

## RG-50.944.0027

### Summary

Júlia SZILÁGYI [born August 1, 1936, Kolozsvár (Cluj), Romania.]<sup>1</sup>

Ms. Szilágyi, 81 at the time of the interview, told the interviewer that she had a stroke that affected her hearing and speech to some degree, although it was barely detectable in the recording. She also referred to her memoirs: *Sleepless Nights* (ed. by József Imre Balázs, Korunk, 2014).

She was an only, sheltered, child of assimilated Jewish parents. Two sisters of her mother married Christians, and there were other mixed marriages in the extended family. Her paternal grandmother, however, kept a kosher household, which led to friction between her grandmother and mother when they lived together.

Her sheltered childhood ended in 1942, when her father was called up for forced labor, and her mother and she moved into her grandmother's small house. There were more and more ominous signs of what was coming; events that she did not understand and the adults around her did not explain. She thinks that they could not explain these events because they did not understand them completely either, and they lived under such stress that they did not have the mental and psychological energy for patient explanations, to which she was accustomed.

She did not understand her Jewishness. On the national holiday, on March 15, 1944 after she performed a patriotic poem at her school celebration, her classmates had beaten her, calling her a "stinking Jew." She went home bloodied, and temporarily lost her speech. She did not go to school any more, which in any case was closed a short while later. They had to wear the Yellow Star. Her mother and she moved to one of her aunts, because her grandmother shared a courtyard with a family belonging to the Arrow Cross, whose sons threatened her all the time because she was a Jew. She remembers living in fear. Once, she had a toothache, and her aunt, who was married to a Christian, took her on a bus to the dentist. She was not supposed to be on the bus and she was supposed to wear the Yellow Star. A former neighbor recognized her and exposed her as a Jewish child on the bus.

Her mother went to the leader of the Jewish community, asking his advice on what to do as a single woman with a child. He advised her to follow the rules. As it turned out, he himself managed to leave for Switzerland.

Her mother did not take his advice and, as the ghettoization began, she organized their escape. One night her mother pulled her out of her bed, and they got into a car. Her mother with two other sisters and their children went to the border estate of a Romanian Christian relative, who bribed the Romanian border patrol commander, and the women crossed over from the Hungarian to the Romanian side at Torda (Turda). They were almost caught. Her mother told someone that she had poison, which she would take if caught and would also give it to her, the daughter. She was frightened all the time. In Torda, they made their way to the *Mikvah*, where the Hungarian Jews were held. They were hidden for a couple of nights at a private home before getting the train tickets to Bucharest. Her mother had an older and a younger sister

---

<sup>1</sup> The beginning of the recording is missing. Date and place of birth is from Wikipedia, which identifies her as journalist, writer, and professor of literature.

living in Bucharest. They moved there in the 1930's because of better employment possibilities. She and her mother were hiding in the older sister's apartment, which was also a fashion salon. A neighbor denounced them and on one day in July 1944, the *Securitate* came to arrest them. Her mother's sister and her husband bribed the officials to save them. The Russian army was close and they survived the war.

In October, on the first train, they went back to Cluj.

They knew that her grandmother had been deported. They went to the grandmother's house, where she saw a little girl on her own bicycle and in her own coat. She cried and demanded them back, but her mother left everything there. They moved in with one of her aunts again. Later, they received the apartment of deported Jews, and furniture that the Jewish community had distributed.

Her mother was waiting for her father. News came that he was alive. He survived the Don battle, the retreat, and concentration camp, but in very poor health. He was only able to return in the fall of 1945, after being treated and regaining his strength in a U.S. military hospital. She said that after returning, her father was lying on the sofa and looking at the ceiling for a year. He never shared his experiences with his wife and daughter. His grandson, Mihály (Ms. Szilágyi's son) managed to record some of his memories, but he wiped out the recording, substituting it for Mozart before his death.

She became a "fanatical Communist" in her teenage years. She chastised her parents who were critical of the post-war political system, and wrote a poem on Stalin's death that was published. She gradually became disillusioned, and, internally, turned against the regime in 1956.

Still, she never left Romania, although she had opportunities to go to Israel.

Her intellectual life – editor of the leading magazine "Korunk" (Our Time), and teaching at the university of Cluj – kept her in her hometown.

She has had an anxiety disorder all her life, which she attributed to her wartime shocks.

She married and divorced twice: György Gotárd and Ernő Gáll. She has one son.

Asked about anti-Semitism after the war, she mentioned one incident that happened to her son in his school in the 1980s. Two classmates grabbed him by both arms and told him; "Now, we take you to Auschwitz!"

She explained that the Communist regime downplayed the Holocaust because it did not want Jewish martyrdom to overshadow Communist martyrdom. Only Communists were "entitled" to martyrdom. Beside this hidden, official anti-Semitism, populist anti-Semitism continued to live, as it did everywhere in formerly semi-feudal Eastern Europe. Official policy, meanwhile, tried to steer emotions toward class warfare.

She showed family photos to the interviewer.

There is also a 45-minute YouTube interview with Ms. Szilágyi, recorded in 2019: "Life Journeys in Transylvania."