hospitalized for tuberculosis, too. We met and talked, and I found out that, to use his words, he "could go for" me, a bit of English vernacular I was already able to understand. But our conversation at that time did not lead me to believe that anything would develop from it.

In the fall of 1950 I was transferred back to Bedford Hills. A van there took us for recuperation activities. One day when the van returned to the front entrance, the same young man I had seen at Montefiore was standing at a second-floor window looking down. He saw me, though I didn't see him. Later he told me he had decided then and there that I was the girl he was going to marry. I had had an understanding all along with Murray Dennet that there was a serious relationship between him and me, but as soon as Harvey Feldman, the young man at the window, made known his serious feelings for me, I realized

that he was my choice for a husband. There was an instant chemistry between us.

Our relationship began to flourish then and there. We went to movies together. We sat together in the dining room. Harvey introduced me to his parents. I felt that we were very good for one another, and I was hoping that he felt the same way.

Once I recuperated enough to begin to think of a vocation for myself, I began to study X-ray technology at Bedford Hills. I eventually became a technician and worked in the X-ray department, and I continued to see Harvey. He gradually recovered from tuberculosis, which he had contracted while in the National Guard, and left Bedford Hills. I had convinced him to go into some aspect of the medical field. He went to the Eastern School for Physician Aides, where he became a medical technologist.

On weekends Harvey came up to visit me at Bedford Hills or I went to the Bronx to stay with my aunt and he came there to visit me. I cooked delicious meals for him. Our courtship continued. We wrote and talked to one another even when he couldn't see me. When he went to Bedford Hills, the bucolic surroundings became an ideal place for our courtship.

While we were keeping company, Harvey asked me why I had decided to stay in Bedford Hills and not return to live in the Bronx. The fact was—and I had learned this from my cousin Clara—that once I had contracted tuberculosis, Aunt Minnie felt reluctant to have me live in her apartment, considering that her two sons still lived with her and she didn't want them or the rest of her family exposed to a communicable disease. She had had a sister, Ethel, who had married a man with tuberculosis who had never told her of the fact. Ethel had contracted the disease from her husband and died of it. Much as I was saddened at not being able to live there, I realized that the dread

of tuberculosis, which had already struck my father's family, had left an ineradicable scar on my aunt. My Aunt Minnie's decision never lessened my love for her, since she had been instrumental in helping me make my decision to live a normal life.

Once Harvey graduated from school, we began to make arrangements for our wedding. Harvey's first job was as an X-ray and laboratory technician at Bound Brook Hospital in Bound Brook, New Jersey. Since he had been brought up with the notion that a man does not marry until he can support his wife, we had gone together for four years.

In April 1953 he began working at Bound Brook Hospital. I went there for an interview in September 1953, just before Yom Kippur. I met Dr. Benjamin Borow, who shared with his brother Henry a medical practice located right next door to Bound Brook Hospital. He hired me right on the spot, then took me home to meet his wife, Beatrice. Beatrice took one look at me and said, with Harvey standing there, "If I had a single son, you would have become my daughter and part of my family." From that day on I became a part of her family. Even today, I remain very close to her two sons and their wives, Edward Borow and Rosalie and Maxwell Borow and Eleanor, his first wife, and Carolyn, his present wife, and all their children.

Dr. Borow dispensed medications to his patients, and I assisted him.

I got the job in September and gave two weeks' notice to my employers at Bedford Hills. I moved to New Jersey and lived in a room in the upstairs attic of Bound Brook Hospital, where other employees, including Harvey, also lived. I was beginning a whole new phase of my life.

Harvey and I were married on December 13, 1953. Our wedding took place at Moskowitz and Lupowitz Restaurant, a kosher

Hungarian-Jewish establishment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. A rabbi performed the ceremony. Both of our families attended, as well as Dr. and Mrs. Benjamin Borow, Dr. and Mrs. Henry Borow, and Dr. and Mrs. Cutter. Dr. Cutter was a resident at Bound Brook Hospital. My one regret was that my mother and father were not there to walk me down the aisle in the wedding service. Nor were the others of my European relatives who had perished in the *Shoah*.

