# GROWING UP WEALTHY AND JEWISH IN PRE-WAR EUROPE

This is not a horror story. In fact, like all survivors of holocausts, I suffer from the guilt that comes from having escaped a shared destiny. On looking back on the 16½ years of childhood in Riga, the remarkable thing to me is that my childish mind foresaw doom and horror where the much more sophisticated adults in my environment refused to see it. Maybe it takes maturity to perform the mental gymnastics necessary to face this world so full of cruelty and evil.

In October 1972, Dad and I went to a de Sica movie, "The Garden of the Finzi-Continis" (I may have the title wrong). It moved me far more than seemed justified. In fact, I couldn't stop crying after it had ended. The reasons were two-fold: First, I was about to have an operation for suspected breast cancer and deeply objected to the attendant mutilation. I was, thus, in a heightened emotional state. Secondly, the Finzi-Continis were a very rich, very upper-class Italian Jewish family living in great splendour until they, like their humbler fellow-Jews, were deported by the Fascists. The details don't much matter. It was very human, like all of de Sica's films.

It shook me up, because I suddenly recognized the particular tragedy of those members of my family who had been killed by the Nazis. In fact, only my parents, Dita and I escaped. Some distant relatives lived out the war in Israel or the USSR, but they never belonged to the core of the Berner-Nisse clan.

We were neither as rich nor as aristocratic as the Finzi-Continis, but relatively speaking we occupied as privileged a position. In a largely agrarian, newly established tiny "potato" republic like Latvia there were few tycoons. My father had become one in the thirties. In the earlier years, we lived typically middle-class lives: our flat was in an old, quaint building. It had no central heating, and the "servants" were a maid and a governess. Although that may sound rather extravagant, it wasn't really. Even people of modest means could afford one live-in maid. Servants probably worked for their keep and pocket money. They were dismissed for trivial reasons because there must have been many more available. In fact, Dita and I, who do not agree about many things, have the exact same memories of intense sympathy for servants who were reprimanded or fired by our otherwise kind mother and grandmother. I suppose that they stole and thus brought on these consequences on their heads. Children see it differently and more correctly: the rich and powerful holding the fate of the poor and helpless in their hands .... The whole notion of servants is a repellent one.

As my father prospered (he became the director of a large oil-import firm which traded under the name Lat-Rus and had its own filling-stations, storage tanks and garages), we moved into a very large and elegant apartment. Because my parents despised the ostentation of the "nouveaux-riches", we did not have a privately owned car, attended state schools and did not possess particularly fine clothes or toys. Nevertheless, we fully realized that we lived in greater comfort, even luxury, than most of the population. The thirties were depression days in Latvia, and beggars called at the back-door to be given alms or food.

Being raised in a close, loving, wealthy family is surely a great advantage. We had private lessons in music, English, French and Hebrew. Every talent was carefully fostered. With no more than average ability, we ought to have become accomplished. As it was, my elder sister was a genius, and Dita and I were bright. We were given well-chosen books to nurture our minds. All of us were book-worms, largely because there weren't many other diversions available to us. Playing in the streets was for urchins. In our area, one had to go the the park to play. The life of a close clan is totally different from that of a nuclear family (horrid sociological term). Clans are like colonial organisms: each member is linked to all others: birthdays, illnesses, worries about the upbringing of children, all were shared naturally. Visits were not by invitation. Coming and going from house to house was natural, requiring no warning. My mother, as pediatrician, was constantly in demand when nieces and nephews ailed. She would sleep at the house of either of her brothers if a child was seriously ill. The severe asthma of one of my cousins cast a gloom over our household. My father sometimes rebelled against my mother's anxiety and went out to play cards with friends or to spend the evening at a café.

Had we been Gentiles, the picture of our life in Riga might have ended here, although there were aspects of it that I haven't bothered to include. One that I should mention is that of glorious, totally predictable, monotonous, wonderful sea-side holidays. Going back to the same place summer after summer is surely a wonderful thing. The memory of sixteen such summers forms a blend of smells and sights which sustains one for the rest of one's life. I am so fortunate to have this inner treasure. Of course, all was not sweetness and light in our family, but I will not dwell on the shadows. One should not speak ill of the dead. If one is unjust, they cannot defend themselves. Anyways, I don't like the rôle of judge.

The great shadow over our childhood was "being Jewish". It was like an inborn blemish, almost like being black in a racist society. I hesitate to compare the anti-Semitism of pre-war Latvia to the racism of the pre-war USA because the latter stemmed from slavery, an evil that defies comparison and which only the extremes of anti-Semitic persecution rival in ferocity. Pre-war anti-Semitism was much less open. Nevertheless, it possessed great potential for open hatred and violence as we now know. I think that we Jews always knew that this was so, but were helpless to change it and adopted political ideologies which promised solutions. Most young Jews were either ardent Zionists or Communists.

The word for Jews in Latvian is "Židi" (pronounced zheedy). It is very close in sound to the Russian "zhidy", meaning "yids". So, the very word carries pejorative connotations. It is impossible to recall how or when I as a child first became aware of the reaction provoked in non-Jews by this word. Certainly, I cannot remember a time when I did not realize that being Jewish was undesirable. The only non-Jews in our early childhood were servants, shopkeepers and our kindly German kindergarten teachers, sisters who never became Nazis and belong to that group of Germans who stand out in my memory as shining examples of decency in a time of shamelessness.

