

# Acknowledgements

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*Jewish children weep your tears,  
Youngsters, those advanced in years,  
Since adults and boys in cheder today  
Must put your Jewish clothes away.  
But how will the Jews be recognised,  
If they look like people who've been baptised?  
Dear God in heaven hear our prayer  
And further Jewish tears spare  
Send us freedom, if you will,  
Don't let us be forgotten:  
Erase the laws for good and all  
By which we're kept downtrodden.  
Jewish child, here's what to do:  
Find yourself a hasid true,  
Dress in true hasidic style  
Then lock your door and wait a while.  
And if there be any Jews any more,  
If Jewish people are born at all,  
Then every one, both big and small  
Will know just what the hasids wore.*

(Transylvanian Yiddish folk verse,  
translated into English from Sándor Kányádi's Hungarian translation)

*Cine n-are bătrâni, să-și cumpere!*<sup>1</sup>

(Romanian saying)

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1 If you have no old folk, go get yourself some!

# Foreword

“A soldier threw us some cans of food. I caught one and opened it. It was lard, but I didn’t know that. Unbearably hungry – I had not eaten since April 5 – I stared at the can and was about to taste its contents, but just as my tongue touched it I lost consciousness.”

(Elie Wiesel: *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1995, p. 97)

My memories of childhood during the Ceaușescu regime are frequently connected with hunger. Or, more precisely, not so much with a sense of hunger as with a craving for flavour. Fortunately, we didn’t experience real hunger – there was always some kind of food to be had. Other than from the stories told by my grandmother’s generation, we didn’t know that hunger is as savage as a wolf; that it devours and consumes. On the other hand, we were all too familiar with cravings. We knew exactly what we wanted. We wanted what someone – my mother, or my grandmother – had once made for us in the past.

It was filled with such musings on hunger and craving that I set out in 2015 to write a book of Transylvanian Jewish recipes. My aim was to explore the pre-war customs of the Jewish community, their experience of starvation in the concentration camps, and the deprivation and inevitable breaking of kosher rules that resulted from the Communist-era communal feeding. I wanted to both see and present what remains of the kosher households of Northern Transylvania.<sup>2</sup>

But it was not only the hunger experienced by my own generation that prompted me to write this book: the decision was the outcome of a longer process, in which shame played a significant part. I was ashamed that, while there are scarcely enough men left in the Transylvanian Jewish communities to form

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2 According to Jewish tradition, the flesh of animals is considered to be kosher food if the animal is kosher on the basis of the laws contained in the Torah, the oldest written record of Jewish customs. Kosher animals have two distinctive characteristics: they have cloven hooves and they chew the cud. The flesh of any animal that has both these characteristics is regarded as kosher – that is, ritually clean – and may be eaten. They include sheep, horned cattle and goats. If an animal has only one of these characteristics, the flesh of that animal is unclean. In order for the flesh of an animal to remain kosher, it must be slaughtered according to the ritual laws of shechita by a trained and authorised butcher, known as a shochet. Fish are regarded as ritually clean if they have both fins and scales. Any food that does not comply with the kosher dietary laws is considered treif.

a *minyan*<sup>3</sup>, the local politics of memory are becoming aligned with that same denial that is slowly becoming the norm in the mother country. I was ashamed that, as we walked through the old Jewish quarters of the familiar settlements, the idea never even occurred that it may have been our very own grandparents and great-grandparents who had begun using the bedrooms, kitchens and plates of the deportees after May 1944. I was ashamed that, with the exception of cholent and *flódni* – which, it turned out, were popular at most in the assimilated communities of the bigger cities – I knew next to nothing about Transylvanian Jewish cuisine.

But what I did know, having been born in Marosvásárhely where family ties are far-reaching, was that I would be able to get in touch with survivors who could tell us about kosher households and cultural heritage, one essential element of which is gastronomy.

I also knew that these people, if anyone, would be able to recall pre-war flavours, diverging regional approaches and family recipes – just as they would remember devastating hunger and a craving for flavours.

I began the interview process, which lasted two years, in my native city of Marosvásárhely, then expanded the interviews to Érmellék and Máramaros, and from there to Nagyvárad and Kolozsvár, finally including Budapest, Chernivtsi and Mezőbaj, which was formerly part of Southern Transylvania, since after the war all of my interviewees had settled in towns that had earlier belonged to Northern Transylvania. This detour confirmed that, despite the frequent redefinition of national boundaries and the deportations, adherence to Hungarian identity had remained intact in the majority of cases. During our conversations, it became apparent that, besides their family recipes, there was something else my interviewees were handing down. Along with their individual life stories, I was glimpsing the everyday world of a community. I also recorded our conversations as we cooked together, using recipes that they either knew or recalled, and these conversations supplemented our earlier interviews.

3 *Minyan* means number, or quorum. A quorum of ten Jewish adult men is required for various religious rituals, such as public worship and the reciting of the Kaddish. When the members of a minyan eat together, the formulation ‘Let us bless our God, from whose wealth we have eaten’ is used in the grace after meals. A minyan is also required for the seven benedictions recited at a wedding, and for the benedictions and consolation of the mourners at a funeral.

