

Childhood

Map of Margit's journey during the Holocaust. Numbers indicate the order in which she moved to each location.

I was born to an Orthodox Jewish family on June 12, 1929. Much later I learned that I came into the world on the very same day as another infant whose name would one day be known throughout the world: Anne Frank. Sixteen years later I was rescued from Bergen-Belsen, one of the most infamous of all the Nazi concentration camps. Anne Frank, who had also been in Belsen when I was there, had not been so lucky, however. She had died in that very camp shortly before it was liberated. When I speak to groups of students and teachers, I carry two large photos, each of a young girl still in childhood: one is of Anne Frank; the other is of me. I feel that there is an inextricable bond between us, since it might so easily have been I, not she, who perished in that infamous place.

My parents' names were Joseph Buchhalter and Theresa Granat Buchhalter. The place where I grew from infancy to my teen years was Tolcsva, in northeastern Hungary near the Czechoslovak border.* That region was known as Zemplen Megye, of which the county seat was Satoraljaujhely, one of the most populous Hungarian-Jewish enclaves outside of

*For this and other locations associated with Margit's early life, see the map on the reverse of this book's dedication page.

Transylvania. However, I was actually born in Budapest. Because my mother was unable to deliver me on her own, the Tolcsva doctor advised my father to take her to the Polyclinic, the largest hospital in Budapest, and it was there that I first came into the world. I was actually one of a pair of twins, but my brother died in childbirth.

Perhaps because of the circumstances of my birth, one of my earliest ambitions was to study medicine and become a doctor in Tolcsva. My goal as a young girl was to help to improve medical facilities there, so that the lives of babies about to be born would not be put at risk and so that no pregnant woman, ready to deliver her infant, would have to go somewhere else to give birth.

Although medicine in our town was far from advanced, I found a role model in our family doctor. His name was Klein, and he was a kindly man with a soft voice and a gentle touch who visited our home whenever one of us was ill. He was a bachelor, and he dedicated himself to his patients, who consisted of virtually everyone in and around Tolcsva. At the age of eight I contracted scarlet fever. I remember how Dr. Klein came to our house each day to examine me. I had been isolated in a separate room with my grandmother, who volunteered to care for me. I was burning with fever, I recall, but she was at my side whenever she could free herself from her chores. At first I was certain I would never leave my bed again. But when Dr. Klein first came into my room, he immediately applied cold compresses and made me take some bitter-tasting medicine. But all the while he would assure me, "Muncika, you will be well soon, and be able to run around and play." I never forgot the warmth in his soft voice.

Tolcsva was a small agricultural community, with a population of two thousand to twenty-five hundred people, of whom

approximately one-tenth were Jews. Though it was only a *shtetl* (village) in size, Tolcsva was well known and was visited by hundreds of outsiders. It was situated in a region of Hungary, around the city of Tokaj, that was known for its vineyards. Even today, it is a mecca for wine connoisseurs. The main street had all the stores, and this was where the farmers brought their goods three times weekly to display and sell.

Tolcsva had a small restaurant with rooms in the back for travelers. The hotel's proprietors, a family named Prince, were Jewish, but there was no restriction on their clientele. Many non-Jews stayed there, too. The dietary laws of Judaism were strictly observed, however. There was also a theater in the center of town where plays were staged. Outside our town, and in the direction of the mountains, there was a popular spa where people, often from other towns and cities, went for health and recreation. I can remember horse-drawn carriages going past my house carrying vacationers to the spa. It was commonplace to hear singing and shouting as the vacationers passed by.

My father ran a general store. His merchandise consisted mostly of food supplies. His customers were both farmers and laborers. The laborers would often spend their salaries on wine and would then charge their purchases. Yet my father's patience and kindness were boundless. He had sympathy for everyone. When some of his customers drank up their wages, he altruistically "forgot" to enter into his ledger the money owed to him, and simply gave to the mens' families the supplies necessary to sustain them until the next pay period. This postponement of payment might continue for a long time, and it sometimes provoked heated discussions between my father and my mother. His argument always went something like this, "Theresa, it's not his children's fault that he drinks up his week's wages! Do you want them to starve?" The logic of this was irrefutable, but the dilemma persisted: how long could payments be delayed without our suffering, too?

Usually on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays we had what is called today a "farmers' market," to which people brought the produce they hoped to sell. I remember seeing live chickens, ducks, and geese waddling about the market. I would follow my mother around and watch her as she bargained with the various vendors. Virtually everyone was, at least in part, a farmer.

There was also a thriving lumber business within our town in which my father's family was for many years engaged. They sold lumber for furniture and for firewood so that houses could be heated in winter. For a time my father worked in the lumber business, before he took over the general store. His younger brother Sany, however, continued in the business, supplying lumber to furniture factories.

