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About the Book

On 9 July 1944, two months after his eleventh birthday, the gates of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp closed behind Ladislaus Löb. Five months later, with the Second World War still raging, he crossed the border into Switzerland, cold and hungry, but alive and safe. He was not alone, but part of 1,670 Jewish men, women and children from Hungary who has been rescued from the Nazis as a result of a deal made by a man called Rezső Kasztner – a Hungarian Jew – with Adolf Eichmann, the chief architect of the Holocaust. Twelve years later Kasztner was murdered by an extremist Jewish gang in his adopted home of Israel.

To this day Kasztner remains a highly controversial figure, regarded by some as a traitor and by many others as a hero. Accused of betraying the bulk of Hungarian Jewry by hand-picking only those who were politically and personally dear to him, or those who could aid him financially after the war, Kasztner was accused by the judge in his post-war trial of selling ‘his soul to Satan’. *Rezső Kasztner* tells his story – and also the story of a child who lived to grow up after the Holocaust thanks to that man. A compelling combination of history and memoir, *Rezső Kasztner* traces Kasztner’s negotiations with the SS and describes in detail the lives of the author and his fellow inmates at Bergen-Belsen. Löb’s first-hand account offers extraordinary insights into one of the least known and most surprising episodes of the ‘war against Jews’. It is also an examination of one individual’s unique achievement and a consideration of the profound moral issues raised by his dealings with some of the most evil men ever known.

About the Author

Ladislaus Löb is Emeritus Professor of German at the University of Sussex. He was born in Transylvania and spent five months in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp aged eleven. He grew up in Switzerland, where he worked as a journalist and teacher before moving to an academic job in Brighton. He has published widely on German and English literature. His translations include *Nine Suitcases* by Béla Zsolt, *Battle for Budapest* by Kriszti'an Ungváry and *Sex and Character* by Otto Weininger.

Also by Ladislaus Löb

Nine Suitcases by Béla Zsolt (translation)

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Key Persons

Vaada and associates

Barlas, Chaim, Jewish Agency representative
Biss, Endre, Vaada member
Brand, Hansi, Vaada member
Brand, Joel, Vaada member
Dobkin, Eliahu, Jewish Agency member
Fischer, József, leader of Bergen-Belsen group
Fleischmann, Gizi, Zionist activist
Goldstein, Peretz, parachutist
Kasztner, Rezső, Vaada executive vice-chairman
Komoly, Otto, Vaada chairman
Krausz, Moshe, head of Budapest Palestine Office
Mayer, Saly, Swiss Joint representative
McClelland, Roswell, US War Refugee Board representative
Offenbach, Shulem, Vaada member
Palgi, Joel, parachutist
Schweiger, Moshe, Vaada member
Sharett, Moshe, Jewish Agency member
Springmann, Samu, Vaada member
Szenes, Hanna, parachutist
Weissmandel, Michael Dov, rabbi

Germans

Becher, Kurt, SS Obersturmbannführer (lieutenant-colonel)
Eichmann, Adolf, SS Obersturmbannführer (lieutenant-colonel)
Grüson, Max, SS Hauptsturmführer (captain)
Himmler, Heinrich, Reichsführer-SS (SS supreme commander)

Hunsche, Otto, Hauptsturmführer (captain)
Kaltenbrunner, Ernst, SS Oberführer (head of SS security)
Kettlitz, Herbert, SS Sturmbannführer (major)
Klages, Otto, SS Obersturmbannführer (lieutenant-colonel)
Krell, Erich, SS Hauptsturmführer (captain)
Krumey, Hermann, SS Obersturmbannführer (lieutenant-colonel)
Müller, Heinrich, SS Gruppenführer (squad leader)
Veesenmayer, Edmund, SS Brigadeführer (brigadier-general, ambassador to Hungary)
Wisliceny, Dieter, SS Hauptsturmführer (captain)

Hungarians

Horthy, Miklós, Regent
Szálasi, Ferenc, Arrow Cross leader
Sztójay, Döme, Prime Minister

Israelis

Agranat, Shimon, Supreme Court judge
Gruenwald, Malkiel, defendant
Halevi, Benjamin, District Court judge
Silberg, Moshe, Supreme Court judge
Tamir, Shmuel, attorney

