

Clandestin Prin Europa
Clandestine Through Europe

By Serge Haber



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The Writing Lives Project

The years between 1935 and 1945 marked a dark decade in the history of humankind. Since then, in the decades following, we are still coming to terms with the scope of loss, pain and trauma that informs the lives of the survivors and the legacy of the Holocaust. Now older adults, Holocaust survivors live with their traumatic memories of the past, cope with age-related losses of the present and consider the unknowns of the future. Theirs is a strange world in which the trauma of multiple early life losses often mixes with the joy of witnessing the births of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, where loneliness mixes with a need for solitude, sadness with hope, and resilience with regret.

In the years following their liberation, much has been written about Holocaust survivors, and more recently many survivors are writing their own stories and memoirs. The assaults described in these stories are often difficult to comprehend and always laden with loss and pain. A crucial factor that prompts elderly Holocaust survivors to commit to recounting their daunting experiences is the wish that somehow their stories, their narratives, and their truths would outlive them and serve as a reminder to the rest of the world to recognize the carnage of genocide and commit to “never again.” Perhaps even more importantly, it is to leave a tangible legacy for future generations of family, who will be able to carry these personal narratives into the future. It is to remember. It is to bear witness. These are the links not only to pain, but to a vibrant past and people that cannot be wiped away by genocide.

Each and every person who survived the Holocaust is a living miracle and a testament to the resilience and capacity of the individual. Each and every person has a uniquely miraculous story of survival that warrants preservation and is critical to a better

understanding for all of us of the human condition. However, because of health reasons, writing ability or emotional vulnerability, today there are many survivors who are unable to write their own memoirs. The Writing Lives Project is a unique partnership that seeks to address these challenges and ensure that these remarkable stories are also preserved.

The Azrieli Foundation, among its many initiatives, supports the Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program, which collects, preserves, publishes and distributes the written memoirs of Holocaust survivors in Canada. In 2011, the Foundation reached out to the Programs for 50+ at the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University to form an innovative and unique partnership. Together, in consultation with Paula David from the University of Toronto, they created the Sustaining Memories Project to give interested survivors of the Holocaust the opportunity to “write” their memoirs. With little fanfare and great enthusiasm, eighteen people joined the Project and committed to a training program to be matched with a survivor to tape and transcribe their story.

The Sustaining Memories Project, in partnership with Ryerson University, continued for three years and produced seventy-five memoirs in total. Recognizing the need to make this opportunity available to other survivors in other parts of Canada, the Foundation joined with Langara College in 2016 to involve a dedicated group of twenty-one students in a Vancouver program, the Writing Lives Project. The program continued in 2017 with sixteen enthusiastic writers. Our student writing partners represent different ages, life stages, religious backgrounds, cultures and educations. Their commonality is the desire to learn more about the Holocaust and enable survivors to tell their stories in the manner that was meaningful to them. The students gave many hours of their time in

preparing for this task and more time meeting with their survivor partners to tape their stories, reflections and memories. The student writing partners then transcribed the tapes and together both memoir partners agreed to the finished product. Of course, this description of the process does not recognize the strength of the bonds that form when a volunteer and a survivor create a memoir, of the emotional challenges that a survivor faces in the telling and the understanding and insight that the listener experiences throughout the journey. It was challenging and important work for all and the rewards have been tangible and affirming for every participant. Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, wrote that “when you listen to a witness, you become a witness.” With the completion of this memoir, we will now have more witnesses to remember and sustain this important legacy.

I want to dedicate this memoir to my beloved wife, Elinor Ruth, may her memory be a blessing.

I also want to dedicate this to my beloved children and grandchildren, and my best friend, Sheila, who may benefit from my experiences and my life.

I was born on July 23, 1928, in Romania, in the village of Tîrgu Ocna (which means “salt mine”), close to the Carpathian Mountains. My birth certificate says Serj Haber, but — funny thing — my parents didn’t call me that. They wanted to give me a nickname, so they used to call me Sergulica (in Romanian, “lica” is commonly added to the end of a name to show affection), which eventually evolved into Lica. My sister calls me Lica to this day.

My father, Leon Leiba Haber, was born in 1902, in Harlau, Romania. He was one of five children; he had three brothers — Isaac, Oscar and Samuel — and a sister, Betty. My mother, Louise, or Liza, née Haimovici, was born February 24, 1906, in Podu Iloaiei, Romania. She was one of five children; she had three brothers — Beno, Zigu and Milu — and a sister, Janette.

My father had been working in the lumber business in Tîrgu Ocna, and when the Depression came, everyone went bankrupt; there was a drop in the country’s wealth. So when I was two, my family moved to the small Jewish town of Podu Iloaiei, (which means “Iloaiei bridge”), where my mother’s family still lived. My sister, Sidonia, was born there three years later, on September 5, 1931. By that time, my father had established himself as a businessman and owned a flour mill in the village Larga. He used to come home for the weekend with his horse and buggy and return to the mill on Sunday afternoons. He always carried a handgun in the time before the war. After 1939, Jews were not allowed to own any weapons whatsoever.

Our family home in Podu Iloaiei was very, very big with a tremendous yard of around an acre and a half. It was a very large property. The home was composed of several buildings. Two of the buildings were usually reserved for guests and had living,

sleeping and dining quarters. The third building was for our daily living, and it also had separate spaces for living, sleeping and dining. Lastly, there was a summer house that was apart from the other two buildings. We spent a lot of the summer in that house, which was mostly for living and cooking. We had a flood in 1934 or 1935, and no one lived in the largest front house for some time, because the walls were still wet and mouldy. Eventually the property was torn down by the communists, and there is now a new building in its place.

In 1939, when I was about eleven, my family moved thirty kilometres away to the city of Iași so that I could go to *lyceum*, secondary school. Iași was the capital of the Romanian province of Moldova (not to be confused with the present-day, independent state of Moldavia (former Basarabia)).

My father was not a person who looked for support; he made the support. He was a tremendously enterprising man. My father had established himself as a businessman, starting with the flour mill, which he ran with my mother's help for several years until it became a very large and modern flour mill. He then started a cartage business, and worked to regain the wealth that our family had enjoyed before the Depression.

The postal system in Romania prior to the war was shoddy and unreliable, so whenever my father visited Bucharest he would bring letters and parcels back for friends and family in Iași. He would travel over three hundred kilometres between the two cities by overnight train. Eventually the pharmacies in Iași found it necessary to get their pharmaceutical products from Bucharest, and they asked my father for his delivery services as well, on a commission basis. As time went by, my father became extremely knowledgeable about the needs of the pharmacies, so he decided to establish a wholesale

business in Iași. He began ordering large quantities of pharmaceutical products from Bucharest to supply the needs of the pharmacies in Iași. By 1949, his business had become the second largest pharmaceutical business in Romania.

