

Judith M.

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Judith M., f., born in Budapest in 1920, in Switzerland since 1956

Where do you come from?

I was born in Budapest in 1920. All my ancestors were Jews. My grandfather on my father's side died early. He was the director of the Jewish primary school in the industrial town of Miskolc in northern Hungary. Both my parents came from this place. My grandfather on my mother's side was a businessman. My maternal grandmother's family came from Galicia and probably migrated to Hungary in the eighteenth century. Both my grandfathers took the Hungarian forms of their names around the turn of the century. My mother grew up in Miskolc and moved to Budapest with her parents when she was relatively young. I had a brother two and a half years older than me. My parents studied in Budapest and became doctors. My mother was a psychiatrist and neurologist and also became a Freudian psychoanalyst. She was a leading light of the Budapest school of psychoanalysis. For a period she was the president of the psychoanalytical association. My father was a paediatrician and served as lieutenant and surgeon-major for the whole of the First World War. My father left the Jewish faith while at the front, and my parents were baptised as Unitarians in 1920.

Our family and its milieu were radicals and liberals, intellectual, puritanically inclined, and not always financially secure. It was a cosmopolitan and secular family. My parents could speak German; my mother could also speak English and French. My father was renowned for the many Hungarian poems he could recite by heart. He was a rather soft, loveable man. The rock of the family was actually my mother. She had broken off her university career during the First World War to take over a small institution for mentally

disabled children. At first she managed this institution alone, then together with my father when he returned from the war. That was where I grew up until I was seven, on the outskirts of Budapest in a beautiful old house with a great big garden.

On my first day at school, my mother took me there on the tram. On the tram she taught me the Hungarian national anthem, verse after verse, eight in all. You see, these terrible, maligned and hated Jews had nothing better to do than teach their daughter the Hungarian national anthem. I can still sing it from memory today. Later in my youth I was always a patriot, but never a nationalist.

When I was seven we moved to a hill in Buda. My parents rented a big area there with various houses and gardens. It was in this area that I passed the best days of my life – in freedom, and at the same time with the sick, mentally disabled children. Other children came there on holiday in the summer: normal, healthy, or convalescent. This period came to an abrupt end when the great depression struck in the thirties. My parents went bankrupt.

What role did school play in your life?

I went to the Imperial German School in Budapest, which had been founded in 1908 by Germans. The lessons were held in German. 1926 was the time of the Weimar Republic. In this sense it was an outstandingly progressive and demanding, difficult school. What was particularly important for my parents was that it was the only coeducational school. In addition there was the quality. I enjoyed going to school – for twelve years! I took my school leaving certificate there. I was a good pupil, one of the best by the end.

People from many nations were at this school. Besides Hungarians and Germans there were the children of the diplomatic corps, so that they could be taught in a world language, German, rather than Hungarian. A former pupil said a few years ago: “That school was a little united Europe”.

What happened after school?

I got to know my husband during my schooldays. He came to our institution one summer as a convalescent, when I was seven or eight years old and he was six years older. We met each other again on New Year’s Eve in 1935, and we have been together since that night. We married in 1941.

I enrolled in the agricultural department of the technical university of Budapest and studied there for four years. I didn’t finish my studies but left in 1942. During the previous year and a half anti-Semitism had become aggressive. They had discovered my ancestry and they so disgusted me that I left.

Did you think of emigrating?

As Nazism arose and the persecution of the Jews began, naturally the inclination to emigrate arose too. Many people we knew emigrated, amongst them my husband's brother, who has lived in Australia ever since. We also discussed the question, but we said: "No, we don't want to emigrate".

Hungary entered the war in 1941. Then the bombardments began. I had done a first aid course and was responsible for emergency aid and Red Cross aid. The main issue for us was undoubtedly politics, Nazism and what would happen in Hungary. In 1942 my husband and my brother were conscripted into the labour service. At first they were privileged, in the sense that, because of their Jewish origins, they were taken for labour and didn't need to be soldiers. As baptised people they wore a white armband. In fact, my husband had served his full term as a normal soldier – a year and a half, 1939/40. He was called up again when Hungary, as an ally of Hitler, marched into Yugoslavia. But they threw him out, because he wouldn't conform. They were reported for making anti-Nazi propaganda and sent to a labour camp near Siebenbürgen as punishment. They escaped from there and made their way finally to Tito's partisans.

