

Peter Ehrenthal

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Abstract

Peter Ehrenthal was born in Huedin (Romanian) or Bánffyhunyard (Hungarian), a Hungarian town in Transylvania on September 2, 1920. They spoke Hungarian at home and Romanian at school. His brother Gershom was born in 1924 and is now 91 and lives in Israel. The father's dentistry practice was in their house which had no electricity and an outside toilet. Peter attended primary school in town but had to stay in Cluj, 50 kilometers away, for high school. People mostly traveled by horse and buggy. His family was not religious but his grandfather took him to synagogue on the High Holidays. When he was 13, the family moved to Bucharest as his father had too much competition in his profession. There Peter fought a newsboy who called him a Jew. He attended Gymnasium in Bucharest until '36 when he was thrown out and apprenticed to a silversmith until the war. When the war started, his father had to clean the street but was permitted to continue his dental practice. Peter was forced to a labor camp for a short while and brought home but did not report to duty and no one looked for him. He worked in the basement doing his silversmith work during the war and was liberated by the Russian Army. Peter joined the Young Communists as he believed in their philosophy but did not like the way it was carried out. He married Erica and along with his new wife, brother and wife and uncle and his wife they left Romania for Palestine. They were helped by the Hagenah but the British captured them on a fishing boat and placed them in Cyprus until Israel became a state. In Israel Peter was first manager of a school for newcomers and then became a merchant. A company sent him to the US in '57 and he liked the life and remained with his wife and son. First he went into the silversmithing business and later became an antique dealer which resulted his accumulating 550 objects portraying anti-Semitism, some of which were exhibited in Israel. Peter shows a few of the Judaica items. His son, Michael, was in the business for 30 years and adds some details.

Summary

00:00 Peter Ehrenthal was born in Huedin (Romanian) or Bánffyhunyard (Hungarian), a Hungarian town in Transylvania on September 2, 1920. It was German and now Romanian. They spoke Hungarian at home and Romanian at school. For 1,000 years it was part of Hungary. After World War I, it became part of Romania. 90% of the population were Hungarian. The merchants were Jews. It was a large town, now a city. His father was a dentist. He came to town to open the only dental practice. His father was from Slovakia which was part of Hungary. He studied dentistry in Cluj, the capital city.

- 05:00 Peter's mother's family was local. The grandparents lived there. His grandfather disappeared in old age. His grandfather was from Slovakia. His father's side was orthodox, very religious. He met them once when he was a baby. His brother Gershom was born in 1924 and is now 91 and lives in Israel. He was a General in the Army. In Peter's school years, he was known as a "vilderchaya," a wild one, as he had fights for stupid reasons.
- 10:00 They lived in a provincial town with a primary school and a Gymnasium where Hungarian was spoken. His father had a cabinet in the center of town and they lived there. All their residences were brick homes. Their building had floors; one of the few that did so. There was one truck in town and it had solid tires and there was one private car. The most significant people in town were the three doctors, the bank director for the one bank and the city officials including the mayor and the solgabero (the judge). His father socialized a little with them but he was not very social but was serious.
- 15:00 Peter's mother, Helen Clinga, was born there and had several siblings that have all passed away. She was the second eldest. She had a younger sister, a younger brother in Budapest and an older brother in the area. There were no other relatives in town. His mother had help at home. The middle class had at least one helper. His family was not rich but well-to-do. They usually had a large apartment with a waiting room in front, a dining room, bedroom, a little room for the children, a kitchen and a large veranda. They rented a single family house in the center of town. The big garden belonged to the proprietor. There was no electricity in town. The toilet was outside. They obtained pure drinking water from the source which they carried in two big ceramic pots.
- 20:00 They had a fountain for washing where the water was not so pure. There was a train station in town. It took an hour to go the 50 kilometers to Cluj, the capital. Primary school was in town but he had to stay in Cluj for high school. To get home from the train station, you had to take a horse and buggy. Most people walked in the town. A few peasants had horses. There was no factory. They had agriculture. Many peasants had farms. 90% of the people were Hungarian and there were some Romanian. There was one Romanian church three or four Hungarian churches and two synagogues (one Hasidic and one regular orthodox) for the 50 Jewish families. Most of the Jews belonged to one of the synagogues. His father did not take him to synagogue but his grandfather, who was not religious, took him on the main holidays.
- 25:00 They did not have a kosher home. When a kosher dentist settled in the town, the Jews went to him. His father used a foot activated drill as there was no electricity. Their teeth were not too good as his father was not interested. They moved to Bucharest when the area returned to Hungary and it was bad for the Jews. Everyone was orthodox except for his father. It was the time when anti-Semitism was strong and his father said he would

not change a dirty shirt for another dirty shirt as it would not help. He was a leftist but did not belong to an organized political party.

