

MY PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS AND SOME RELATIVES

Kovarce (pronounced Kovartseh), on the upper reaches of the river Nitra, is the cradle of the Schwitzer family - at least as far as I can go back in time. When they got there and from where I don't know. It has now 1500 - 2000 inhabitants, larger than the surrounding villages. It is probable that it had been a larger village in the past too. My great - grandfather Solomon Schwitzer was born there. His wife was Aloisia Steiner. They must have lived there between 1830 and 1880. It has always been my understanding that they owned an inn and were farmers at the same time.

My grandfather Simon was born in Kovarce on 7th February 1851. He had a brother Max, whose daughter Alice was the mother of the late Terri Richter and Magda Oppenheim. He also had two sisters: Berta and Rosa. Berta was married twice. From her first husband Moritz Adler she had a daughter Stefanie who married her cousin Josef Schwitzer, my Father's half - brother. Schnuki is their daughter. Her second husband was called Weinberger and they lived in Hlohovec.

Rosa married a Nagel and they also lived in Hlohovec. Their son and perhaps they too, had the hardware shop 2 or 3 houses away from the Szilard home. I do not have the birthdays of Grandfather's siblings nor do I know whether there were any other. (See family tree).

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Grandfather grew up in the hustle and bustle of the inn. (For a description of life in a Slovak village inn, see chapter 15, pages 139 and 140.) I learned from a letter from cousin Bözsi that when Grandfather was 16 he ran away to Pest (Budapest). He hired himself to a restaurant called GABRINUS (also a brand of beer) as a young drinks waiter. (The youngest waiter is called a "Piccolo"). I don't know how long he worked there but his father arrived one day, having discovered his son's whereabouts, and took him home. No doubt he scolded him properly.

Grandfather became a farmer. He married twice. His first wife was Amalia Schlesinger, born in 1858 and they lived on the rented farm in Madunice. I do not know whether the farm had been rented previously by Solomon or whether it was rented pspecially for Simon. Later Simon had other farms in Voderady, Kynek (now part of the city of Nitra), Malé Janikovce and Fornoszek. But Madunice became the family seat and remained in the family until 1945, a total of about

70 years. Their first born was Josef, Schnuki's father. He was born in Madunice on 25th February 1979. Amalia died in childbirth only 20 years old.

Simon's second wife was Johanna née Kuffler, born in 1851 (the same year as Simon) in Beckov (pronounced Betscow) near Trenčín which is a little bit north of "my triangle". Simon must have married her not later than 4 years after the death of his first wife. The Kufflers were a rich family, originating from Vienna. They were in the textile - dyeing business. It was a Blaufärberei i.e. they did blue dying; presumably cotton with indigo. They are my only ancestors who were not farmers.

I don't know how many siblings Johanna had altogether. She seems to have had 4 sisters (see family tree): I have the names of three but not of the 4th sister. It appears that through the latter there is a distant relationship with Leslie Eggerton.

Grandmother Johanna had the doubtful reputation of being bossy, intolerant and somewhat vehement, like all Kufflers. A real termigant. Throughout that part of Slovakia people knew about this trait of the Kufflers and I was told repeatedly that their family motto was "Já som Kuffler" "I am a Kuffler". Whenever a Kuffler couldn't get his or her way, they were alleged to utter this phrase threateningly meaning "I'll get my way in the end". Johanna was a cousin of Grandfather's first wife Amalia. Johanna had been married before too and was widowed. From her first marriage she had a son Alojz who died before 1919.

From the second marriage were 4 children, in order of descending ages: Berta, my Father Stefan, Aunt Leonka and Aunt Frida Maria.

When Josef had grown up he farmed with Grandfather in Madunice, until he got married. After his marriage to Stefanie Adler they lived in Füss (in Slovak Tekovský Fiš) which property I believe belonged to the Adlers. Their first child Marinka was born there on 28th November 1905. They then moved to Madunice, Grandfather having left to farm in Fornoszek. This was some time between 1905 and 1906. Father and the other children moved with him. It is idle but interesting to speculate why Grandfather moved away, rather than staying himself in Madunice and letting Fornoszek to Josef . Was it because it is nearer to his birthplace ? or was it a farm which belonged to great-Grandfather which he had left to Simon ? or couldn't Johanna stand Madunice ? Josef's second child, son Bandi, was born in Madunice on 5th May 1908. Some time after that Josef and his family moved to Nitra Tormós where they rented a farm from the Bishop. In c 1918 they bought the farm in Šindolka at the foot of the Zobor



17. Fornoszek 1915. Both grandparents were 64, father 30. He stands on left. In front of him cousin Bözsi. Frida is on the right. The boys are the Szörenyi's.