Through our conversations about food, and the memories it evoked, it gradually became clear that post-war adherence to kosher traditions represented at least as great a struggle as the abandonment of those traditions. In terms of adherence to tradition, the word ‘struggle’ is apt, since the survivors were recalling recipes and dishes that they had been too young to cook themselves before the Holocaust; they could only piece them together afterwards from scraps of memory, aromas, flavours, and gestures copied from their mothers: “I wasn’t old enough at the time, but I watched how my mother did it.” “I remember my mother doing it something like that...”

At the same time, abandoning the traditions involved a similar struggle, since it inevitably meant tearing apart the family and the community, and each survivor had to wrestle with this alone. All my interviewees were young – teenagers, in fact – when they were taken. Anyone much younger or older than that was typically killed immediately. And most of those who were a little older, and who survived the selections, have now died.

During the interviews, and while writing this book, I did not strictly follow the rules that govern professional historians, although I did attempt to corroborate certain facts using other sources, and in such cases I turned to historians for help. I was confident that honest curiosity, and new questions related to food and hunger, would help my interviewees to shake off the numbness that so often forces Holocaust survivors to resort to the formulaic language of recollection. A numbness that forces us, as questioners, into that narrow gap from which the Holocaust appears at most like a picture hung on the wall, not – as Zygmunt Bauman puts it – like a window onto the world, through which people ‘glimpse many things that are otherwise invisible’. I wanted to open this window again, to look inside myself. I had no desire to produce a picture to be hung on the wall: I wanted to step back into that world – if such a thing were possible. If only for one brief moment, to a time when the family was still together. I wanted to help them recall how they once were, men and women who were suddenly flung into adulthood, and who, without their families, had to begin their lives again from scratch and conjure up the taste of home.

I was curious about everything. Perhaps even shamelessly curious.

Even about the death camps.

I spent a long time agonising about this. Even during the interviews I agonised about it. After all, I was interrogating and upsetting people who were 90 years old. I couldn't even be sure that they wanted to remember. Or at least that they wanted to remember this. I experienced the same anguish when it came to writing up the interviews. As I worked with the recollections of these 90-year-olds, I was often forced to confront the porosity and confusion inherent in memory. In the end, I decided to write about how memory functions in the lives of people of this age. The kind of themes around which memories cling. The associations they bring to life, and the traumas that might be set in motion. It's something that is common to all of us. And this is why, when writing up and editing the interviews, I retained the idioms, rhythms and contingencies of spoken language, only making corrections where absolutely necessary.

I have no wish to disappoint anyone who hopes to discover solid scholarship in the background of this material: it was never my intention to claim that knowledge of this kind is achievable in its entirety. The most one can do is endeavour to understand something about these ten individuals by listening to their stories. So that the stories of the survivors can be built into our common story. And so that, for my own part at least, I can understand a little of what these stories have in common: the strength of individuals, who were left alone with their grief as little more than children, to begin again.

The storytellers are remembering, and their memories are frequently rambling and associative – and at the same time associations began to form in my own head, as the summoner and witness of their memories. But my curiosity was also piqued. How would each of them relate to someone they had never seen before, and would very likely never meet again?

On the pretext of a recipe?

Along the threads of a story?

By means of an object?

Via another person?

Perhaps with the help of my existing knowledge, and the things I'd already read?

It was this technique of association, which is one of the most wonderful features of the human mind, that provided the principle of composition.

As my interviewees recalled memories, anecdotes and the stories of others, they brought to life in me things I had read long ago, memoirs – from which, out of a sense of respect, I have omitted the passages that describe industrialised murder – fragments of conversations, memories that others had shared with me, so that my own associations found their place among the texts and images, creating a shared story.

However, during the editing process I was also struck by the fact that these stories offer a tragic account of myths that remain alive to this day, myths about the meeting of cultures and the practice of religious tolerance in Transylvania – something that, if it ever existed at all, was repeatedly denied in the 1940s. This is all too apparent from the testing of their loyalty that the Hungarian Jews were forced to undergo just a few months or weeks before everything they had, including their lives, were taken from them. Many recall how their fathers were deported, despite having been decorated in the First World War; how they themselves experienced Trianon as a personal trauma; and how Hungarians and Jews had shared a minority existence ‘during the Romanian times’. At the same time, without exception, those who returned recall how their neighbours had ransacked their homes, and how, although in some way or other such things did come to light, in many cases the personal property that had been entrusted to those neighbours was never returned.

Perhaps one of the most heart-wrenching scenes in this mythology is the story of the Székely Sabbatarians in the village of Bözöd. It was here that the political order came face to face with a tiny community, Székely/Szekler in terms of ethnicity but of Jewish/Israelite faith – an indivisible community, typically even within a single family, of persecuted Jews and idealised Szeklers, the guardians of a genuine, intact Hungarian identity. And even though a special ministerial committee was sent from Hungary to save the Szeklers from the Jewish laws, a committee that did indeed ensure exemption at the cost of conversion to Christianity, in the end they were still taken off to the Marosvásárhely ghetto, from where most of them were deported to Auschwitz, erasing forever the unique community of Székely Sabbatarians.

Most of the members of the Transylvanian Jewish community are now elderly.

In most cases, their children are living abroad.