I was in Budapest. When my daughter was born we rented a flat. When the Germans marched into the country of their allies, Hungary, and occupied it, the horror started. From then on we lived in constant fear. There were rumours every day. One of my best friends disappeared from the street one day. We didn't know much about the extermination camps, but we kept on hearing rumours. Then the regulations started: the yellow star that one had to wear, ever tighter restrictions on the Jews. My parents had a large practice and a big five-room flat. You couldn't have domestic servants any more. Then they had to leave the flat. But, interestingly, they could keep the practice. Next, the families were packed together into what were called the star houses. My parents, my daughter and I move into a psychoanalyst's flat. There were two or three families living in the one flat, in a house with a yellow star on it.

One morning in autumn 1944 the Hungarian Nazis seized my father. That was the last time I ever saw him. He was deported.

The Swedes, the Swiss, the Portuguese and the Vatican arranged special houses where Jewish families that had what was called a protective pass from the embassies of these countries could move in. However, a large proportion was put in the ghetto. Through connections we got a Swedish protective pass and moved into one of these jam-packed Swedish houses. A little later my mother and I moved to my uncle's illegal flat nearby. We had hardly moved in when the Hungarian Nazis inspected the house and took everyone in it away. That was the worst experience of my life. We had to leave the flat

that night with the Hungarian Nazis. I was pushing the pram. And we already knew that people were taken to the Danube, had to undress and were shot in the river. I said to my mother 'we're going to die', but we didn't. They took us to Hungarian Nazi party headquarters, where they interrogated us and opened my mother's suitcase. Suddenly the Nazi looked into my mother's face, and my mother looked at him. They knew each other. He was a former patient from the psychiatric clinic. The suitcase was shut and the other Nazis were told: "Take these three home!" And we went back to the Swedish house. We stayed there for two or three weeks until the war ended.

Afterwards my mother, my daughter and I moved back into my old flat. We spent a few days there in the cellar. My husband and my brother had absconded again and came home from the partisan army.

And so our new life began. The city was totally devastated – incredible! We began building our new life. We joined the Communist Party. I worked in what was called a mass organisation, in the democratic association of Hungarian women. From there I moved on to the borough party organisation, first as head of the educational system, then as leader of the propaganda section. Finally I was borough party secretary – at 27, an inexperienced girl! I wasn't elected, but appointed from above. I had a lot of power and was a fanatic. In the meantime I had had another child. I was truly convinced that I was working for something good. I was ordered from the borough to the party's central offices for a number of months as head of female labour for the whole city of Budapest. I was promised that I could attend the party university. That was my longing: to learn Marxism. I was at the party university for ten months and was then engaged as a teacher there. In 1953 came the thaw, the attempt at socialism with a human face, and we were all naturally in favour of it. As I gave birth to my youngest son in hospital, on the radio I heard the speech of the incoming prime minister, Imre Nagy. We all supported Nagy.

Then they started to open the prisons. All the people who had been convicted in the show trials came out and told everything. Bit by bit it came out what had been going on behind the scenes. We all had a phase of enlightenment. That was a time of change, and also of intense soul-searching.

Since I was a Nagy supporter I was dismissed from the party university in 1954. I was politically suspect. Then I got a job as an editor with a party publishing house. Not only did I have to edit books there, I also had to write the brochures for party conferences. I just couldn't do it any more, because I could tell that what I had to write was all lies. One day I was sacked. I had been given special permission from the ministry of agriculture that I could complete my studies and had passed a number of exams. Then, through a friend, I got a job in the city library, where I worked for nearly a year as a bibliographer. But it

was hard financially. As a teacher at the party university I had earned twice as much. The library was a dumping ground for opponents of the regime.

Then the revolution came. On 6 October 1956 the mass burial of victims of the first great show trial took place in Hungary, and hundreds of thousands marched. Things were already coming to a head. Finally came the demonstration on 23 October. That was indescribable: the euphoria! People streamed in from everywhere, others waved from the windows. Then there was the gigantic demonstration in the square in front of the parliament building. My mother was also at a meeting and heard the shots fired. As the revolution started we sat at the radio the whole day. That was a time of incredible tension.

On that terrible Sunday of 4 November the Russians put the revolution down. My husband and my brother went underground and only came home between times. My brother was one of the leaders of the opposition, and my husband played an important role in the organisation. He assumed another identity, using false papers and changing his appearance. I was ordered to watch the telephone and to pass on messages, and to hide documents. My brother and his friends produced an illegal newspaper. The manuscripts lay on our table at home.

In the middle of November our flat was occupied by a Russian soldier and a secret policeman for a day and a night. On the telephone we could only say yes or no. As a consequence our people in the city didn't know what was happening at our place. Bit by bit they found out that something was up with us. If somebody came to our place, for instance the washerwoman, she wasn't allowed to leave. My husband could be warned. The men went the next day. Two or three hours later a pair of policemen in blue uniforms came to set us free: the uniformed police and the army were still on the side of the revolution.