18. Grandfather's 75th birthday; taken Nitra 1926. Standing from left: Pista Szörenyi, Gyuri Sz., Bandi Schw., Marinka Schw., Emil Schlesinger, Bözsi Sz., father, Leonka, Béla, Frida, Josef Schw. Sitting: grandfather holding Schnuki, Anni, Jean, I, Imre Szörenyi, Stefanie (Schnuki's mother), mother.

Grandfather, whom I knew well, was gentleness personified. He had a soft pleasant voice and had become a devout Christian. I have my first definite recollections of him when he was nearly 75 years old and when I must have been 8 or 9. The family photo 18 was taken on or around his 75th birthday. He was not tall, had a round face, a grey bushy mustache and a mass of short, grey, silky, curly hair. He had kind, lively eyes and a healthy skin. He wore well-cut suits, a waistcoat

hill near Nitra. Schnuki was born in Vienna on 19th December 1919 after a gap of 11 years and was brought up in Sindolka.

When Josef had left Madunice, the farm passed to father who was 7 years younger than Josef.

It is interesting to note that father's oldest sister Berta returned to Madunice to have her second-born, Imre, there on 12th May 1905.

BIRTHS IN MADUNICE

		<u>Grandfather Simon's children</u>
1878 25 February	Josef	from first marriage
1883 17 December	Berta	from second marriage
1885 16 December? <i>January</i>	Stefan, father	ditto
	Leonka	ditto
1894 11? September	Frida Maria	ditto
		<u>Others</u>
1905 12 May	Imre	second child of Berta
1908 5 May	Bandi	second child of Josef
1917 12 February	I	born Vienna, lived Madunice
1919 22 May	Anni	born Bratislava, lived Madunice

I give this chronicle of births to show that Madunice had truly become the family seat.

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Grandmother Johanna died in 1919. I was about 2 years old and don't remember her. She is buried in Beckov with her parents atop the rocky castle hill near Trenčín. Exhibit 17 is the only photo I have of her. It was taken in Wornószek in 1915 during the war. Both grandparents were 64 then. My father stands on the left. In front of him is Cousin Bözsi. On the right is Aunt Frida. The boys are Bözsis brothers. Some time around 1919 (perhaps after Johanna's death?) Grandfather moved to Nitra, leaving the day-to-day running of the farm to a bailiff. Frida, still unmarried, moved with him. 1919 was an important watershed for the family as Grandfather and his family converted to Catholicism.

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with a gold watch chain and always a bow tie. He seemed to be using a walking stick.

When I met him he lived in a comfortable first floor flat on the main street in Nitra leading from the railway station to the centre. There was a small front garden and a high wrought-iron fence and gate. Opposite the house was the steam mill, so called because corn was ground by means of a steam - driven flour mill. Terri's husband Charles Richter used to work there. The flat was smaller than the home of the other grandparents but had better furniture, excellent carpets and several paintings, mainly of cattle. There was also a life sized painting of Grandfather's by a painter called Maximilian Schurmann.

I must dwell on this painter for a moment. He also painted life-size portraits of father and mother and also of me when I was about 5 years old. These were in our home. They were all alike in that they had dark backgrounds and the faces shone brightly. On mine there were some flowers in one corner and a blue butterfly. I had a sort of Lord Fauntleroy suit on. My right arm was lifted and my index finger gently crooked as if I were saying "Did you hear what I heard?". Schurmann became a well-known painter, survived the last war and was honoured by the Communist régime by being appointed an Academic Painter. He features in both the books on Nitra in my possession. In the book by Jozf Lajoš on page 191B there is a colour reproduction of one of his paintings of three women in national costume. In the other book, published in 1977, there is a photo of a self-portrait of his, after pages 256 / 257. He was 70 years old when he died in 1960.

Grandfather had a number of objects d'art in his flat. One I loved was a silver wheelbarrow, perhaps 3 inches long of the type that was used for transporting hay or firewood. The little wheel turned smoothly and I often played with it. He also had a collection of Venetian glasses in translucent, luminous colours: blood red, deep blue, yellow or multi-coloured.