For Egon Mayer

Rezső Kasztner

The Daring Rescue of Hungarian Jews: A Survivor's Account

Ladislaus Löb



PIMLICO

Foreword

Two months and a day after my eleventh birthday the gates of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp closed behind me. It was 9 July 1944. Five months later, with the Second World War set to last another half-year, I crossed the border into neutral Switzerland. As the Allies were closing in on Nazi Germany, and the camp I had left was turning into the hell commonly known as 'Belsen', I was looking down on Lake Geneva with its peaceful backdrop of snow-covered mountains, stunned but alive and safe. I was not alone, but one of 1,670 Jewish men, women and children from Hungary who had been released from Belsen thanks to a unique deal between another Hungarian Jew, Rezső Kasztner, and Adolf Eichmann, the chief architect of the Holocaust. In fact Kasztner saved many more, but ten years on he was accused of collaborating with the SS. In a law court in Israel, a modern, democratic country in the twentieth century, a judge ruled that Kasztner had 'sold his soul to Satan'. Eventually the highest court in the land reversed the judgement, but by that time Kasztner was dead. The Jew who had saved more Jews from the Holocaust than any other Jew had been gunned down in a street in Tel Aviv by a Jewish gang.

The repercussions went far beyond the private sphere. The issues were deeply rooted in Israeli politics and the violent arguments surrounding the case rocked the young state to its foundations. The trial marked the beginning of Israel's gradual shift to the right, which still determines the course of events in the Middle East.

Kasztner himself remains a controversial figure: a traitor to some, a hero to others. This book is based on the belief that the second assessment is nearer the truth. It tells the story of a man who had the courage and resourcefulness to stand up to the Nazi mass murderers and save thousands of lives before being assassinated for his pains. It tells the story of how 1,670 people survived in Bergen-Belsen until he rescued them at the last moment before hell broke loose. Finally, it tells the story of one child who, thanks to him, lived to grow up after the Holocaust.

This book is the first to bring the three stories together in a detailed and comprehensive narrative. Accordingly, it concentrates on three main topics: Kasztner's negotiations with the SS in Hungary, Germany and Switzerland; the everyday life of the 'Kasztner group' in Bergen-Belsen; and the trial and assassination of Kasztner in Israel. While most existing publications are predominantly concerned either with Kasztner's negotiations or with his trial and assassination, I have placed equal emphasis on our own experiences in Bergen-Belsen while we were waiting for him to save us.

The events are no longer completely unknown. They are discussed, from one point of view or another, in greater or lesser depth, in a number of books, chapters and articles, mostly by Israeli academics. They also appear in many newspaper and internet commentaries, ranging from the serious and responsible to the unscrupulously tendentious and scurrilous. I have tried to steer clear of both the journalistic and the academic extremes. Although I hope that the expert historian, lawyer or political scientist will find my arguments convincing, my prime aim has been to create an accurate and objective account for the general reader in an accessible form. Throughout the text I have resisted the temptation to embroider, to present fiction as fact, to invent scenes and dialogues that do not appear in any of my

original sources. By 'telling it as it really was', I wanted above all else to reveal the truth about Rezső Kasztner.

As a child of eleven I was of course too young to understand all that was happening to us in Bergen-Belsen, but old enough to notice many things and to acquire what are now patchy memories. To fill the gaps, and to add a more mature perspective to my juvenile recollections, I have drawn on many conversations with fellow-survivors and a wealth of unpublished reminiscences, memoirs and interviews from archives in Israel, the USA and Germany.

For Kasztner's negotiations my prime source was a report written by the man himself soon after the war, which was eventually published in German under the title *Der Kasztner-Bericht*. While Kasztner is clearly trying to present his own case in the most favourable light, the report, used with some caution, is an indispensable account of his work with – or rather against – the SS.