Our honeymoon was spent at the Nevele Country Club in the Catskills, and immediately afterward we returned to Bound Brook. We lived in a tiny attic apartment. The building we lived in belonged to Dr. Louis Borow, a second brother to Dr. Benjamin Borow. Louis was a radiologist. In the attic we had one room; it served as a bedroom, office, and sitting room. There was a small room with a sink and a Frigidaire, but no stove or oven. I prepared European-style gourmet meals on a hot plate and on a rotisserie. We shared a second-floor bathroom with Dr. and Mrs. Cutter and their young son. When one of us got up during the night, the other would ask, "Where are you going?" Considering the small quarters we had, it strikes us as funny today that we even thought there was any place to go besides our small room or the bathroom downstairs.

During the week Harvey worked at the hospital all day. I worked for Drs. Ben and Henry Borow, and I came home in the evenings and prepared our meals. On weekends we would go to Brooklyn to visit Harvey's parents unless he was on call. Our daughter, Tina, was conceived in that attic apartment in 1956 and was born on February 2, 1957, in Bound Brook Hospital. I worked through my whole pregnancy until the time of her birth. On the day of her birth there was a terrible snowstorm. I recall going to the hospital with labor pains on Thursday and having to wait until Saturday for Tina to be born. I was not dilating properly. One of Dr. Borow's associates, Dr. Albert Doswald,

came in to examine me and decided to give me an injection to induce labor. This brought on excruciating pain. I could see Harvey turn snow white while he listened to my screams.

Dr. Ben Borow was finally summoned. He delivered Tina at 4 P.M. on Saturday afternoon. Harvey had wheeled me into the delivery room. I wondered how many husbands at that time had the chance to do that. Harvey was so shaken by the whole experience that he forgot to perform his chores as an X-ray technician. Before leaving work to be with me when the baby came, he literally forgot to put any film in the cassette in order to take the X-rays!

Once Tina was born, I was wheeled back into my room. Suddenly I felt the terrible void I had felt at my wedding, that of not having my father, but most especially my mother, with me. Not being able to partake of the happiness of having my newborn daughter "meet" her maternal grandparents, who I know would have loved and cherished her, was painful to me. Nevertheless, I found solace in the fact that my American family and the friends whom I considered my extended "family" responded so warmly.

Harvey's mother, father, sister, and brother-in-law, as well as my Aunt Minnie, came out to Bound Brook to help me. Beatrice Borow, who is sadly no longer alive, came to see me and brought baby clothes for a newborn child. Then there was Mary Rosenberg, an elderly member of the Bound Brook Temple, who came with a set of sterling silver cutlery. She said to me, "I hope this beautiful baby's life will be as beautiful as this shining sterling silver."

Ruth Kissel, who was the matriarch of the Jewish community in Bound Brook, came to see me. She embraced me as part of her own family. She was the best orator I knew. She never wrote her speeches or public presentations down, but spoke from her heart. She and her family were founders of the Bound

Brook Temple and oversaw the life of the Jewish community there. Another person who came to see me was Sylvia Adelsberg. She was the president of the Bound Brook Temple Sisterhood, and she brought two gifts, one from the sisterhood and one from herself and her husband. The rabbi of the Bound Brook Temple was Hillel Horowitz. I remember that his wife, Faiga, baked cakes for the baby naming in temple on the first Sabbath that we could attend.

As much as I missed my parents and the other members of my family—aunts, uncles, and cousins—swallowed up in the Holocaust, I was comforted by the presence and participation in my life of those whom I am still proud to call my friends. They opened their arms and their hearts to me unconditionally.

Just before Tina was born, Harvey and I moved across the street to an apartment above Dr. Ben Borow's office. In that apartment I felt like royalty. I had a kitchen, a bathroom, and furniture of my own. We were able to furnish our dwelling to our taste. When I took Tina home, I took her to that apartment. My Aunt Minnie, Harvey's parents, and Harvey's sister and her family came out to help us and to be "introduced" to our new arrival. I also had a woman staying with me for a week who taught me the fundamentals of feeding, bathing, and caring for an infant. Yet I could not keep myself from thinking that had my mother been alive, I would have needed no one else. No one can take the place of a mother in a young woman's life, especially when she becomes a mother herself. Tina is named after my mother, Teresa Buchhalter.