Since before the first world war Grandfather spent many a summer holiday in Abbazia, now Opatija, on the Istrian peninsula in Yugoslavia. Before the first war the Istrian peninsula belonged to Austro-Hungary and Pola was its naval port. Nearby Trieste was its commercial port. (We visited Opatija and stayed a night there to pick up Veronika who was there for a week's field work in 1973). He stayed in the biggest hotel on the shore which is still

there. He continued to visit Opatija even when he was quite old. In pre-1918 days it must have been a major logistic feat to move grandparents, children and nanny to and from the Adriatic. In my imagination I see a horse drawn carriage taking them to the halt in Madunice. The large number of suitcases and valises had perhaps preceded them to the halt. They would have travelled to Bratislava by slow train; then changed there into a train for Vienna. They would have stayed in a hotel overnight, necessitating at least some pieces of luggage to be taken along. Certainly not less than two Fiacers (fiacre, Viennese horse-drawn cab) would be required. How the children would have enjoyed their ride through the streets of the capital, perhaps getting a glimpse of the Hofburg where the Emperor resided. The next day they would be conveyed to the South Station. They would find their reserved compartment, have the luggage loaded and stowed away and soon the fast train to Trieste would start on its long journey to the sea. Next morning there would be another change of trains and finally they would arrive in the hotel, reverently welcomed by its manager and personnel.

In later years, when I knew him, he travelled with Frida and the housekeeper Kissa. Kissa is short for kissaszony (pronounced kishassonj^j) which in Hungarian is Miss. She was a powerfully-built woman, somewhat on the short side, plump, with a raucous voice and talkative in the only language she mastered, Hungarian. She looked after Grandfather very well and was more like a member of the family than a servant. She stayed with him until his death. Grandfather also had a servant.

Ever since I remember, Grandfather had asthma. He used a rubber balloon operated spray for injecting his throat.

Later - I can't remember when but perhaps around 1935 - he gave up his flat in Nitra and moved back to his farm in Fornószek. His was a simple but roomy farmhouse to which he brought his furniture, carpets, paintings and objets d'art. It was light and airy indoors. Kissa was an excellent cook and loved to have the family come to a meal, making us very welcome. I think the reason for leaving Nitra was probably economic. Farmers the world over fared badly in the 1930s and it was cheaper to live on the farm than in the flat in Nitra.

I have already mentioned that he and the family converted to Catholicism in 1919. This was the year grandfather's second wife had died. Incidentally his eldest daughter Berta, had died in Oct. 1918 of the Spanish flue. Whether there is any connection between the deaths and his conversion I don't know. He became a very devout Catholic. In 1928 he donated a bell for the church

tower in Nitra. I did not know about this until William was told about it by Schnuki. He photographed part of the bell with the inscription:

SANCTE CAROLE B. ORA PRO NOBIS. OBTULIT SIMON SCHWITZER CONVERTITA A. 1928

In English: St. Charles B(eatified) pray for us. Donated by Simon Schwitzer cast in A(nno Domini) 1928.

Exhibit 19 was taken perhaps a year or two before his death. I remember him as he looks on this photo.

Grandfather died on 4th March 1937 when I was 20 years old. It was a cool spring day when we followed his coffin to the little village cemetery. It was my first rather upsetting attendance at a funeral. Afterwards some of his belongings, including his objets d'art, were to be distributed amongst his children. Neither Father nor my uncle and aunts could bring themselves to do this. So my cousins and I were asked to do it. I had no idea about the value of the various pieces which were all spread out on the floor of one room. I did not get the coveted silver wheelbarrow. Some of the Venetian glass cups later adorned a room in Velký Lapáš.

There was Grandfather's rolltop desk which nobody had yet opened. Father pulled out a drawer in front of the others. He found a bank draft for a large sum drawn in favour of Josef which rather upset father. Probably Josef had fallen on bad times and Grandfather had helped him.

Exhibit 20 shows Grandfather's marble head inside the memorial chapel in For-
noszek. It is an excellent likeness. Exhibit 21. shows the inscribed memorial tablet. Underneath it is another tablet, added later and I believe by Bela. It lists the family members who died in 1944: Father, Mother, Anni and Father's sisters Leonka and Friderika Maria. Leonka's husband Emil had died already in 1942.

Exhibit 22 shows the ensemble of the memorial wall and 23 of the chapel. I do not know the man standing in front. I assume that Father was instrumental in erecting the chapel, perhaps with his siblings. In a letter from Mother of 28th November 1943 sent to us in England via a friend in Portugal, she writes that on All Souls' Day (2nd November) Anni, Father and the recently widowed aunt Leonka visited the memorial chapel. Anni reported that the chapel was in excellent order and that there were many flowers in it. I never saw the chapel.