30:00 His mother shared whatever the father stood for as she did not have political opinions. She and her sister were beautiful women. His mother was a housewife and a good cook. She did not have opinions. Peter was closer to his mother as his father was more distant. He does not know the extent of his mother's schooling. It was a Hungarian town with peasant Romanians in the mountains. After World War I, they took away Transylvania from Hungary and gave it to Romania. Cluj, the capital, was Hungarian. The government became more Romanian so in school, he learned Romanian. There was a Hungarian Gymnasium. The Hungarians and Romanians had no problems with the Jews. There was one anti-Semitic organization in Romania consisting of university students in the Iron Guard. Before the war, they would take the train from town to town and throw stones into the Jewish homes with someone guiding them along the way.

35:00 Peter fought as a child and was a good student as school was easy. He went to Cluj for Gymnasium. He attended for three years and when he was 13, they moved to Bucharest. Hitler was coming to power but except for the Iron Guard, did not have an effect in Romania. The Romanian Jews did not suffer much compared to the Hungarian Jews. They moved to Bucharest for economic reasons. At one time, his father was the only dentist but when the kosher one came, he had competition. His father opened a cabinet. They were middle class and lived a small distance from the center in a residential neighborhood. They rented a single family house with his father's cabinet, a waiting room, a room for him and his brother, the parent's bedroom, and a kitchen. His father had a good business.

40:00 They had electricity and Peter was in the Gymnasium which was an annex of the university. They were mostly Romanian. He took a tram to school. He waited at a glass station for the tram where a Romanian peasant boy sold papers. The boy called him "Zhida" in Romanian which Peter tolerated for a while. Then he fought and broke the glass station and the police came. Peter's uncle, his mother's brother who was also a dentist, lived nearby and came over. When the police asked Peter his name, he said to call his uncle who was a drunk but friendly with the police. He drank with them and let Peter go. The boy never returned and blamed Peter. The boy had no money.

45:00 Peter learned about Judaism from the Judaica business he had rather than from home. He only knew about a mezuzah. Peter did not learn about his religion but became aware of it. The Bible was written by Jewish historians laid down grounds for theoretical behavior. Everyone with little knowledge of Jewish behavior has to read the Bible. Peter was Hungarian and grew up in the culture of both worlds. He has books in Hungarian and Romanian and he wrote poetry in both languages. He did not feel foreign in the Bucharest Gymnasium as he knew the language. He felt Transylvania was Hungarian.

Only peasant Romanians lived in the mountains. He did not know Yiddish. His father was non-religious leftist.

50:00 His father learned dentistry from the uncle. He was not religious and grew up in non-religious environment although his parents were of various religions. Peter visited them once in Hungary when he was young. His family had a radio as his father tinkered with it. Peter did not finish the Gymnasium because of Hitler. The Russians saved them by sending them to Lajos (?). The Prime Minister tried to save the Jews from the fate of the German Jews by procrastinating.

55:00 They were thrown out of Lajos and the university as Romania had to give something to the Germans. Peter did not attend the university. General Antonescu came to power before the war. There was the popular Peasant Party before that. Julio Manu was the President of the National Peasant Party and was Prime Minister before the war. Peter was thrown out of the Gymnasium in '36 as Jews should learn a trade so he learned silversmithing. He apprenticed for three years until the war. He worked for a small factory with his brother.

60:00 They specialized as the brother made tea sets and Peter made big plates. Later he had his own business, a small silversmithing atelier in Bucharest. Kerner was the owner and he immigrated to Israel and opened a silversmith place there. World War II did not influence Romania as they took no part in the war except for a mass exportation of Jews from northeast Romania. This was to appease the Germans. General Antonescu, the Prime Minister, tried to save the Jews. He succeeded until the Russians came. He was an ally of Nazi Germany and under pressure to roundup Jews and send them to Germany.

65:00 The War started and Peter was a silversmith and his father was a dentist. Romania was pressed by Germany to do something with the Jews so Peter had to work for them but deserted after one day. They had to assemble in one place and perform made-up work of digging earth for the railroad tracks. When Peter deserted, no one came after him. He made himself a false paper. When the war started, it was fashionable to change religion which some Jews (his uncle) did. His father's dental practice was unchanged. One day his father and other Jews from the area cleaned the street. His patients were of mixed backgrounds and continued coming.