My mother was just as hard a worker as my father. She worked with my father in the business and also ran our home. She was an extremely clean woman, who highly valued cleanliness and worked hard to keep our home. I remember my mother bent over the washing, and cleaning our wooden floors until they shone, the color of egg yolks. My mother was a fairly good cook, but my aunt Janette was the real cook in my mother's family. She was a phenomenal cook. She and my uncle Jean, her husband, owned a restaurant. My uncle Jean tested many of his wines on me, and as a result, I became a connoisseur. Probably the best thing they served was their smoked turkey, which was smoked naturally outdoors in an open fire pit. My uncle Jean died in 1939, so long ago, but I remember him well.

I don't believe that my family suffered much discrimination for being Jewish in the times after the Depression. That would come later.

Since the rise of Christianity around two thousand years ago, there has always been discrimination against Jews, which became more or less inflamed at different times throughout history. This antisemitism was aggravated with arrival of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in 1933. World War I left Germany destitute, with tremendous unemployment and financial bankruptcy. Hitler's promise of a better life for Germans provided fertile ground for the acceptance of his vision and the rise of antisemitism. Italy, likewise, saw the rise of fascism headed by Mussolini under similar conditions.

Between the wars, severe economic problems and shortages of goods were experienced all over Europe. The German mark, the Italian lira and the Romanian leu had no value; people needed millions of lei, a suitcase-full, to buy a loaf of bread. This gave rise to a very robust and flourishing black market.

When Marshal Ion Antonescu, the Romanian Prime Minister and head of the military, rose to prominence in 1940, Romania was suffering economically, as was the rest of Europe. The conditions enabled Antonescu to implement a fascist dictatorship and ultimately a partnership with Germany and Italy. The political tension in Romania was high, especially in cities where discrimination against Jews and Roma became virulent.

This was when the Nazi movement began to spread to Romania. Young students, workers and the younger population in general became very radical and formed a Nazi-sympathizing, political party on the extreme right. They called themselves the Legionnaires. They adopted a uniform of green shirts and berets. They were ardently antisemitic and agitated against the government of Ion Antonescu, because they believed he was too moderate. They wanted much more radical action against the Jews.

World War II began on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded and occupied Poland. In 1940, when Antonescu took over and allied Romania with Italy and Germany, Romanian Jews lost all their rights, and their possessions, including their businesses, were confiscated by the government. My father's business, which was quite large by this time, was taken over by two Romanian individuals, gentiles, who were extremely honest people. They pretended to own his business on paper while my father remained the operator of the business in secret throughout the duration of the war. He paid the new "owners" generously to keep them quiet about their arrangement. At the end of the war,

these two individuals kept to their word and transferred the deeds to the business back to my father.

In 1940, during the war, the Romanian government forbade Jews from attending public schools, so Jewish communities began their own school systems. This school system was organized and operated by lawyers, doctors, pharmacists and accountants. Whoever had some kind of an education became a teacher, and the Jewish school system spread all over the country. Classes were held in whatever space was available for rent. None of our teachers were paid for their work; they all volunteered their time for the sake of their community, to make sure the Jewish kids were educated.

Later in the war, the Jewish people were given a curfew, and we had to sew a yellow star on our outer clothes. I don't remember the day we got those stars. One day they were just there. My family didn't talk much about these things. There was nothing to talk about really; you had to do it, so you did it. We didn't wear the stars at home, but when we were out, they were a quick identifier that made us targets for abuse: Jews were spit on, cursed at and often beaten up.

During those days, Jewish children were regularly beaten up or harassed by gangs of non-Jewish Romanians on the way to and from school. One day, a former Jewish middleweight boxing champion of Romania came to our school and offered to teach boxing to any interested student. He hoped we could learn how to protect ourselves from anyone who harassed us or tried to beat us up. I immediately enrolled and we trained every day. In my early years of boxing I boxed for the high school. I eventually participated in amateur boxing matches and continued to box after the war. I fought in fifty-four fights, finishing mostly in knockout, and I have lost none.

At the beginning of 1941, while the government was trying to consolidate its power, the Legionnaires continued to try, in every possible way, to disrupt the government and perpetrated many aggressive acts.

June 29, 1941, was supposed to be a great day for me. I was thirteen years old, and it was on that Saturday that I was to become a bar mitzvah. The bar mitzvah ceremony celebrates the fact that, on this day, I was to become an adult in the eyes of God and the Jewish community. My parents had assumed the responsibility for my sins up until this point, but from now on, I was responsible for any misdeeds I committed.

The synagogue was only one block away. I was supposed to be there with my parents and family to recite the passage from the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, that I had studied. My family and I had all gotten up early for the eight o'clock services. We were all excited, getting washed and dressing in our best clothes to go to the synagogue for this important rite of passage and special event in our family and community.

At that time we were living in an apartment off Nemteasca Street. The apartment was in a complex that was a rectangle about the size of a city block, with a courtyard in the middle, but it had only three entrances to the inner courtyard and the apartments; the storefronts had no access to the residential area and vice-versa. The block was surrounded by Nemteasca St., Costakenegri St., Stefan Cel Mare Blvd. and the building of the National Bank. Two entrances were on Nemteasca St.: one was a massive steel door about forty-two inches wide, and the other was a gate about twelve feet wide for trucks and other vehicles to pass through. The third entrance was a smaller gate off Stefan Cel Mare Blvd. All the entrances were locked at six o'clock in the evening for curfew and opened again at six o'clock in the morning.

As we were getting ready to go to the synagogue that morning, we heard terrible noises coming from the street below. We carefully opened our curtains to see what was going on. What I saw over the next three days is my story of survival and the reason I am called a Holocaust survivor; it stayed with me and changed my character for the rest of my life.

The noises were coming from crowds of people — young and old, men and women, boys and girls — being attacked by youngsters armed with sticks, knives, revolvers and other instruments that could cause injury or immediate death. For the next three days we didn't leave our house. I could see between 1,500 to 2,000 people lying dead, with their heads smashed, limbs separated from their bodies in pools of blood. Some were still alive but severely wounded. To get a better sense of what was happening and to see as much as we could, we went to our neighbour's apartment in the complex, where we witnessed the same carnage on the other streets. My father, may his memory be a blessing, said to me, "Look, see and remember," and I did. I have never forgotten this horrible scene. Any time I am preparing a presentation or engaged in telling my story to youngsters or anyone else, I have a hard time sleeping the night before, and I have a difficult night afterwards.

Jewish homes were easy to find, as many Jews lived in the same neighbourhoods, and each door had a mezuzah. How we went undetected was perhaps due to the fact that the complex had only three entrances, and the groundskeeper, upon hearing the commotion that morning, did not unlock the gates and doors at the end of curfew. On the second day, some male youngsters tried to get through the gate. The nanny of one of the families living in our apartment complex, a young girl who wore a large cross on her

chest, addressed the boys, telling them, “Everyone in these buildings was taken yesterday.” The boys left, and that is how we were spared!