A few words about the structure of the book. The first chapter is about my own childhood memories of life in a small, anti-Semitic town in Transylvania. The next chapter locates these particular memories in the wider context of the Holocaust in Hungary. The subsequent chapters move to and fro between two parallel stories. My stay in the ghetto of Kolozsvár is followed by the beginnings of Kasztner's 'relief and rescue committee' and the first phase of his negotiations with Eichmann, leading up to our departure from Budapest to Bergen-Belsen. Kasztner's continuing encounters with the SS alternate with scenes from our daily round in captivity, ending with our release to Switzerland. The narrative then shifts to Geneva and Nuremberg, where Kasztner spent most of the first three years after the war. It ends with Kasztner's ill-fated trial and his assassination in Israel.

Kasztner had to face terrible situations and resolve appalling dilemmas. He had neither the time nor the temperament to engage in lengthy reflections about the

ethical implications of what he was doing. He saw that lives were at risk and he acted as quickly and as decisively as he could to save them. Without ignoring the excruciating moral issues raised by his dealings with some of the most evil men ever known, I believe that what he did was right. I hope that this account will assist the recognition that is due to his astonishing achievement.

CHAPTER 1

A Jewish Child among Jew-haters

A small town in Transylvania

I was about six years old when I had my first conscious experience of anti-Semitism. A Hungarian lout, probably in his late teens, was sauntering along the main street of our small town in Northern Transylvania, bawling a scurrilous song to the tune of 'Hatikvah' - the anthem of Zionism then and the national anthem of Israel today. I did not catch the text as a whole, but I still remember the refrain: 'Bloody Jews, stinking Jews, go to Palestine'. I also remember wondering whether the singer was mad and whether somebody would come to arrest him. Nobody did.

That was in 1939. Northern Transylvania, previously part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had belonged to Romania since the Trianon Treaty of 1920, which was meant to tidy things up after the First World War. They were not tidy enough for some, and in 1940, one year into the Second World War, Hitler forced the Romanians to return the region to his Hungarian allies as a reward for services rendered. The red-yellow-and-blue Romanian flags on public buildings and private houses were swiftly replaced with red-white-and-green Hungarian ones, and the Hungarian army came marching in as if it had won a famous victory. On 19 March 1944 the Germans occupied Hungary, and the two countries, which nevertheless continued to be allies, jointly lost the Second World War. In 1945 it was the Soviet Union's turn to be generous with other people's territories and

Northern Transylvania was once again apportioned to Romania.

Between 1920 and 1940 the majority of the inhabitants had been Hungarians who bitterly resented the Romanian rule. From 1940 the Romanians, still a minority, were equally hostile to the Hungarian regime. Today there is a growing Romanian majority and the two communities are said to be developing a kind of peaceful coexistence. Perhaps it will work, but I cannot help thinking that the only time I have seen Hungarians and Romanians forgetting to hate each other was when they were busy hating the Jews. For the Jews themselves, life in Transylvania under the Romanians had been uncomfortable but bearable. After the Hungarian takeover it became much harder. The German occupation of Hungary, including Transylvania, brought the final disaster, when the two allies promptly joined forces to complete the last stage of the Holocaust. The few Jewish survivors who subsequently returned to the region were not made to feel welcome.

I was born on 8 May 1933 in the capital of Transylvania – Kolozsvár in Hungarian, Cluj in Romanian. I was the only child of Izsó Löb and Jolán Löb, née Rosenberg. We lived in a small town, or rather an overgrown village, called Margitta (or Marghita), about 150 km north-west of what I will continue to call Kolozsvár.¹ Before March 1944 Margitta had about 8,600 inhabitants, of whom 2,600 were Jews. By mid-May 1944 it had about 6,000, of whom none were Jews. After the Holocaust some 400 of the 2,600 Jews were still alive, but very few of them went back to live among neighbours who had proved so unneighbourly.

Since the Second World War Margitta has seen the development of some new industries and part of its original village architecture has been replaced by jerry-built concrete blocks in the notorious communist style. In the nineteen-thirties and forties it was an agricultural town, surrounded by wheat fields, orchards, pastures and

vineyards. The streets were unpaved, unlit at night, thick with dust in dry weather and in wet weather covered in mud so deep that the carts drawn by oxen or horses often got hopelessly stuck. Our own street was called 'Sáros utca', Muddy Street. Lined by acacia and mulberry trees, it led out to the vineyards and the Jewish cemetery on the hillside beyond. That was where my mother was buried at the age of thirty-six, when I was nine.