I shall complete this chapter by short accounts of Father's siblings.

Berta, Father's oldest sister, was born on 17th December 1883 in Madunice. She married Dr. Tivadar Szörényi, a doctor, when their first child, Bözsi, was born on 27th June 1904, they lived in Bardejov in north-east Slovakia, then part of Hungary, where Tivadar was district doctor. Later they lived in Budapest. It is interesting that for the births of her next two children she went to her father's home: Imre was born on 12th May 1905 in Madunice and Gyuri on 21st June 1906 in



19. Grandfather at table in front of his house in
 Fornószek. Note the simple garden furniture.
 Bõzsi is standing. Her brother George with his
 wife and child are on the left. I think the lady
 next to grandfather is Kissa. I don't recognise
 the other.

21. Birth certificate in my name
 given by the large land
 owner 7 Feb. 1891 - 4 March 1897

22. Grandfather's memorial chapel
 in Fornószek

20. Grandfather's memorial tablet





21. Here rests in God's Grace
Simon Schwitzer large land
owner 7 Feb. 1851 4 March 1937



23. Grandfather's memorial chapel
in Fornószek.



22 . The assembly of the memorial wall inside the chapel.

Fornoszek. Pista was born on 7th September 1907 in Budapest. The Szórenyis were a rather intellectual family. Berta became a theosophist and translated from the English Anni Besant, Blavatsky, Leadbitter and others into Hungarian. Her English must have been good. She died on 30th October 1918 of the Spanish flu, only 35 years old. This was 2 days after the Czechoslovak Republic was proclaimed and the day before Count Michael Karólyi proclaimed the independent Hungarian Republic. It was a time of political disturbances and the "rabovka" or plundering by soldiers returning from the front which led a few months later to the short lived Bolshewik regime of Béla Kún. (See page 68). Grandfather Schwitzer and my Father tried to go to the funeral by train but did not manage to get there because of almost total disruption of traffic. Berta was not buried for 10 days after her death. I saw her tomb in a Budapest cemetery which has a seated stone/marble figure and a heavy sort of veil over her head and top part of her body which I believe is a theosophist symbol.

Bözsi took her degree in palaeontology. She never married and was very fond of Grandfather and spent many of her holidays with him. She still lives in her parents flat - or to be precise in two rooms of the former flat - in Ilka utca in Budapest. That's where Joan and I saw her on 29th September 1986.

Imre followed his father's interests. He became a biologist and biochemist, worked in the 1930s in a Berlin University Research Institute, became a convinced communist, disappeared before the last war to the USSR where he worked in the University of Kiev, He married there, had one son, returned to Budapest after the last war and died in 1959 only 54 years old. His wife died in Budapest in 1984. Their son Omry Ronen, born 1938 is a Slavistics expert and lives either in the USA or in Israel. Gyuri/George was the "black sheep" in his family as he never went to University. He became a grain dealer, lived in Nitra, got married and had one daughter. I used to see him frequently in Nitra. He and his family died in the holocaust.

Pista took a degree in agronomy/agriculture. As a young man he practiced on Grandfather's and our farms. He was a great friend of (another) Pista Schwitzer, son of Max (see family tree). When he had completed his studies he emigrated to Argentina with funds largely provided by Grandfather. He stayed there for a few years and returned penniless sometime before the outbreak of the last war. He had married and has one daughter living in Canada. Later he lived in Budapest with another lady from whom he had about 4 children, the eldest, a girl, is married in Sweden. Until his retirement he worked in the agricultural ministry in the machinery section. In his last years he lived with yet another lady. He died on 29th September 1986, the day after Joan and I had arrived in Budapest. I never ^{did not} see him. When I called on the 30th on Bözsi some of his children, now in their early twenties were there and complained noisily that while already in hospital he had made over his flat and chattels to his last lady friend.

Leonka's marriage was one of 5 Schwitzer/Schlesinger unions. It seems that she took cash, rather than a farm, as dowry. Leonka was short, rather rotund and had the round face of her mother. She was for ever smiling, complacent and unperturbed. Emil, her husband, by contrast, was tall, slim, had an extraordinary sonorous bass voice, slightly greying, elegant and possessed of a warm sense of humour. They had no children and farmed in a village called Klučo near Trenčín. Theirs was a small manor house in a large wooded park. In front of the main entrance doors were pillars which supported part of the top floor. To arrive in a carriage or by car in this portico was an elating experience. Leonka was an excellent cook and the well-filled large larder was a living testimony to her skills. Smoked hams and varieties of home-made sausages hung from ceiling hooks; there were pickled cucumbers in large glass jars; row upon row of pots of jams and compotes made from home-grown strawberries, red currants, gooseberries, raspberries and fruits from the orchard; there was pickled red cabbage, smoked strips of lard and much else beside. All these goodies were neatly arrayed on shelves and labelled. We children used to stay there for holidays and being childless they showered their love on us and spoiled us. Once Jean stayed there and phoned home in distress and crying a little. She complained that the fresh garden peas were all wrinkly instead of having a shiny, smooth surface like at home.