My father had another brother named Henrik who lived with his wife and two daughters, Edith and Erzsike, in Sarospatak, a neighboring town northeast of Tolcsva. Henrik was

in charge of the Jewish community in Sarospatak. In Sarospatak lived also my Grandmother Buchhalter. My father's sister, Elizabeth, lived with her husband in Satoraljaujhely, which later became the Jewish ghetto for the area in which we lived. They owned a restaurant and published a local newspaper. I remember boys on bicycles riding through town and delivering the papers. My Aunt Elizabeth had an elegantly furnished five-room apartment on the town's main thoroughfare. I loved to visit her there.

Since she had no children of her own, Aunt Elizabeth took pleasure in spoiling me. She would take me shopping for clothes and prepare my favorite foods. She was always beautifully groomed and wore the most stylish clothes with flair. Her makeup was always perfectly applied. She was dark complexioned, with luminous brown eyes. She had curly hair arranged in the style of the movie stars of the time.

My mother's two brothers, Danesh and Jenó, lived in Budapest with their families. Uncle Danesh, who had beautiful red hair and bore a tremendous resemblance to my grandfather, was a furniture maker. Uncle Jenó, who was dark haired and had the same huge, sunken eyes as my grandmother, was an accountant. My mother's older sister, Hermine, and her husband lived in a smaller town between Budapest and Tolcsva. They owned a butcher shop. How I used to look forward to their visits and all the joyous times we shared! We saw them all at least twice a year.

We were a fairly prosperous community, thanks to Tolcsva's vineyards, its lumber business, and the popularity of the spa. But on the outskirts of town lived laborers and gypsies, and most of them, particularly the gypsies, knew discrimination and poverty. The gypsies were always regarded as social outcasts. In general, the rest of the community avoided them. The only

contact we had with them was during a festival or parade. They would participate in the festivities and perform for the rest of us, and people would throw coins at them. I recall them driving through Tolcsva in their multicolored, decorated wagons. The music they played was very melodic, often lively but sometimes melancholy. I often wished I could just get up on the makeshift stage and join them in their dancing. I wondered, though, how they could dance and play the violin, given the sad condition of their daily lives.

Tolcsva never had a shortage of water. The town is situated close to the Tisza River. In the middle of our street was a well that pumped water for the area, although we were fortunate enough to have our own well. Behind our house was a brook that bubbled with fresh water, so the fishing was very good there. Here I spent many summer days with my father. While he fished, I swam. In between large, moist stones could be found enormous shrimps and lobsters that our gentile neighbors used to pull out. As a very young child I was afraid to go near the rocks because I was sure the live lobsters would bite me. But when the summer heat came, I could not wait to run to the brook to cool off.

Yet water was frequently a danger to our region as well. One of the dreaded seasonal occurrences came during the spring thaw, which brought torrential rains, mud, and, worst of all, flooding. There were no drainage facilities, so we were constantly inundated with water. Sometimes the water came up to our very house. Often furniture and household items were ruined by water seeping into the house.

Even worse for us was the destruction of merchandise in our general store. This proved terribly costly to my parents. Cleaning up afterward was an immensely difficult task. I remember spending whole days mopping up and trying to retrieve items

that hadn't been ruined in the flooding. The whole Tolcsva community suffered from these floods, even the animals. At these times we were in harm's way both economically and physically.

My childhood, as I remember it, was happy and secure. As an only child I was the center of my family's attention. My parents doted upon me. We also shared our house with my maternal grandparents, who provided me with an additional loving influence, although my grandfather died in 1935, when I was only six. In our house lived a young woman who did domestic chores for us. A laundress came in once every two weeks.

I can recall as a very young girl standing by my mother's side and watching as she readied her dough for baking or scrubbed the pots or swept the floors. I carry with me also a strong mental image of my maternal grandmother daily calling to and feeding our chickens, geese, ducks, and turkeys. She would take me by my small hand as a child, saying, "Come, Muncika," and leading me to the chicken coops where we collected eggs each day. She made a game of it, and I looked forward to it each time. I can recall how, when the chores were done, I would often sit with my mother and grandmother in the parlor and listen to their reminiscences about their early lives and the difficulties and deprivations with which they had lived when they were younger. "We want you to have the comforts and security we never had," my mother would tell me.

Since we inhabited an agricultural area, we had a small farm. We raised quite a few animals on our farm. As a young child I regarded the cows, chickens, ducks, geese, and turkeys as my "playmates." I remember playing with them for hours on end. I loved to imitate the sounds they made. When I did something wrong and wanted to hide from my parents, I would lie down in the barn inside a clump of hay, and I would feel

that the cows and calves were watching over me, protecting me from my parents' punishment. I cannot ever forget how emotionally attached I was to the animals among which I grew up.