Each morning the town's cows were driven through the streets to the pastures and each evening back to their stables. I was fascinated by the way their udders had swollen during the day. Many of these cows were infected with TB, the disease that killed my mother, although she may have picked it up not from the cows but rather from her dressmaker, who was said to have TB and who used to spread her customers' clothes on her bed. For a while my father had a special licence to sell salt, both wholesale and retail. The salt trade was a state monopoly and such licences were awarded to veterans of the First World War decorated in compensation for their wounds. His store was in the main street and he kept a large block of salt in front of the door, where the passing cows regularly stopped for a lick before continuing their walk.

Most of the buildings in Margitta were single-storey, some with storks' nests on their chimneys, and hen-coops, pigsties, stables, water wells and other paraphernalia of rural life in their back yards. We rented the ground floor of a rare two-storey villa, whose owner lived in a hut at the bottom of the garden. We were a relatively well-off, more or less middle-class family, but still had to get water from a well and use an outdoor privy. We had (somewhat erratic) electricity, but no phone or radio. Every noon a town crier would walk the streets, beating his drum and reading out the news when people had gathered from the houses nearby. If a plane flew over the village all the children - and some adults - would run outside, craning their necks to

stare at it. I remember my excitement when a small single-propeller machine flew so low that I could see the face of the pilot in his leather helmet and thick goggles. Cars were rarer than carts and had to be started with a crank. Train or bus connections to the world outside, although they existed, were infrequent. On the buses children shorter than a metre, as measured against a rule drawn near the door, paid half fare. When the trains were slowed down by track repairs, passengers would leap off into the fields and then clamber back on, loaded with potatoes and onions, before the engine regathered speed. Later there were trains which people could not jump off because they were sealed and guarded by armed gendarmes.

Jews lived in every part of the town, but were concentrated in and around Main Street, which was also called Petri Street as it ran on towards the village of that name. The half-hour hike to Petri through the wheat fields lined with poppies and cornflowers was one of the earliest explorations I remember. While the markets and stockyards were at the other end of the town, most of the shops and offices were in the Petri Street area, as were the premises of the Jewish institutions. There was an impressive Great Synagogue for the mainstream Jewish community, built in the 1860s and extended in 1910, and a smaller one for the Chassidic congregation. Apart from their official purpose, the synagogues were ideal places for exchanging the latest news and discussing business during prayers, while copiously spitting on the bare wooden floor. There was a *mikveh* where the faithful took their weekly ritual bath, a *matzot* bakery that supplied the unleavened bread for Passover, and a *cheder* where the Orthodox children received their religious training. When the Jews were deported, the Great Synagogue became a warehouse and the Chassidic synagogue a stable.

There were three Christian churches. The Catholic and the Reformed were built in the eighteenth century, painted in

warm ochre and topped by the onion spires typical of the region; the Eastern Orthodox hailed from the nineteenth century and supported a mass of silvery domes. When I visited Margitta after the war the three Christian churches were still standing and showed signs of careful maintenance. There was no Great Synagogue, no Chassidic synagogue and no ritual bath. When I asked people in the street what had happened to them, nobody seemed to know. Eventually I discovered that the Great Synagogue had been pulled down in 1977. Not that it mattered. There was nobody left to use it anyway.

The 2,600 or so Jews of Margitta represented all segments of Hungarian Jewry. There were some socialists or communists. There were Zionists, ranging from the far right to the far left. There were Chassidim with dangling sidelocks, dressed in black kaftans and wide fur hats, whose wives, as prescribed, were shaved bald under their wigs. But the majority were moderately religious and fairly well-educated Neologues, who identified with traditional Hungarian society and culture but still considered themselves Jewish and more or less assiduously observed the important festivals. This last group comprised most of the professional and business people in the town. My own father and mother mixed mainly with them, and their children were my friends. With the Gentiles we had little social contact. For all our assimilation we were different from the Hungarians and unwanted by them. To us they were a vaguely hostile presence, to be avoided whenever possible. To some extent I was the stereotype of the sheltered middle-class Jewish boy whose education in good manners, politeness and sensitivity did not exactly make life easy when confronted with rough Hungarian peasant kids. But I would not refuse the occasional chance to join a chaotic game of football in the street.