My personal story of surviving that pogrom ends here. However, it continued for my uncle, Isaac Haber, and his two sons, Felix and Marcel. My uncle and his sons lived in a different part of town. During the pogrom, they were unfortunately taken from their house and, in the same manner, driven by force to the main police station. The police station was a big stone building, built around the turn of the century, surrounded by thick stone walls. It had a paved courtyard. My uncle told us later that all the Jews from all the various parts of our town who were still alive had been brought there. Most were wounded and bleeding. They were kept in the courtyard for the next three days. From time to time, soldiers or youngsters would enter the courtyard and shoot or maim some of their prisoners. I was told that by the end of the three days, the pavement in the yard was covered in a layer of coagulated blood three to four inches thick.

After those three days, whoever was still alive was taken to the central railway station where trains of boxcars were waiting to be loaded. One hundred and fifty individuals were counted and packed into each boxcar. All the windows were boarded up, and the doors were locked so tightly that no fresh air could get in. There was only standing room, with no place to urinate or defecate besides on the spot. The months of June and July, the height of summer in Romania, have temperatures rising anywhere between twenty-eight and thirty degrees Celsius. It does not take much imagination to understand what happened in those boxcars.

For the next seven days and nights the trains travelled between Iași, Ialomita and Podul Iloaiei — back and forth, back and forth. People, especially children, started dying.

It came to the point where mothers were giving urine to their children to quench their thirst. Later, others smothered their children to save them from suffering any further.

Finally, after seven days, the trains stopped in Ialomita and Podu Iloaiei, and the doors of the trains opened. In some cases, nobody inside had survived. At most, maybe one or two people emerged from a boxcar alive. Those survivors threw themselves onto the pavement of the station, trying to breathe fresh air. Trucks came, and whoever was unable to move out of their way was crushed to death by them. Unfortunately, my cousin Marcel was killed. My uncle and my cousin Felix miraculously remained alive. All the survivors were put into camps and were unable to communicate with anyone outside the camp for the next six months. After six months they were released to make their way home however they could. According to the Jewish community's records at that time, 36,000 Jewish people were killed in this horrific incident, referred to as a pogrom. In 2006, forty years after the war, the Romanian government finally admitted that this pogrom had taken place, but they only acknowledged 14,000 of the deaths, perhaps with the hope that this partial recognition would prevent the stigma that a total denial would create. The government claimed to have gotten this information from the Jewish community forty years after the war. Perhaps by that time there was a completely new Jewish community in Romania, with people who had different memories of the pogrom. Maybe that was the reason for the discrepancy.

Before the beginning of the war, there had been 800,000 Jews in Romania. At the end of the war, 400,000 remained. I believe that most of the 400,000 survivors immigrated to Israel when it became an independent state in 1948, and to other parts of the world as well. In 1951, there were only 280,000 Jewish Romanians.

My family was spread throughout the region, and the war made it even harder to see them often. We had family in Podu Iloaiei, Harlow and Iași. We tried to keep in touch, but our closest familial relationship was with my Uncle Isaac and his family, who also lived in Iași. Even though we lived in the same town, it was difficult to gather as a family.

It was the strangest thing: after the pogrom, life went on — you had to survive. I started going back to the Jewish school, and we returned to our normal, everyday lives. My mother still had to get up early in the morning to buy food from the market. Life was normal again, and strangely enough, there was not much difference between the Jewish Romanians and the non-Jewish Romanians. When we were standing in line at the market, they were standing next to me. That was the life: sometimes you were in line for two days just to get a little bit of bread, a little bit of oil and sugar, or maybe a little bit of meat. Those were the things that we had. Luckily, my family had a good supply of food stored away so we didn't depend on rations alone. We were financially well off, so we had purchased items on the black market. We had fifty kilos of sugar and six to seven gallons of oil in our cellar. Other items that we didn't use quickly we bought and stored when we could because we couldn't predict the market. I am very thankful that my father had money. We were particularly lucky because of my father's business arrangements with his wartime partners/owners.

About twenty-five kilometres from Iași, in Stâncea Roznovanu (which means, “stone of Roznovanu”) the Soviet and German armies had held their front for almost two years. Then, on August 21, 1944, Soviet troops occupied Iași. That same day, there was a bombardment, beginning at five o'clock in the morning. My mother was at the market

trying to get some supplies when the market was bombed and she suffered a head injury. A neighbour was able to bring her home. The bombardment of Iași continued for the next two to three hours. At three o'clock in the afternoon, Soviet tanks were rolling in. The day after that, whoever happened to be on the street was summoned by the police and military to take the dead bodies to a mass grave nearby. Unfortunately, I was on the street that day. It was summer and the bodies of the bombing victims were beginning to rot and smell. We dragged the bodies by their legs to the mass graves.

For us, the war ended when Romania surrendered on August 23, 1944. On September 12, Romania signed an armistice with the Soviet Union, turning against Italy and Germany, as the country had done in World War I. The Soviets, having just been the enemy, were received with mistrust by Romanians, and Romanian-Soviet relations were heavy with this tension.

The Soviets had fought under terrible conditions. Soldiers would line up for a rifle that had been dropped by the man holding it when he was shot. The Soviet soldiers became aware of luxuries in Romania that they hadn't seen at home in their rural towns. For them, their arrival in Iași was a party. They started looting everything — everything that they could get their hands on. If you had a good ring, they would cut off your finger. If you had a good knife or a good watch, they would cut off your hands. Sometimes I would see this captain: he'd be walking down the street, and soldiers would come to him to ask for the time so they could steal his watch. The captain would take a big clock out from under his tunic. The Soviet soldiers had nothing. There were stories of soldiers breaking into basements, shooting up the wine barrels and drowning in the wine. They

used to drink cologne after placing a piece of cotton into the liquid to absorb the scent. Many soldiers died because the cologne was made from wood alcohol.

My father was fortunate enough to find two Soviet officers who happened to be Jewish. These two officers eventually were paid to take our possessions, including my father's merchandise, the medications he was selling to Bucharest.

We moved to Bucharest when the war ended, because I had to begin public school again. Because of the war, I spent only my last two years of high school in public schools with Romanian children. I was able to complete my schooling and pass the baccalaureate exam. Then I entered the University of Medicine and Pharmacy. It was quite competitive to enter university, because there were fifteen hundred applicants and only fifty seats. You had to be pretty good to get in.

Then the communists started taking over the government, which led to conflicts and violence against members of other political parties. Ana Pauker, a Jewish woman who was the granddaughter of a rabbi, became the unofficial leader of the Communist Party of Romania in September 1944.

During the war, Romanian citizenship had been taken away from the Jewish people. After the war, many wanted to leave the country, and I was one of them.