After this episode my husband and my brother said: "The families will have to go". We accepted this. I went through the days of preparation as though in a trance. In this way we said goodbye to my mother and my parents-in-law: the others knew nothing. We had just one rucksack for the three children and me. My husband had been director of a large teaching and experimental farm. He organised a lorry and got hold of some papers to collect animal feed from a border village. In this lorry we set off, four families, for northwest Hungary. In the morning we tried to get to the border by bus. The bus was stopped by Russians who, when they saw that 90 percent of the passengers were refugees, sent us all back to the next town.

The second attempt finally worked. We were just the other side of the ditch. I saw an Austrian farmer who was busy loading maize leaves. We asked him if he could take us with him, climbed on the wagon, and I began to sing "*Nun ade du mein lieb Heimatland, lieb Heimatland ade*" (So Farewell, my Sweet Homeland, my Sweet Homeland, Farewell).

Near the border tents had been set up temporarily. The children got hot chocolate. The Viennese touring club had asked its drivers to drive to the border and collect the people from there. My husband had told us we should avoid going into a camp if it was at all possible. But we knew nobody in Vienna. The Caritas organisation then billeted us with various families or churches in Vienna which had offered to take in refugees.

We said to ourselves that we couldn't stay in Austria, because how could Austria cope with 200,000 refugees? People had to move on. My sister-in-law applied to go to Switzerland, firstly because my brother had been at the Vietnam conference in Geneva in 1954 as a correspondent and had told us a lot of great things about Switzerland. Secondly, a distant relative had been running a dental practice in St Gallen for decades. In addition, we heard in Vienna that Switzerland treated refugees very humanely, particularly families with lots of children, and old and sick people. That made a great impression on us.

So we travelled to Buchs in a Red Cross transport. There we were showered, had fleas removed, our hair washed and were given new underwear. That was really degrading. From Buchs we went to the barracks in Walenstadt. The military women's emergency service had been mobilised, and there was a great store of clothes and decent food. The Hungarian children didn't like the muesli at all, but the mothers ate it. That was the first time I saw a washing machine. I began writing applications in answer to job advertisements straight away. And I began to give German lessons to the children in the barracks.

In the meantime, my brother had been arrested and my husband had escaped to Vienna. My brother was executed in 1958.

How did you find work?

Once the quarantine period was over in Walenstadt, all the people were split up. We went to Trogen in Appenzell. It was like a fairy tale, in winter with lots of snow. The school teacher and his wife took us in. They took us on a sleigh to a chalet. There was a fire burning in the grate, the table was set and the beds were made up. We lived in Trogen from the end of December until the beginning of February. Then I got a letter from the Maschinen- und Bahnbedarf AG company in Dübendorf. I went to an interview in Dübendorf. Although I had never worked as an office worker they hired me and arranged a three-room flat for us, bought furniture for us and made curtains for us. My husband was able to come over from Vienna to Switzerland for a few days; he couldn't stay because the quota of 10,000 refugees had already been filled. He helped us move in, then he had to go back to Vienna. He came only in the spring under the family reunification arrangements. At that time Switzerland took in another 2,000 refugees, more or less, and we settled ourselves here in Switzerland.

So I began work at the MBA company in Dübendorf. I wasn't an important person there. At that time I barely understood the dialect. When the Personnel boss dictated the word "Bagger" (excavator, JCB) to me I didn't know from the way he said it whether I should type it "Bakker". At first they looked on me as a rather exotic person, but I settled into the firm relatively quickly. The firm paid half our rent for the first six months. It was also in my contract that, if I stayed with the firm for two years or more, all the furnishings in the flat became mine. And that's what happened. I stayed with that firm – later as assistant to the head of sales and authorised signatory – until my retirement, over 25 years altogether.

How did the children get on in school?

Amazingly well. They learned the language very fast. I had begun to teach them German back in Trogen. Once we were in Dübendorf and I had my job, I didn't have so much time to help. But I didn't have to help much, because they learned amazingly fast, were good pupils and didn't have to struggle too hard.

Were they homesick?

Not so much. At the very beginning we didn't talk about home very much. My husband always kept up with news from Hungary. I didn't have time to read many newspapers. I was very absorbed in my work, the household and the children.

Did you notice a great difference between the Hungarian and Swiss mentalities?

Above all in the workplace. I had the feeling that people were far less open here; they were stiff and obstinate. If I told them anything about home, about Hungary, I had the impression that I was coming up against a wall. They actually didn't understand all that.

An example of obstinacy?