On Saturdays most of the shops were closed and the streets were full of Jews going to the synagogues. At midday

Jewish housewives appeared everywhere, bearing home the earthenware pots in which the traditional *cholent*, beans with smoked goose breast, had been simmering since Friday in the Jewish baker's oven and beating the law that forbids any work, including the pressing of a switch or the striking of a match, on the Sabbath. Another regular feature was the Saturday afternoon promenade. The young Jewish men and women, in their smartest clothes, would converge on the town centre. Strolling up and down Main Street in small groups, the sexes strictly segregated, they seemed to be absorbed in their conversations, but were in fact observing each other intently out of the corners of their eyes. Personally, I thought this game boring and usually tried to track down my friends and do something interesting.

True to form, Jews played a leading part in the commercial and professional life of Margitta, although there were no Jewish civil servants. Three of the town's six lawyers were Jewish, as were both pharmacists and all four medical practitioners. Dr Emil Goldberger was one of the best-known characters. He acted as his own receptionist, secretary and lab technician, and was constantly seen dashing to his patients' bedsides in a carriage and pair - often forgetting to charge the poorer ones for these home visits. On a less happy note, I can still taste the cod liver oil he used to prescribe for me as a tonic. Jews in business included a landowner, two wine-growers, four wholesale merchants, two bankers, two tobacconists, a grocer, a hairdresser, a haberdasher and a wine-seller. There were also rabbis, teachers and circumcisers employed by the religious communities; several self-employed Jewish joiners, tailors and cobblers; and labourers, odd-job men, and others of uncertain occupation and income. One of the richest men was József Wollner, who owned a small shoe factory. Most of the buildings around the small passageway between Petri Street and Körtvélyes Street belonged to him. I do not know the official name of the passageway, if indeed it had one.

Everyone called it 'Wollner sikátor', Wollner Lane. An outstanding Jewish institution was the 'Kóser' run by József Klein and his three sons, Ferenc, Miklós and László. This kosher restaurant, bar, café and hotel was the favourite meeting place in town, even for many Gentiles, who enjoyed the excellent Jewish food and the cosy atmosphere.

In short, Margitta was a *shtetl* like many others in Hungary up to the Second World War. Like the others, it owed much of its prosperity and culture to its Jews, and like the others, it sent them to their deaths when the opportunity presented itself.

My family

I was four years old when my mother caught TB. Streptomycin was still unknown and we had neither the money nor the opportunity to send her to a sanatorium in Switzerland, where she might or might not have been cured. So she spent five years in bed in Hungary and died when I was nine. All that time I had to keep at a safe distance from her for fear that I might become infected. When I wanted to talk to her I had to stop in the doorway, and there was no question of even the slightest physical contact. I can imagine how painful this must have been for both of us, but I cannot recapture any feelings. I must have been good at blotting out unpleasant things. Ironically, it was discovered many years later that my lungs were scarred. I had in fact had TB and recovered without anybody realising that it was more than a bad cold or flu. I do not know whether this happened during my stay in Bergen-Belsen or at some other time. In any case, all the misery of being kept at more than arm's length from my mother had been quite unnecessary.

Towards the end of my mother's illness I was sent to stay with my grandfather and aunt in Kolozsvár. My father and my grandmother were in Margitta, looking after my mother. One morning I was overcome by a restlessness I had never felt before. In the afternoon a telegram arrived and my aunt

told me to get ready to travel to Margitta because my mother was getting worse. The only train available that night stopped a few stations short of Margitta. Everything was closed, except for a cold and dusty waiting room that seemed to be darkened rather than lit by a bare bulb. I stretched out on one of the benches, but was too tense to sleep. It was then that my aunt explained to me that my mother had actually died in the morning. I spent the next hours alternating between crying and dozing. At daybreak an enterprising drayman turned up on the off-chance of picking up a fare before the train to Margitta was due. Wrapped in coarse blankets, we completed the last leg of our journey on a horse-drawn sledge. It was January 1942.