In 1947, I was in the university studying pharmacy. I was an outspoken student and known as an anti-communist. My classmates and I started noticing that people who were not communists were being put in jail, and I was sure that I would be next. I wanted to leave the country for my safety, so I started making applications to go to the United States, where my uncle Milu, my mother's brother, lived, in New York. I made an application to the State University of New York, and I was accepted. My studies in

Romania were recognized, with the exception of English (which I didn't speak at that time), so I could begin my studies and sit an English exam at the university in a couple of years. With my acceptance by the State University of New York, I tried getting a visa to go to the United States, but Romanians were quoted a forty-year wait for visas. Unfortunately, I had to flee Romania much sooner than that.

On November 10, 1947, I asked my father to accompany me to Arad, a town near the Hungarian border. We went by train to a place where I planned to cross the border illegally into Hungary. Many families were sending members across the border, and when we got to the border town, we inquired as to who could take me across. My father and I went to the cinema that day, before I crossed the border, for what would be the last movie I would see in Romania: *Casablanca*.

Many people were in Arad for the same reason I was, and it was easy enough for my father and I to ask around and find guides. That night I met up with a group of seven Jews and two non-Jewish guides who had been recommended to me. We were to pay the guides most of their fee after I sent a note to my father from the other side, telling him I was okay. However, as you will read, they never got their money.

My parents didn't want me to leave, but I don't think they understood what was going on. My father didn't think that conditions under communism could be as bad as they had been. Besides, he had his business, which he had built from the ground up, and he would lose it all to the communists if he were to leave. My sister wanted to come with me, but she was far too young. In a way, I am glad that she didn't come because of the things that I had to go through later. Furthermore, when I was leaving, escaping communism, I didn't know that I would never return. I didn't know that I wouldn't see

my parents again until 1961 when they came to Montreal, Canada, through the Red Cross.

We refugees and our guides began crossing the fields at around ten o'clock at night. It was a dreary November night, and it was raining — a cold, misty rain, the kind that gets into your bones. At about one o'clock in the morning we were halfway through our journey when we were approached by two individuals armed with guns. They stopped us, lined us up and started checking our pockets. Some of us had brought along gold, valuables and American money. The only items of value I had on me were the watch on my wrist, another watch hidden on my belt, the belt itself and an American hundred-dollar bill inside a condom, hidden in my tush. The intent of these armed individuals was to rob us, which was unfortunately not uncommon. Many, many escapees were later found dead, buried alive at the border at the hands of similar thieves.

One of the guides ran away but the other one stayed. One of the thieves ran after the escaping guide, and the other began checking us as we were all still lined up. When he got to me, I hit him under the chin, an uppercut, and the guy went down. I fought for his handgun. It fired a round and grazed my leg. I still have the scar. I finally wrestled the gun out of his hand and I hit him over the head with it. I'm sure he was dead by the way that he was lying there on the ground.

We looked around and saw a light. It looked like a town about eight kilometres away. The town must have been where our guides were taking us, so we headed that way. For the rest of the night we walked bent over to stay hidden in the layer of fog that hovered close to the ground. I had at least forty or fifty pounds in a sack on my back, as did the others.

We arrived at the edge of a small village, which we later found out was Gyula. I had been told previously that there was an American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee post there, which was also a synagogue. We went to the first house we came across at the edge of the town, and we knocked on the door.

A man opened the door. We didn't speak any Hungarian, so my friend gave him the watch off his wrist and said, "Zsidó templom, Zsidó templom" (which means "Jewish temple" in Hungarian) to ask for directions. The man took the watch and closed the door without saying a word. So we went to the next house and did the same thing. I had the two watches, so I held out the one on my wrist, saying again, "Zsidó templom," and this man, thankfully, took us to the synagogue. By the time I got to the doors of the synagogue compound, I was completely bent over and bleeding profusely from my leg. I collapsed under the weight of my sack. The volunteers at the compound looked after me and put a bandage on my leg to stop the bleeding.

We were in Gyula for the next three days in a compound that could have been a military barracks, filled with three hundred to four hundred Jews sleeping on bunk beds. It was financially maintained by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and organized by members of the Haganah army from Palestine (as Israel was known then). After those three days, a young man from the Haganah took us to Budapest to another compound there. We stayed in that compound for a week, and while there I was able to get out and see Pest and Buda as well as the Danube River that runs between the two districts.

In the meantime, the communists began to take over the Hungarian government as well, and they completely took over in March 1949. We were told that we should go

back to Romania, but we could not go back. The Romanian government had issued an order that those who left the country and were discovered would either be put to death on the spot or would spend the rest of their lives in jail. Those punishments applied not only to those caught, but to their families as well.

Soon we were given orders to move out of Budapest, and the Haganah took us to the border of Austria. When we arrived at the border, we were a group of hundreds of people, and the Hungarian border guards wouldn't let us through. Many people wanted to turn back even though they would face punishment alongside the families that they'd left behind. In an effort to take a stand and keep everyone there, and to put pressure on the border guards, I organized with other youths. We took out knives and picked up sticks, threatening to take the life of anyone who tried to give up and turn back. For three days and three nights we stayed there. We slept on the ground in the rain. We did not move from the spot until the orders came from the Communist Party in Budapest that the border guards should let us through.

I and all the other refugees being guided by the Haganah went on to Vienna, and from there we all went to many different places throughout Europe. Vienna was divided into jurisdictions: the French zone, the American zone, the English zone, the Soviet zone and the common zone, each with its respective administration. There were three Haganah-led Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Vienna filled with Jewish refugees from Romania, Soviet Russia and the Ukraine. For the next two or three weeks, I was in the camp of Alzerbach. I worked in the pharmacy department because I had the training for it.

During my stay in Vienna, I spent time in jail for a small, one-man black market business I had started with my hidden hundred dollars. The business worked like this: I was allowed to travel back and forth on the tram from Vienna, Austria, to Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, crossing the border between them. In Bratislava, I bought pens, chocolate, a leather coat or a thousand packs of cigarettes, and I sold these things back in Vienna for a profit in order to sustain myself.

One time, the border guards caught me at the border on my way back to Vienna, and I spent seven days in jail in Bratislava. The only thing we had to eat in jail was stone-hard black bread and water. We also had cigarettes (that is where I picked up the awful habit of smoking). Luckily for me, Jewish people were being sent back to where they'd come from, so upon release from jail in Czechoslovakia, I was free to return to Vienna.

I wanted to get as far west as quickly as I could, to get away from the conflict that was rising between the Americans, the English and the Soviets in Europe. I did not want to get caught in the middle of the battle I was sure they would have. So, by myself, I hopped on a train during the night and went west to Linz, which is a large city that is also on the Danube. From there I went through Salzburg to Saalfelden to Innsbruck, alone.