Above all, the situation of women alienated very much. I grew up in a big-city, intellectual milieu and went to a liberal school where the equality and self-confidence of women was entirely different. I was treated rather differently from my co-workers, because of my age and also probably because of my whole demeanour. But the way women were treated by men at work was sometimes outrageous. For instance, one woman fell in love with an executive, and he abused her. He grabbed hold of her, sat her on an office cabinet, tickled her, took her shoes off and tugged at her dress. This was all during working hours.

Did you have more contact with Swiss or Hungarians?

We have hardly any Swiss friends. This is, firstly, because we were relatively old when we came here. Friendships are generally made in one's youth. Secondly, we wandered into another social environment. Most emigrants lose social status. In our first years here we were really very poor. Then we whittled all the debts down. As well as that, we're a bit different. My husband is a very intelligent but very intransigent person. He tends not to toe the line. Then we had people, such as the parents of our children's classmates, that we invited, and this happened two or three times, who never invited us back. We somehow never managed to form a connection with a circle who shared our mentality or original social environment.

Do you have mostly Hungarian acquaintances?

Indeed we have some Hungarian acquaintances, friends and couples, not many but good. We also took part in the life of the Hungarian associations, but it didn't suit us. In fact we were founders of the association for literature and art, but we weren't comfortable with these people. Politically, they were mostly right-leaning or extremely right-wing. There weren't any progressive Hungarian associations.

And in Dübendorf?

In Dübendorf itself we don't know any Hungarians. There is just one couple here – naturalised Germans – with whom we are friendly. We have any number of acquaintances – after 42 years in Dübendorf – because we sang in the Reformed church choir for 25 years, and also from the gymnastics club, but relatively superficial. But we always have visitors, from all over the world: Budapest, Canada, Australia, California, Paris, Germany.

So we relied on each other far more within the family, and the daily routine was very different from that in Budapest, far more intensive. There were many discussions around the dining table. As far as it was possible, we spent time with our children. And the children brought their friends home with them. They were all welcome at our place, to have supper or to stay overnight. And naturally the children brought the language and the culture into the family. I don't know if I would have become a Beatles fan if I hadn't had any children. And in a way my old life began to develop again, buying good books and attending good concerts.

The children acquainted us with the youth movement of the eighties. My sons were very involved. And we stood with them, of course. We both marched for the Kanzlei cultural centre as well; we discussed it a great deal at home.

To what extent have you adapted to the Swiss mentality?

I picked up the local custom and became really houseproud. I made life pretty difficult for my family with that. And despite that I was scolded and brought to book because the washing machine wasn't clean enough and I had to leave it in a cleaner condition. That really annoyed me, of course. And the other thing was that we were loud, with three children and friends and a piano. It got to the point where someone reported us to the police if we had a party. To have some peace we moved to a place across the street. Our children were called names, and the people spoke to me in pidgin German as they did with the Italians because they thought I couldn't speak the dialect. I learned it gradually, but it took years.

Have you experienced xenophobia from the Swiss?

It's my husband who experienced a lot of xenophobia, not at work, but above all when dealing with the authorities. It meant that, whatever business he had with a public office or authority, he just did as he was told. But my colleagues esteemed and respected me.

Do you have prejudices about Swiss people?

It's interesting, I often understand people in Germany better. They have known war, distress, deprivation, and bombardments. Something clicked there. I've had to change my opinion of the Swiss in recent years, for the better; I have more understanding of the Swiss. Perhaps this is because since I retired I attend the Café Literaire, a women's literary club.

After all this time, do you feel at home here, or do you still feel like a foreigner?

I don't feel like a foreigner, but it would be an exaggeration to say I felt at home here. I feel at home in my flat: my home is my castle.

Has the policy towards foreigners changed since you have been here?

The reception in 1956 was fantastic, and the Czechs were also very well received in 1968. But today's situation is very different. Since very different cultures have come in large numbers, fear of foreigners, and also unfortunately hatred, has grown stronger. And the policy towards foreigners was somewhat mean. A rich country should or could give a lot more, although that isn't possible due to selfishness. Because the poverty that we have here – around 10 percent – is relatively low. Purely theoretically, arithmetically, it would be possible to help these people a lot more.

Nigg, Heinz (Hrsg.) (1999) Da und fort. Leben in zwei Welten. Interviews, Berichte und Dokumente zur Immigration und Binnenwanderung in der Schweiz. Zürich: Limmat Verlag

How can the coexistence of people of various origins be improved here in Switzerland?

By working at the grass roots. By beginning with people right at the foundations, very gently, but in time bringing people together. Explain what is new and bewildering in the other culture, but at the grass roots, in small groups, or with two or three families together. And try in each case to show the other what can enrich their own view of the world. It's an endless task.

Nigg, Heinz (1999) Here and away. Living in two worlds. Zurich: www.migrant.ch
Translation: Simon Milligan



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