Emil died in 1942 and was thus spared the trauma of deportation. I believe that Leonka continued to live in their old house but I don't know what happened later; she did not survive.

Frida got married late. She must have been over 30. I remember her living with Grandfather in Nitra for many years. Her marriage to Béla Szemző was yet another Schwitzer/Schlesinger union. Béla had been married before. He was handsome and a man about town, not the type that one would have expected the somewhat placid and quiet Frida to marry.

I remember their wedding reception, in fact a grand ball in the hotel Carlton in Bratislava. I was about 7 and wore brand new white long trousers and a matching blouse. I arrived with mother in a car and as I stepped out I put both feet into a puddle of black water splashing my trousers up to the knees and mother's dress as well. The next quarter of an hour was spent in a cloak room cleaning ourselves up. When we got to our places at the dining table I was so bewildered by all these jolly people, the dance music, the noise, the waiters and the rest that most of the time I was on the verge of tears. I clung to mother and didn't let her take the dance floor. I made a thorough nuisance of myself.

Frida was given as dowry a farm in Voderbay, almost adjoining some of our fields in Madunice. They lived there for several years when their children, Jenos (we called him Jensi, the German version) and Erica, were still small. Later they moved to a farm that belonged to Bela's family in Vasa near Trable. When the children were of school age they had a town house in Bratislava in



24. Erica's tomb stone. The inscription is in Hungarian.

Szemző Erica Maria 1925 X 10 - 1952 IX 4

Here lies the best child, sister and friend.

It is in the cemetery of Guelph, Canada

Frida's real family because almost fanatical and she spent the last years of the war in a factory, separated (not divorced) from Bela. Despite of this she was deported and did not survive. Bela was hiding in Budapest. Later he married a third time and had three and three. He died soon after his 30th birthday in 1934 in Budapest.

*X Jay has written incorrectly that Bela stayed in
Vasa to Szemző in 1918*

Frida was given as dowry a farm in Voderady, almost adjoining some of our fields in Madunice. They lived there for several years when their children, János (we called him Hansi, the German version) and Erika, were still small. Later they moved to a farm that belonged to Béla's family in Fűss near Vrable. When the children were of school age they had a town house in Bratislava in the same area where we lived. Frida and her children were very religious and the children were not told that they were not of "Aryan" blood and that caused later many problems.

I do not know where János was during the war but I know that towards the end of the war he was fighting with the partisans. Béla, who lived in Budapest, got the family name amended to de Szemző which denoted nobility. After the war he emigrated to Uruguay. He travelled from Holland on a cattle boat. He worked on a farm and married Edith and their child is Ilona. After János shot himself Edith and her daughter moved to Washington. Edith married one Mr. Newman but now lives on her own. Ilona married a Uruguayan named Daniel Molfino from whom she was divorced in 1985. I saw her and her two boys early in December 1985 in Washington. She has a good job, is intelligent, a good mother and lives an active life.

Erika survived the war and was for a time in a finishing school in Switzerland. Joan and I visited her once in Montreux and she also came to see us. She went to Canada, studied agriculture at the university of Guelph where I visited her once. She committed suicide on 4th September 1952 by staging an explosion in the laboratory with a bunsen burner. Exhibit 24 is her tombstone in Guelph cemetery. It reads Szemző Erika Maria 1925. X.10 - 1952. IX.4 Itt nyugszik a leggyögyermek testvér és barát. Here lies the best child, sister and friend. Uncle Béla had arranged for the stone.

Frida's religiosity became almost fanatical and she spent the last years of the war in a nunnery, separated (not divorced) from Béla. Despite of this she was deported and did not survive. Béla was hiding in Budapest. Later he married a third time and had Gabor and Csipi. He died soon after his 90th birthday in 1984 in Budapest.

X Jay has documents indicating that Béla changed his name to Szemző in 1918.

János was as
the Russian
Front, liberty
(Czechoslovakia)
(Edith, 2008)

X
Janos