When we arrived in Margitta in the middle of the morning, my father was waiting for us in our cold apartment, unshaven, red-eyed, with a deep cut in his lapel, as prescribed for Jewish mourners. 'We're alone now,' he said, and when he kissed me his bristle felt damp and scratchy against my face. He was weeping again as he recalled my mother's last words. 'I'm all right now,' she had said, 'but for the rest of you there are hard times ahead.' A little later she had cried out 'I can't see any more,' and died. The TB saved her from the hard times, but without the TB she might well have survived them, as did her husband and son. All too soon we had reason to remember her prophecy - or was it simply sober foresight?

According to Jewish custom, my mother was buried as soon as we had arrived, and I recited the *Kaddish*, for the first of many times, at her grave. I don't remember what everybody else did afterwards, but I spent the rest of the day on my own, tobogganing on the hillside next to the cemetery.

I have been told that, for many years after my mother's death, I refused to talk about her. In fact I would not have known what to say because I had never really known her: having to stop on the threshold of her bedroom had taken

its toll. One of the few things I remember is that her two favourite tunes were 'The stars were shining' from *Tosca* and 'Solveig's Song' from *Peer Gynt*. Perhaps she was at heart a melancholy person, but my father often praised her quick wit and composure. Two incidents bear witness to this.

At one time during her illness she had a particularly bad coughing fit. One of the two doctors by her bedside said to the other: 'This could be the exitus.' When she had regained her breath she remarked: 'Well, doctor, it wasn't the exitus, was it?' I understand that this was the last time the doctor risked such bedside predictions, whether in Latin or Hungarian.

At another time my mother was woken by an intruder climbing in through the window that she kept wide open in all weathers - a recommended treatment for TB. She always had a syphon beside her, and in best slapstick fashion she squirted a jet of soda water straight into the intruder's face. He uttered a few words that were definitely not Latin and retreated through the window faster than he had entered. But no amount of composure was a match for the TB bacillus.

While my mother was ill, our housework was done by local peasant maids, but my mother's younger sister, my little aunt Sári, often came to stay with us and became something between an elder sister and a second mother to me. I remember her taking me to the river where she taught me to swim and to the local fleapit where we watched Tarzan, Laurel and Hardy, Bette Davis and Errol Flynn in *Elizabeth and Essex* (translated into Hungarian as 'Love and the Scaffold'), and a Spanish Civil War epic glorifying the defence of the Alcazar of Toledo by heroic Falangists against dastardly Republicans. Popeye gave me an enduring love of spinach. As we watched the film, we would nibble sunflower seeds, and I was very proud of being able to open them in my mouth and spit the shell out without using my hands. What I did not know then was that my young aunt was a

member of the communist youth movement and had been arrested and tortured several times by both Romanian and Hungarian police, but had refused to give away any secrets. Later she was to pass up a chance of surviving the Holocaust out of loyalty to her parents.

My father was thirty-seven years old when I was born. He had left secondary school after four years, and at nineteen, soon after the outbreak of the First World War, volunteered for the Austro-Hungarian army. Some of his friends had persuaded him that he had every prospect of being slightly wounded and returning with his arm in a sling to Vienna or Budapest, where all the girls would run after such a dashing soldier. In reality he was hit in the knee by a Russian dum-dum bullet - banned by international law - and spent several days lying in a swamp before being picked up and taken to a military hospital in Vienna. Rather than strutting up and down the Ring with his arm in a sling and the girls running after him, he lost his knee cap and walked with a stiff leg and a stick for the rest of his life. Thirty years later that dum-dum bullet would prove to be a great asset.