I was sleeping with my sack between my legs on the floors of trains. Sometimes it was a freight train, sometimes a passenger train — any train that was going. During the entire journey, I always carried the same backpack filled with things I needed, among them my journal and pictures from home. It was cold, and I had on layers of clothes and underclothes from home, to try to keep myself warm, and a blanket.

I tried to leave Austria four times. Each time I was caught at the border. Finally I learned that you could jump into the snow as the train slowed for the checkpoint between Vienna and Innsbruck. If you ran ahead about a kilometre past the checkpoint, you could jump back onto the train again as it was still moving slowly and ride the train into Saalfelden.

At this point I should say that each time you entered a Joint camp, you immediately had to pull your pants down so the Haganah could check that you were circumcised, making sure that you were Jewish. The relief workers needed to make sure they were helping the right refugees. After you washed, you were sprayed with DDT all over to kill lice.

After we left the camp in Innsbruck, the Haganah people smuggled us into Italy. They organized a group of truck drivers. We lay on the bed of the truck and were covered with a tarp. Then gravel covered the tarp so that we would be hidden. In Italy we were taken to a post on Lake Maggiore, near Milano, for a few days. Then we were taken to Milano, to ORT Scuola Muraria, a unique Displaced Persons camp with craftsmen-training programs for Jewish refugees, where I stayed for several weeks. Then came the town of Cremona for several more weeks. The talk of the independent Jewish state became the norm of the day, and many of the displaced people were directed to the ports of Bari and Barletta to be sent to Israel. I did not want to go to Israel. I wanted to make my way to France and ultimately to the United States of America.

My first goal was Menton, France, so I had to cross the Alps that border Italy and France. A guide gave me a map with directions on how to get through. I began in Ventimiglia, a port on the Adriatic Sea, and headed north into the mountains. I was

caught in the Alps shortly after entering. I had my *tefillin* on, and the guards checked inside them just to make sure I wasn't smuggling any jewels or anything. They were only guarding the border to discourage people from travelling through the area. They told me there had been too many mines placed along the route during the war for it to be safe.

I turned back and took an alternate route across the mountains to Menton. From Menton I took a train to Nice, and from Nice, with the approval and support of the local Jewish community, I took the train to Paris. In Paris I declared myself a refugee. The French officials first checked on me with the Romanian government in exile, to make sure that I wasn't a communist spy. Then they gave me a *récépissé* which is a document with my picture on it that declared my status as a refugee. That was the first time in all my travels from Romania to France that I had a document that gave me legal status as a refugee. After I had legal status, I looked around for more long-term solutions. I checked into the possibility of being adopted by my uncle in New York, but unfortunately I was a year too late.

Eventually, my uncle found me another solution. He paid thirty-five hundred dollars for a visa for me to go to Cuba, though I was not legally allowed to work there until I could become a citizen five years after arrival. When I arrived in Havana, I started working illegally for a fellow Romanian refugee, Dr. William Stern, who used to have a chemical plant, Napuchemia, that did business with my father in Romania. Because of my pharmaceutical background, I became Dr. Stern's general manager and production manager, and after one year I became the salesman. In Havana, I went to night school to learn Spanish, which I speak quite fluently to this day. While in Havana, I had several

good marriage offers, but I rejected each of them because I was quite independent, and I didn't want to be told what to do by the daughters of very wealthy people.

A friend of mine, David Herlin, from Iași, whom I was able to keep in touch with while we were refugees in Europe, managed to get to Sydney, Australia. He sent me a paper allowing me to join him in Sydney, but approximately one week later, I received a paper from my uncle giving me permission to go to Canada. For the Canadian visa, my uncle paid five thousand dollars. I chose Canada over Australia because I wanted to be near family. I specifically chose Montreal. My journey to Canada on Sept 15, 1950, was routed through the Bahamas and Bermuda because the Americans would not let me fly via their country. They were afraid that I was going to skip the plane and stay there!

When I arrived in Montreal I couldn't speak more than a few words of English, only "goodbye" and "hello" and things like that. I didn't have any money, either, other than seventeen dollars in my pocket. There was a skid-row type area in Montreal at St. Catherine St. and St. Lawrence Boulevard, as we have here in Vancouver at Main and Hastings Streets. There were people of all nations of the world coming together on these corners. On one side of the street there were two spaghetti houses where I would get my lunch for twenty-five cents. I ate a lot of spaghetti with only tomato sauce because I couldn't afford the meatballs. Right after all this spaghetti, I would go across the street to where there were two movie theatres that had three movies each for twenty-five cents. I sat there for hours and hours listening to the English in the movies, and then on the radio when I got one, and that's how I started to learn English.

I worked all kinds of jobs in Montreal, and I had to work very hard in order to get anywhere because I didn't have a trade. I couldn't continue my pharmacy education,

because classes were in the daytime and I had to make a living. So I did what I could to keep going, cleaning floors and such. I began to develop as a businessman in the textiles supply industry, and became successful quite quickly.

I met my wife, Elinor, in 1955, at a dance in one of the synagogues in Montreal, and six months later, on May 29, 1955, we were married. My wife's father had been born in Galicia, part of the Austro-Hungarian empire in what is now southern Poland, and my mother-in-law came from Soviet Russia. Both of Elinor's parents immigrated to Canada before having children, so my wife and her brother had been born in Montreal. My wife and I had three children: Wanda Joyce, born October 22, 1956; Geoffrey John, born March 15, 1959; and Stephen Isidore, born October 12, 1961.

In 1967, the Quebecois Separatists (a group that lobbied for Quebec to be a sovereign country) were waging their political war. I was afraid of getting caught in another political war and being seen as a second-class citizen, as I had experienced in Romania. I decided we should move our family somewhere else, and we chose Dallas, Texas. We were there for only one year, however, because I didn't like what was happening in the United States. There were all these uprisings, all these racial problems in Los Angeles and all over the country, and of course the Vietnam War. I had two sons, and I didn't want either of them getting involved in any of that, so we made the choice to return to Canada, this time to Toronto.

My former textiles colleague in Montreal had been diagnosed with a fatal brain tumour, and he asked me to save his business by buying it. He wanted to get as much cash as possible for it, so he chose instead to sell the business to someone else, on the condition that I was to stay with the business while receiving a large salary. The new

owners had no idea how to run a business, and they rejected my offer to become a partner. I therefore started my own textile business, called Finotex, in Montreal.

* * * * *

My family had remained in Bucharest after I fled, and the communists took over everything. My mother became a nurse in 1949 to support the family because my father could not work. He was considered a bourgeois capitalist by the Communist Party, and like all Romanians with money, he was stripped of his wealth and degraded socially. My father wasn't able to find a job for some time; it was three or four years before he was legitimized as an honest individual and started working for the communists. He eventually found work as an impresario, which was a very high-pressure job. He was responsible for recruiting opera and theatre companies and bringing productions to Bucharest.