70:00 The only Nazi party there was the Iron Guard. Peter worked independently. He performed the work in his basement where he had a workshop and did well. Transylvania went back to Hungary which was a tragedy as most of the Jews were exterminated. His uncle's family there committed suicide. They had no idea what was happening in Germany. Peter lived at home for a year and made pocket money. He spent the war in Bucharest.

- 75:00 Peter was with a large group of young Jews in a camp 50 kilometers away. He dug earth for a few weeks. They called back the entire camp and went home to Bucharest to assemble for other work but he did not go. He worked in the basement doing his silversmith work during the war and was liberated by the Russian Army. The Russians came in to drink water. It was rumored they wanted watches but they came in and just drank water. Dr. Felderman was a friend of Antonescu and helped the Jewish community in Rumania. The Jewish Court had a few meetings.
- 80:00 Antonescu was arrested when the Russians came and he had a heart attack. The Russians brought the Communist regime. Peter's parents were affected and Peter decided to go to Palestine as he did not see a future for himself. Antonescu was the Prime Minister when the Russians came. His friend, Lazavicz (?), head of the Communist newspaper, was killed. He and his friends wanted to escape from Romania. Army officers held up a government car that transported money and stole the money. They wanted to escape from Romania because of Communism. He intended to buy an airplane and leave Romania and become Communist. He deposited the money at his uncle's house. A witness saw a private car and took down its number and he was shot. He was Peter's best friend. Peter was already in Israel. Peter had been a member of the Young Communist Party with his friend.
- 85:00 That was the only organization that you could join. Peter was a Communist from the heart and intellectually. His father was a leftist but not a Communist. Harry became the director of the Communist official newspaper. He left Romania as he did not like what was going on under Communism. He could have been a big shot. The practice of Communism was not to Peter's taste. In '47 he left for Israel. (His son, Michael said he was in Romania from '45 to '47.) Peter believed in Communist ideals but not the practice. Peter went illegally without a passport with his brother, uncle and his little girl. A guide took them over the border to Hungary where he felt at home as he spoke the language. From there, his brother and uncle went with the Hagenah (Israeli Army). Peter found life in Budapest superior to that in Bucharest so he remained a month or two and caught up with his brother in Marseille.
- 90:00 In Hungary, Peter joined the Hagenah who gave them Polish names and papers and transported them to France, to Badura (?), a small fishing village on the Mediterranean. Later it became a tourist spot. In Bandura he was with a group of young people who got trained for the Hagenah. Peter and his wife became friends with two brothers and deserted Hagenah and went to Paris. They ran out of money and returned and got punished as they had left the camp. They were all put in a fishing boat which was a terrible experience as they were like sardines in the hull of the boat. They were afraid the English boats would capture them. It was horrible with a bad stink. After a few days, they were placed on an English boat where he washed himself with water. They were captured before entering Haifa and taken to Cyprus. They were kept in a camp with other

Jews for a year. When Palestine became Israel, they were immediately freed. The Haganah was a clandestine Jewish Army in Palestine who brought them to fight for the creation of the State of Israel.

95:00 Peter married Erica Marla (?), his best friend Lazlo's sister, in 1945. Lazlo left before him and died in Turkey when his boat was torpedoed by the Russians. Erica's family was from Bucharest. Peter knew her since she was a little girl. The couple lived in her father's home which had an enormous yard with a little cabin where he made a workshop. Peter left Bucharest with his wife, brother with his wife and uncle with his wife and daughter. This was an affair for the young and his uncle was younger than his parents. All had fake papers. Many Jews left Romania at the time that he did probably because of Communism.

100:00 When the State of Israel was created, they immediately got let out of Cyprus. The first settlements in Israel was on a hill and they had a relative there. At first Peter managed a school in Safad in a remote town on top of a mountain. The school trained newcomers and their families who lived in the village. Israeli merchants came to buy the materials they were producing and they suggested he open a shop in Tel Aviv. He did so, next to a cemetery. He remained there until he came to the US in '57. His son, Michael, was born in Israel in 1949. A big firm in Israel that dealt with gift items sent Peter to the US. Gift items from Israel had high customs to pay in the US so the firm decided to make the items in Puerto Rico.

105:00 Peter was sent here with the wife of a rich man who went to Africa who made a lot of money in gold. Peter worked and the man's wife sold the items. The rich man returned from Africa with the gold and took care of his wife. Then Peter opened a silversmith workshop as he felt he had a better life in the US than in Israel. He brought his family here. His workshop was on the Lower East Side where he also repaired items. He had a contract at the workshop until he became a citizen. Then he opened up his own shop on 6th Avenue and 46th Street across from Horn & Hardett Automat. People brought him antiques and asked for antiques so he became a merchant of antique Judaica and left silversmithing. In this manner, he learned about Judaism.