When my father had recovered from becoming a war hero he began to make a living by buying and selling, exporting and importing things. If I ever knew exactly what those things were I certainly do not remember now, but I do remember that he travelled a lot - sometimes with a Romanian prince, bribed up to the hilt, whom he employed to open doors normally closed to Jewish traders. Bribery and corruption were integral parts of the East European economies and my father knew well how to use them. But he also knew how to put honesty to good use. Once he was travelling by train from Hungary to Romania, or possibly from Romania to Hungary, with a suitcase full of silk, hoping to make a big profit, especially if he could avoid paying duty. He hoisted the suitcase into the luggage rack and waited, passport in hand and an innocent expression on his face. The customs officer duly arrived and demanded to know

what was in the suitcase. Looking even more innocent, my father said: 'It's full of silk.' The customs officer laughed and walked on to the next compartment. On a later occasion, again involving a train and an official, my father's shrewdness and presence of mind actually saved his - and my - life, as we shall see. In Hungary, for much of the twentieth century, a Jew needed more than his fair share of such qualities in order to survive, but the stress gradually wore down even the strongest constitution. My father's physical and emotional health was in tatters long before he died at eighty-five.

My paternal grandfather had died young, leaving behind my father, his younger brother Lázár and four sisters. Three of the sisters - my aunts Bella, Szidi and Janka - were married with several children; the fourth - Szeréna - was said to be 'not quite there'. My father's brother, like his father, died young. He had three daughters and a son, and for a long time my father supported them as well as his widowed mother. One of the daughters - Boris, short for Borbála or Barbara - had the good fortune to move to Bucharest and be spared the Holocaust, which bypassed Romania. The two other daughters - Helén and Goldi - survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, and the son - Sanyi - the slave-labour service. My maternal grandparents, Sándor and Ida Rosenberg, had four children: in addition to my mother and my aunt Sári there were two sons - Mityu and Lajcsi - who emigrated to France before the war, fell out with each other and were rarely heard of. All my other relatives, who were living in or near Kolozsvár, died in Auschwitz. There is not much point in trying to count exactly how many.

None of my extended family had stayed at school beyond their mid-teens, but they spoke Hungarian, Romanian and Yiddish, and were hard-working, literate, and good at arithmetic. Some of the men were artisans, while others made their living as small dealers in whatever goods they

could find to deal in. The women looked after their homes and their children, and occasionally helped their husbands with their businesses. They generally took their Jewishness for granted without thinking too much about it. They tended to eat kosher food, to avoid work on the Sabbath, and to go to the synagogue on the important festivals, but as far as I can tell they followed the religious practices as reassuringly familiar customs rather than intense spiritual exercises. My father and mother were less observant, but we too were fully aware of our Jewish identity. And just in case we ever forgot, there were enough others around to remind us.

My own Jewish education was like that of most assimilated children. While the Orthodox received a thorough grounding in the Torah, Talmud and all the learned commentaries, I was only taught to read aloud the words of Hebrew prayers and biblical passages, without the slightest idea of what they meant. My teacher was a young man studying to be a rabbi at the local *yeshiva*. When I read well, sweets would drop on the table from on high. I cannot remember whether I really believed that they were sent from heaven or realised that they came from the same source as the nail clippings my teacher kept producing with a pen knife while I was struggling with the Hebrew letters. By the time my mother died I was able to recite the *Kaddish* in the synagogue three times a day for a year without any difficulty. I still did not understand the words, which were in any case Aramaic rather than Hebrew, but somehow it did not seem to matter.

I had two famous relatives, although we could have done without their fame in both cases. In 1924 in Chicago two rich, brilliant and bored young men murdered a young boy for the thrill of committing the perfect crime. It was not quite perfect, because they were caught, but they became the defendants in one of the most celebrated criminal trials of their time. The victim was Bobby Franks, aged fourteen. The murderers were Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, aged nineteen and eighteen respectively. They were sentenced to

life imprisonment. Leopold was released in 1958, while Loeb was murdered in prison in 1936. The case inspired many novels, plays and films, including Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*. Early in the twentieth century an uncle of my father had emigrated to America. He never reported back to the family, but some travellers claimed that he had become a rich businessman in Chicago. In which case it is more than likely that Richard Loeb was my American second cousin.