The communist atmosphere in the Soviet Union was different story. There, religion was outlawed. Soviet Russia had a population of over three and a half million Jews who were no longer allowed to practice their religion. Romania's Jewish population was under 300,000 at that time. The Romanian communists were not thinking about Jewish identity in any way; they simply wanted to take away the people's wealth and independence, and control them in the communist fashion. We were only a possession, and it did not concern the communists whether or not citizens were practicing a religion in Romania.

The Communist Party existed and ruled by infiltrating the lives of the people. There were some who believed in the cause, and even children spied on their own parents and reported them to the government. But the communists were a small group compared

to the whole population. The only way they could keep the people under control was by fear and by knowing what was going on.

In 1961, my parents arrived in Montreal. They stayed with us for the first six months, as they had lost everything to the Communist Party in Romania when fleeing with the help of the Red Cross. They knew that they would lose their material possessions, so they had tried to get money out of Romania by sending it to friends and business colleagues in other countries, but they never got it back. It was a risk they felt was worth taking, seeing as it would have been lost anyways.

My mother was fluent in French. She had been a nurse in Romania and soon passed the examination that would allow her to become a nurse in Canada as well, and she continued her work in Montreal. My father started working for a clothing manufacturer, cleaning the toilets. He did what he had to do to take care of himself and his family. I kissed his hands for being the man that he was. He was a hard worker and was soon promoted to head of security at the clothing manufacturing firm. He was in charge of catching the workers who would steal garments by throwing them out the windows during their daytime shifts and collecting them from the ground at night.

In 1978, I came to Vancouver on a business trip and I bought a house in Richmond. When I came home and told my wife she said, “So when are we moving?”

I looked at her and said, “You’re serious? You want to move? We’ll move.” Elinor followed me wherever I had to go, or wanted to go, and she supported my strong feelings about the political turmoil around us. So I liquidated my business in Montreal, and on December 15, 1978, with my parents soon to follow, we moved to Richmond, where we would live for the next forty years.

Before I came to the west coast, one of my clients who lived in Vancouver heard I was moving from Montreal. He owned a business called Drapshire Clothing, which manufactured very sharp clothing, at the corner of Knight and Venables. As I was trading in the textile industry, he asked me to send him some clippings of merchandise, and he bought about \$175,000 worth of goods from me. He offered to make me his buyer, his designer and his made-to-measure man, and he offered me a phenomenal salary.

After the first year, I realized his businesses had lost over half a million dollars during that time, but when I informed my boss of it, he told me not to worry. I worked for him for another year, but when he took out a loan, and lost another three quarters of a million dollars, I told him, “You’re going to go bankrupt. I don’t want to be involved.” I started keeping my eye out for another business, another line of work. One of my friends said there was a kosher butcher shop for sale, and I was interested. For six months, I tried negotiating with the owner to buy that place, but he changed his mind. He told me Kaplan’s Deli was for sale, so I enquired with the owners. By then it was 1981.

Mrs. Kaplan, who was struggling to care for her ageing husband while still running the shop, wanted to sell the business. After half an hour of talking to her, I bought the business. I came home, told my wife I had bought the deli, and she almost threw me out of the house. “What do you know about the restaurant business!” Well, I knew nothing about textiles, but I had become knowledgeable and worked with some of the best in the country; I would learn about delis too. I ran Kaplan’s for twenty-three years until I sold it, so I could retire at seventy-three, in 2000.

From the earliest days of my life, I had a great desire to be involved in the Jewish community, and to somehow give back to the community what it had given me. In 1957–

1958, in the city of Laval, Quebec, I founded a congregation named Shaare Shalom that is flourishing to date. After I moved to Vancouver, I spent the next eighteen years working and being deeply involved with my community. I joined the congregation Beth Israel and was an executive member of the board and various committees, such as the men's club. I was the president of the men's club for two years and excelled by bringing the club to its highest level of participation in the history of the congregation. I was involved in the development of the Weinberg Residence, and I also joined the board of the Louis Brier Home and Hospital. During that time I was also an active member of the board of the Jewish National Fund. The students of the Hillel Foundation at the University of British Columbia (UBC) were struggling, and when I became president, with the help of the executive director, Mordechai Wosk, we strengthened the organization. The Hillel Foundation later developed a new building on UBC's campus. Hillel involved Jewish students in the life of the university and helped them fight antisemitism within the university ranks.

As my parents were ageing, I became more involved with their lives and in the needs of seniors. My parents entered the Louis Brier Home in their mid-eighties, and since my store, Kaplan's, was only across the street, I became quite involved in the life of the facility and somehow became adopted by the seniors who lived there. For the next twenty-five years, I led the Friday night services with a choir, and I also led the services on Saturday mornings.

The Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver, with a grant from the federal government's New Horizons for Seniors Program, came together to help Jewish seniors communicate and keep in contact with each other via phone. I was the president of the

Seniors Advisory Council, a committee of the Jewish Federation, from 1999 to 2003. In 2003, the Seniors Advisory Council was informed that the community did not want the Jewish Federation to involve itself in servicing the community, and so the Seniors Advisory Council was disbanded.

The board and executive of the council decided that it was important to have a group representing the Jewish seniors of Greater Vancouver, so in 2003 we established a new organization called Jewish Seniors Alliance, and I became the founding president. To date, I am a president emeritus of this organization, and I am still fully involved in the fundraising. The Jewish Seniors Alliance plays a very important role in the lives of around five thousand senior Jewish community members who access the organization's programs of outreach, advocacy and peer support.

I was still living in Richmond after the death of my wife on October 5, 2011, when I realized that because I couldn't drive in the dark I was quite isolated in the winter time. I therefore decided to sell my home, which I did in 2017. In April 2017, I rented an apartment on East 36 Ave., Vancouver, in the same building as my girlfriend, Sheila. I had met Sheila on August 7, 2016. I had been a widower for six years, and she had been widowed for nine years. We met, we liked each other, and now she is my best friend.

My children Wanda, Geoffrey and Stephen, have all moved away to lead their own lives. Wanda lives in Toronto. She is a social worker and works for a government agency. Her husband Phil is working in Ottawa at the moment, and they have two children: Jesse, who is married to Daniela, and Zoe, who is studying in Peterborough. Geoffrey also lives in Toronto with his wife Gillah. They have a daughter Ariella, who is married and living in Spain, a daughter Liora, who is living in New York, and a son, who

is living in Boston. Geoffrey is ordained as a Conservative rabbi. He has a doctorate of ministry and a doctorate of divinity, and he works as the spiritual leader of Baycrest Jewish Home for the Aged, which is the largest facility of its kind in North America. He is also a Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy Reserves. My son Stephen lives in Marysville, Washington. He works in the computer business and is married to Terry. The two are raising Kristina, who is Terry's granddaughter.