We kept pigeons so tame they would fly down to accept breadcrumbs from my hand. My father once constructed a ledge just above our living room windows for the pigeons nesting there. I sat at the window for hours, just watching them fly back and forth. I envied them. "How nice it would be," I said to myself, "just to be able to fly anywhere I chose to, and then come back!" The most pleasurable part of the experience was to watch the mother pigeon lay an egg and to wait until the baby was hatched. I always had the opportunity of feeding the infant pigeons, even during nesting season. They were so tame they would fly down and accept bread crumbs right from my hand.

Each of the seasons of my childhood produced vivid memories for me. I loved springtime, when nature came alive. My mother kept a flower garden. Each spring, she and I would plant flowers that bloomed through the summer. She had certain perennial bushes that she would take indoors in the winter and bring out again in the spring. These bushes had the brightest pink, white, and yellow flowers I have ever seen. In the middle of the courtyard was a magnificent lilac bush that I can still see vividly in my mind's eye. I have tried to duplicate this bush in my own yard, but without the success my mother had.

Today my daughter, Tina, plants flowers every spring for me to enjoy. By this simple act she brings back new memories of my mother, whose namesake she is. Tina will never fully know what her action means to me. It is in her that my mother still lives for me.

We also had a good-sized garden where we grew our own vegetables. The mixture of fertilizer and cow manure provided

us with a less-than-pleasant aroma, but it made our soil rich and gave us the freshest vegetables I've eaten to this day. As I grew older, during springtime I was able to help my father bring the cows and calves to pasture.

During the summer months, my friend Katy Klein, who lived in Satoraljauhely during the rest of the year, came to Tolcsva to stay with her grandparents. During those times we were constant playmates and companions, sharing meals and activities. We developed a friendship that is ongoing even to this day. Katy, whose married name is Roth, now resides in Cleveland, Ohio.

Another girlhood friend with whom I am still in contact is Cilike Friedman (née Green), whose father was the baker of Tolcsva. She now lives in Los Angeles.

When my mother cooked chicken soup during the summer, I would go to our garden and pick fresh parsley, kolrabe, carrots, celery, and dill. The joy of doing all these things made them seem to me less like chores than play. They were also to be preparations for my own adult life.

We and our next-door neighbors, the Fishmans, also Jewish, planted fruit trees on which grew delicious *szelva* (white and purple plums), *barac* (peaches), and *cheresznye* (white and red cherries), which I can still taste. During the summer months, little tomboy that I was, I loved to climb these trees and pick the fruit, which I would eat while sitting atop a branch. Sometimes I stayed up in a tree so long that my mother would have to come looking for me. In my remembrance I can still taste the delicious fruits and vegetables I had then, and I associate them with the delightful summers of my childhood.

During autumn there was little time for leisure activities, as we were involved in harvesting wheat and corn. The annual corn harvesting was always a joyous occasion for us. We would go to one another's homes to husk the corn and to get it ready

for drying. Some of the kernels were roasted so that we could taste the sweetness of the corn we grew. Once it was dried, we removed the kernels from the corn. While a portion of the kernels was used to feed the poultry, the rest was ground into cornmeal for our own consumption.

One event I can sharply recall to this day was the annual autumn harvesting of the grapes for wine making. For my family and the whole region, the grape harvest was a vital aspect of our economic well-being. Yet the harvest was also a time of holiday. We drove to the vineyards from miles around in horse-drawn carts. I used to run around the fields tasting all the grapes—green, purple, and dark ones. The laborers would cut grapes off the vines and put them in baskets that they carried on their backs. Once the baskets were full, they would empty them into the barrels on the wagons. To make the wine the people would first wash their feet and then stamp on the grapes to get all the juice out. Later the wine would be taken to cellars for aging. We would have a day toward the end of the harvest when we made jams and jellies, which we stored in jars for the winter.

At harvest time, my Aunt Elisabeth would bring us sardines and fresh bread at lunchtime in the field. Our lunch concluded with *babka* and other pastries that my mother had baked, and also iced coffee. I can recollect the gentile workers cooking bacon and pork nearby. The pungent aroma of the meat drove us insane because it was so tempting, and yet pork was prohibited for us as Jews. However delicious our own food, we yearned for “forbidden fruit.”

In the winters I loved to go on excursions with my father in a horse-drawn sleigh amid the snow-covered mountains of northern Hungary. It was one of the few opportunities I had during the year to have my beloved father to myself. As the horse and sleigh transported us through the winter scenery,

which reminded me of pictures in a child's storybook, he would tell me stories of the history of the region, entertain me with songs, and describe the winters of his own youth with his brothers and sisters amid the majestic mountains. Now and then we saw a deer or an elk run by. We even saw red foxes. Before we left on these excursions, my mother would provide us with plenty of warm blankets to shield us from the blinding cold, and when we returned home we would find that she had already prepared hot cocoa and home-baked cookies for us.

As I remember these early years, our lives seem to me to have been deeply attuned to the rhythms of nature and to the presence and unity of family and community. I feel even now that I had little reason to fear the future.