Very much later, another second cousin acquired a sadder fame. His name was Emil Grünzweig. He was the son of my cousin Goldi, who had survived Auschwitz, and her husband Smile, who had survived slave labour. They had returned to Transylvania after the Holocaust and emigrated to Israel a few years later with their two sons, Emil and Lulu. By 1983 Emil, a teacher and former paratrooper aged thirty-five, had become one of the leaders of the Israeli 'Peace Now' movement. On 10 February a demonstration was held in Jerusalem against the war in Lebanon and the massacre of Palestinian refugees in the camps of Sabra and Shatila. When a right-wing extremist threw a hand grenade at the demonstrators six people were injured and one of them died. The one who died because he had tried to make peace was Emil. The annual Emil Grünzweig Human Rights Award of the Association of Civil Rights in Israel honours his memory.

But I have jumped almost half a century. I must return to my own childhood and explain how my path came to cross Rezső Kasztner's. To a large extent the history of every Hungarian Jewish child in the mid-twentieth century is a history of anti-Semitism. The chapter that follows recalls what it was like for one particular young boy.

Encounters with anti-Semitism

I suffered infinitely less than most Jews in Europe under the Nazis. In comparison with that of millions, my experience of the Holocaust, both metaphorically and literally, was child's

play. I cannot tell why I was granted such an easy passage. Perhaps I was just lucky. Or perhaps it was not quite as easy as I remember and I have repressed more of the pain and the fear than I realise. What is certain is that even in the ghetto, in the cattle truck and in the concentration camp I felt protected by my father, however illusory that idea may have been. Afterwards my father and I never really talked about what we had been through. This reticence on both sides has cost me a great deal of insight and, possibly, catharsis. But juvenile and patchy as my memories are, I trust that they will contribute to an understanding of the anti-Semitism that was rampant in fascist Hungary and that reached its monstrous consummation in the last phase of the German-led Holocaust.

The Hungarian troops arrived in Margitta on 6 September 1940. They were greeted in Main Square by veterans of the First World War. These included about a hundred Jews, who were wearing their medals and welcomed the Hungarians with open arms. The leader of the Hungarian troops, a Colonel Szőnyi, ordered the Jewish veterans to leave before he allowed the celebrations to continue. One of our neighbours was overheard saying to the Hungarian soldiers: 'Thank God you're here. We didn't know what to do with these Jews any more.' On the next day the arrests of so-called communists or collaborators with the Romanians began. Most of those arrested were Jews, and most of the charges were false. Such harassments were to continue until there were no Jews left in Margitta.

I had joined the local 'elementary school' at the age of six in September 1939 under the Romanian regime. Before I finished my first year, Margitta was Hungarian. For some time the Jewish children were taught together with the Gentiles. Like many Jews, my parents strongly believed in education, and I could read and write long before I started school. As a result I constantly got top marks. It may also have helped that my teacher was a kind woman who treated

everybody in the class with equal fairness. At some point during the four years I spent at that school the Jewish children were separated from the rest and put in a class of our own under a new teacher. He was a fierce man with knee-high black boots, piercing black eyes, a bushy black moustache of the kind favoured by army sergeants, and a lapel badge in the red-white-and-green Hungarian national colours. He took every opportunity to tell us what he thought of us dirty Jewish brats and our whole filthy race. He also had a habit of pointing to the map on the wall which showed the newly recovered part of Transylvania as a bulge protruding east of central Hungary and bounded on three sides by Romanian territory. Romania, he kept informing us, was a big open mouth waiting to swallow Hungary. In all the reports I got from this teacher my marks were near the bottom. Perhaps I was so afraid of him that my work had suddenly plummeted. But I rather suspect that I was the object of a deliberate strategy, either on his part or on that of the authorities. He may also have been unhappy teaching stinking Jews. If he was, he did not have to suffer long. Soon there were no stinking Jews left for him to teach.

Anti-Semitism often went hand in hand with nationalism, not a happy mixture for those at the receiving end. At short intervals every household was obliged to hang out the red-white-and-green Hungarian flag, probably to celebrate some war Hungary had once joined and lost. On this occasion the flag at our house was hanging just at the right height for a little boy to keep jumping up and down trying to reach it. I do not remember whether I succeeded, but somebody must have reported the incident, because suddenly two armed gendarmes burst into my mother's bedroom, shouting 'Where's the Jew Löb?' My mother did not know where my father was at that particular moment, but eventually he was found, put on trial and sentenced to a hefty fine because his son had 'insulted the Hungarian nation'.