My parents and I never went back to visit Romania. At first I couldn't go because the Romanian prime minister was still communist, and I was afraid the government would still have records saying I had never joined the party. Then, after I moved to Vancouver, I couldn't leave my business at the deli for long enough to visit. By the time I was finished with the deli, my wife was unable to travel, so I never went.

After becoming a man under the conditions I had lived through, nothing could get to me — nothing could easily impress me. I've seen the worst possible things. I never had a childhood. I look at children today: they enjoy every year of their lives, and so much is given to them. They have friends, education and freedom. I never had those things. My life was not the best to start with because of the economic depression and the war. I was always self-conscious about how I looked and what I was called. Even when I boxed, people in the audience would yell, "Kill the Jew!"

Going through this childhood, having to be tougher and more aware than other children, made me assertive and very responsible. You see, the immigrants who came here to this country had nothing. No family, no education, not anything. They took chances because they had so little to lose. Many ended up making phenomenal fortunes because of the chances they took.

Sometimes you think about your life. You think of the danger, and then you hesitate. I have never hesitated in my life. I couldn't do those things today, but I did them then because I had to. I did not allow negative thinking to get in the way of my actions — I had no choice. I was looking forward to a different future. That's what made me cross all the borders, endure all the difficulties throughout my journey. All I knew was that I had to survive. You have no choice, you don't even think about it. You do what you have to do, and you have to accept whatever results from your actions. I was by myself. My family was not with me. I was alone in a foreign country. Sometimes my family didn't hear from me for weeks. I did I what I could in order to survive, and goodness came out of it. The way I look at it, if I had not seen the pogrom, I would not have been strong enough to see my way through all my difficulties. At the time, I was very daring. I felt strong. I knew how to handle every weapon that you could possibly think of: knives, sticks, rifles, machine guns. I knew everything. At certain points, it seemed my life was worth nothing, in comparison to the benefits I hoped I would gain from the risks I was taking to survive.

When I try to answer the question as to why this all happened, I do believe it was mass hysteria that brought about the Holocaust. Not all the Germans were Nazis, but it was mass hysteria. Hitler was able to inspire people because the circumstances were right— after World War I, Germany was left with nothing. The German government had to pay reparations to the Allies, there was very little food left in the country, they lost tremendous numbers of people during World War I, and all the nation's resources were gone.

You know, whenever I speak to youngsters about the Holocaust, when I tell my story, I ask them one question: “Do you think that could happen here?” Yes, it could happen, given the right circumstances: economic disaster, lack of food because of drought, huge unemployment. People becoming restless, and sometimes ask why some immigrants are getting jobs even though they were not born Canadians. We have seen great changes taking place in the United States today. And unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of people are still killed all over the world for either religious or political reasons. The governments and the free-world newspapers and media make noise for several days, and in the end nothing changes. Murder and barbarism still continue uninterrupted. Yes, it could happen here. But hopefully, it never will.



Serge's mother, Louise (Liza) Haber. Romania, circa 1936.



Serge in his school uniform and his mother, Louise (Liza). Bucharest, Romania, circa 1942.



Serge's sister, Sidonia. Romania, circa 1948.



Serge and his wife, Elinor, on their wedding day. Montreal, Quebec, May 29, 1955.



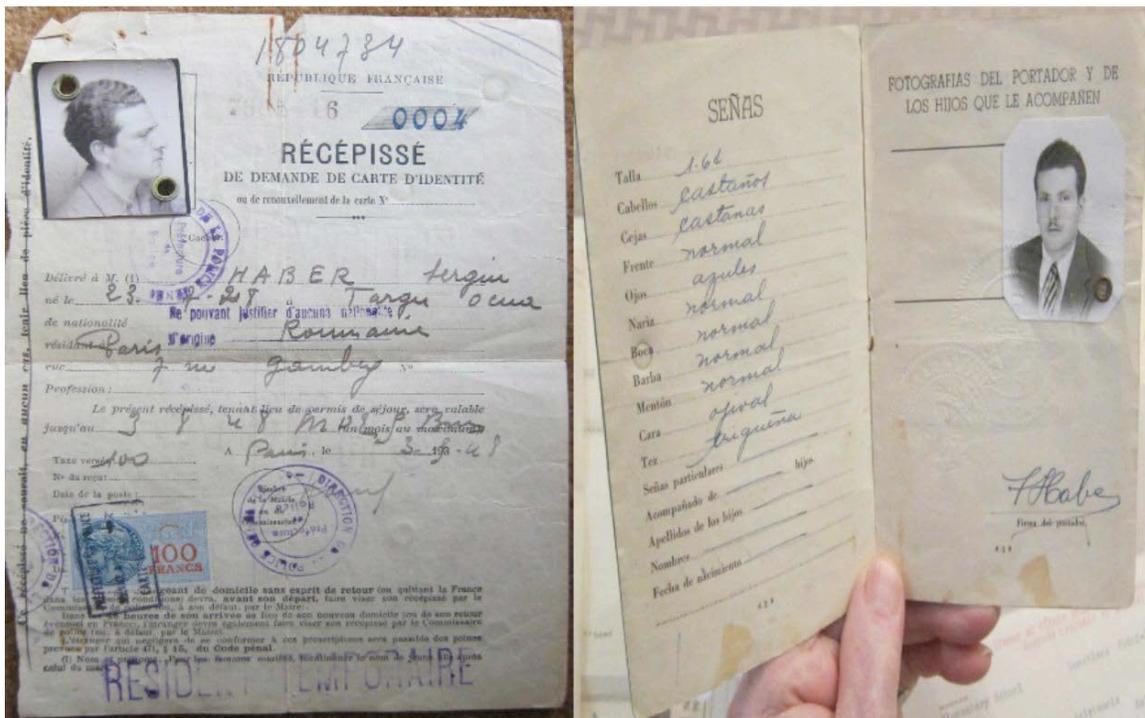
Serge's father, Leon Haber. Romania, circa 1965.