110:00 He knew about Mezuzahs but not about Chanukah Menorah so learned about history and became more Jewish. He lived in Boro Park and learned Yiddish, English and Hebrew. He already knew Hungarian, Romanian, French and German. People requested items about anti-Semitism so he bought some in Europe and started collecting them for himself. He found many art items of that type. He bought some for clients and some for himself and gave some to Israel. He began to like certain artists. They were good artists and got well paid for their work. He found both primitive works and art.

- 115:00 Most of the work was produced by professional artists. Peter showed four items: 1) Caricature of a Jewish peddler on the cover of the exhibit catalog, 2) Print of a sculpture of three Jews made by a professional artist, and 3) one person done by a professional artist. Some items were made with hatred but most were done on commission. He showed a fourth medieval piece indicating hatred and propaganda in the Nuremberg Chronicles. Peter got fascinated with such art and made a collection of professional and folk art.
- 120:00 The art represented Jewish peddlers in 19th century Europe. Peter found it fascinating to go back in time and see how Jews were looked at. He has Jewish art in his home. Some of it was propaganda and was paid for. In late 19th century France, German and Austria, there was fantastic trade in anti-Semitic art. Peter considers the peddler one of the most important though it is folk art and intricately done. He has one produced by a professional sculpture of three pigs representing Jews in a 3-D ceramic. It was the custom of Jews to go to the spa in Carlsbad once a year so they are caricaturized as three Jews (pigs) sitting on a bench in Carlsbad. Peter shows a picture of two Mercuries. Mercury is the G-d of merchants and thieves in anti-Semitism mentality.
- 125:00 One Mercury is the original, a messenger and the other is anti-Semitic. Such items are viewed both by Gentiles and Jews but the Jews would not like to see themselves portrayed in this manner. It is a controversial subject. Jews might look and feel repulsive whereas the Gentiles might make a toast. Some clients wanted one or two items of Judaica, not a collection. The exhibition was in the Jewish Museum in Israel. Peter has the catalog of his exhibit. Thousands came by bus to see it but the press was not interested. Buses came from houses and children came from schools. He collected other things, too.
- 130:00 Peter collected items for their artistic nature. They did not make him sad. For some parts of the world, the items are educative and for other parts the knowledge is inborn. In late 19th century anti-Semitism was prevalent. France and Germany were not far behind. Peter was not an educated Jew and did not know about Chanukah Menorah or Kiddush cups but these items educated him. He has books in his library about Judaism. Judaica was his passion for a while but now it is less so. He was not interested in Judaism when he lived in Romania or Israel. He did not become religious. He believes G-d was invented by humans as it was a necessity as was needed like food.
- 135:00 Then Peter's son, Michael Ehrenthal, is interviewed about his father's Judaica collection. He feels fortunate and lucky to have taken part in the gallery and the business that his father started in '57. Michael came into the business in '75 and remained until three months ago. The anti-Semitic part grew out of the few items that people requested. His father became known in the trade as a collector of anti-Semitic items. Over the years it became the main collection as no one else did it at the time. His main purpose was to

house under one roof the last 500 years of anti-Semitism. He has 550 items. The oldest item is 800 years old. The Chronicles are from 1400, a page from the Nuremberg Chronicles, an encyclopedia of subject matter the world. It is the first printed encyclopedia where Jews are depicted in a non-savory manner. They have manuscripts of earlier ones. There are materials from over the centuries in various forms. There are edicts carried out by governments that indicate they do not permit Jews use of walking sticks as an unfavorable activity.

140:00 The anti-Semitic antiques have cultural value and historical value but cannot be priced. The material shows how the world views Jews from the cradle to the grave. There are educational toys and everyday ceramics. The three Jews on a bench in Carlsbad indicates one is rich and one is orthodox. It is the worse expression as they are depicted as pigs. It is the first one seen with such expression. The items show the world's attitude toward Jews. Michael helped his father 30 years to build the collection. He learned the endless expressions of the creative mind let loose how one can corrupt artistic talent in a hateful manner to show Jews in a hateful light. Not many people have seen such well-crafted anti-Semitic objects. Artists produced them. You can see semblance of the self as a human being as a member of a particular group singled out since time memorable. It is here to see. It is important to have educationally.

145:00 The Holocaust Museum has Holocaust memorabilia so the world can see what the Jews went through. Missing is the core, the substance of why the Holocaust happened so the collection lays the groundwork. Hitler came about to discriminate the Jews. Here in physical space, there are objects that represent you so you can see how the Gentiles looked at you.

146:00