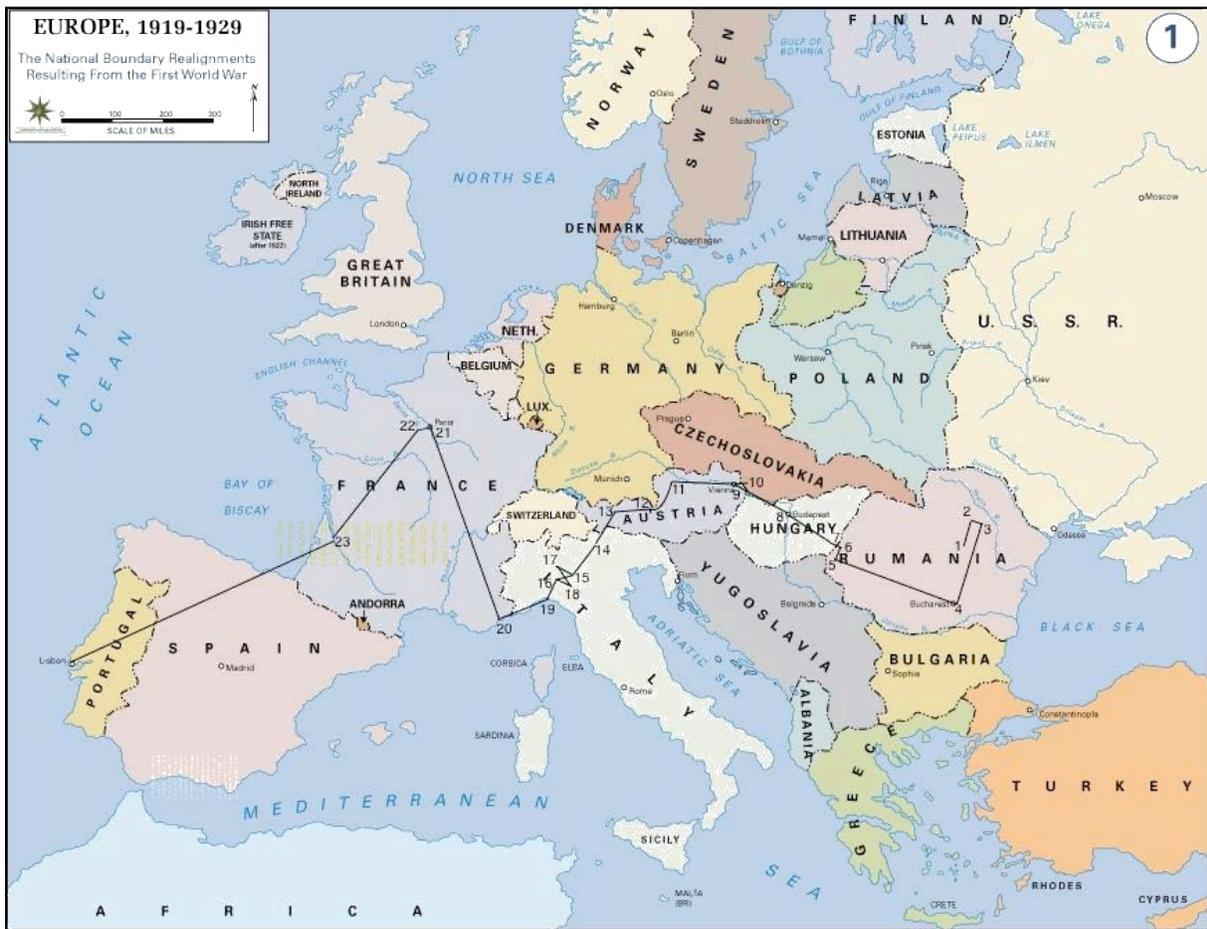
Serge's father, Leon, and mother Louise (Liza) in Montreal, Canada. Circa 1969.



Serge's sister, Sidonia, and her husband, Tiberiu Solymos. Israel, circa 1990.



Two important documents Serge received in his flight as a refugee. On the left is the document he received in France, which finally declared his status as a refugee. The one on the right is the visa he received from the Cuban Government.



Map of Europe Legend & Detailed Travel Timeline

Place	Date	Approximate Distance
1. Tirgu Ocna, Romania	1928	
2. Podu Iloaiei, Romania	1930	155 km from Tirgu Ocna
3. Iasi (<i>Yas</i>), Romania	1936	30 km from Podu Iloaiei 25 km from Stinca Rosnovan
4. Buevesti (<i>Bucharest</i>), Romania	November 2 1947	300 km from Iasi
5. Arad, Romania	November 10 1947	580 km from Buevesti
6. Zorin (<i>Zerind</i>), Romania	November 10-11 1947	55 km from Arad
7. Ghiula (<i>Gyula</i>), Hungary	November 11-13 1947	30 km from Zorin
8. Budapest, Hungary	November 13-21 1947	200 km from Ghiula
Hungary - Austria Border	November 21-23 1947	

9. Viena (<i>Vienna</i>), Austria	November 23-24 1947	250 km from Budapest
Viena-Alzerbach: Displaced Persons Camp, Austria	November 24-30 1947	
10. Bratislava, Czechoslovakia	December 1-6 1947	55 km from Viena
Viena-Alzerbach, Austria	December 8-9 1947	
Viena-Stayer, Austria	December 9 1947	
11. Linz, Austria	December 10-16 1947	160 km from Viena
12. Salfelden (<i>Saalfelden</i>), Austria	December 16-25 1947	150 km from Linz
Zeel am See (<i>Zell am See</i>), Austria	December 26-27 1947	12 km from Salfelden
Salfelden (<i>Saalfelden</i>), Austria	December 27 - January 12 1948	12 km from Zeel am See
Border, French Zone	January 12-15 1948	
13. Gnadenvald (<i>Gnadenwald</i>)	January 15 - February 20 1948	110 km from Salfelden
Austria - Italy Border	February 20-22 1948	
St. Valentino, Italy	February 22-23 1948	
14. Meranu (<i>Merano</i>), Italy	February 23-24 1948	80 km from Gnadenvald
15. Chiari, Italy	February 24-26 1948	160 km from Meranu
16. Milano (<i>Milan</i>), Italy	February 26-28 1948	60 km from Chiari
Chiari, Italy	February 28-29 1948	60 km from Milano
17. Como, Italy	February 29 - March 1 1948	70 km from Chiari
Milano-Como, Italy	March 1-2 1948	
Milano-Scuola, Italy	March 2-22 1948	
18. Cremona, Italy	March 22 - April 27 1948	105 km from Como
Milano (<i>Milan</i>), Italy	April 27 – May 4 1948	80 km from Cremona
19. Genova (<i>Genoa</i>), Italy	May 5-6 1948	120 km from Milano
Ventimille (<i>Ventimiglia</i>), Italy	May 6 1948	130 km from Genoa
Border of Italy – France to Menton	May 6 1948	10 km from Ventimille
Monaco Monte Carlo, France	May 6 1948	10 km from Menton
20. Nice, France	May 6-7 1948	15 km from Monalo Monte Carlo
21. Paris, France	May 7-28 1948	690 km from Nice
22. Versailles, France	May 29 1948	20 km from Paris
Paris, France	May 29 – June 13 1948	20 km from Nice
23. Bordeauy (<i>Bordeaux</i>), France	June 14 1948	590 km from Paris
S.S. Portugal boarded in Bordeauy	June 15-20 1948	
Azores, Portugal	June 20-29 1948	2230 km from Bordeauy
Venezuela, Puerto Cabello	June 29 1948	5000 km from Azores
Curacao	June 29-30 1948	
Habana (<i>Havana</i>), Cuba	July 3 1948	2500 km from Venezuela
Bahamas - Bermuda - Montreal, Canada	September 15 1948	2600 km from Havana