My parents were atheists, although my father went to synagogue on high holidays to show his friends that he was still one of the community. His reasons were a bit woolly. I suspect that his orthodox upbringing had long-lasting effects and that he felt guilty about his total lapse from observance. My mother, whose own father was an atheist, felt no such scruples and only set foot in a synagogue when this was unavoidable. My only memory of being in a synagogue is the wedding of a distant relative. My older sister and I thought it very funny and kept bursting into giggles.

In what sense were we Jews? In the most essential way. We were told that we were Jews descended from a long line of persecuted, hated ancestors, driven across Europe. The anti-Semitism of the Tsarist regime was alive in everyone's memory. After a short liberal period following independence (a Jew by name of Mairovitch was a minister in the first Latvian government), Latvia became less and less tolerant of its minorities. There were some special features of this anti-Semitism. The Jew as Christ-killer, as usurer, as ruthless merchant, etc., is a traditional figure of the European folk mythology. To this were added Jews as wealthy exploiters of the Letts, Jews as Bolsheviks (Jews were very prominent in the Russian Revolution), Jews as doctors, lawyers, etc. (taking good jobs away from the less pushy Letts). Finally, there was a purely local factor. Educated Jews spoke either German or Russian among themselves. Uneducated working-class Jews spoke Yiddish, a language despised by all gentiles and assimilated Jews. No Jews spoke Latvian at home, and few spoke it well enough to make it their working language. This failure of Jews to acculture to the Latvian majority was a symptom of the profound differences between these groups. Latvians had been suppressed serfs from 1100 onwards. Their immediate oppressors were German landowners who remained the ruling class until the end of World War I. The Letts had been a poor, oppressed peasant people who had little access to education. The history of the Jews was very different. None of them were peasants. The majority were poor urban or village artisans, peddlars, small merchants, etc. The ones who had prospered were either in business or the professions. In spite of the difficulties of getting into grammar schools and universities, Jews were prominent in the arts and learned professions. They had been educated in Germany, Switzerland or Russia and had adopted the culture of those countries. To them, the cultural pretensions of the newly independent Letts were ludicrous. I myself remember the condescension I felt towards so-called "great" Latvian writers which we had to study in great detail. The rising nationalism combined with a one-party right-wing government made Latvia a near-Fascist state in the mid-thirties. Communist and socialist parties were banned, and a number of left-wingers imprisoned, among them many Jews.

This is not meant to be a historical analysis of pre-war conditions in Latvia. I have never studied the politics of that time and may not remember events accurately. Let us, therefore, return to purely subjective recollections.

We children knew that we were Jewish. It was impressed on us that, though being Jewish would make us unpopular, denying it was the basest, most unforgiveable sin a Jew could commit. My father was especially vehement in this regard. Jews, who had converted to Christianity, were invariably condemned as opportunists. In a way, we were expected to be willing martyrs. Now, in the light of mature experience, I concur with my father. To dissemble for the sake of convenience, even survival, is to perpetuate the hateful prejudices of bigots.

Not all of the signals we got were so clear-cut as that. Like all despised minorities, Jews themselves believed some of the accusations made against them. To look Jewish meant to be ugly. To be told that one didn't look Jewish was a compliment. I used to push my nose up in front of a mirror, regretful that I didn't have a little turned-up button instead of a beak. The particular brand of anti-semitism that we were exposed to was really a form of snobbery. We found the behaviour of the poor Jews offensive. At the sea-side they congregated in tightly-knit enclaves, shunned by gentiles and middle-class Jews. They were noisy and ill-mannered. Worst of all, they looked different from the gentiles or assimilated Jews. To this day I find them unattractive. But then I remind myself: these are your brothers who were herded into trains, deported, gassed because others thought they had no right to live. I feel deeply ashamed of ever having judged them with the eyes of a Nazi. It is unforgiveable, and I shall never cease to be deeply ashamed of such feelings.

Politics were much discussed around the dinner table, not only day-to-day politics, but political ideologies. The Jaffe's (Helen, Doring, Fanny) and some other distant relatives were Communists in full sympathy with the Soviet Union. The prevailing ideology of the Nisse-Berner clan was democratic socialism. All had supported the overthrow of the Tsar and the Kerenski regime which was overthrown by the Bolsheviks. My father had been in a Soviet prison for black market activities. I suspect that my mother would have been a loyal Soviet citizen had she remained in the USSR. She instilled in us children a sense of justice and awareness of the plight of the disadvantaged. Later in life she became more materialistic, but I still remember her as an idealist.

As the thirties progressed, we heard more and more about Hitler and Mussolini. I even remember a childish game in which we impersonated Hitler, Mussolini and Roosevelt. The details escape me. My sister Mira and I attended a German Lutheran State school. At that time the Latvian government financed a wide variety of schools with different languages of instruction. Parents had a free choice. It is hard to credit that one could choose between instruction in Latvian, German, Russian, Yiddish and even Hebrew, all at State expense! What a shame that these noble beginnings did not last!

My parents chose the German school because we spoke German at home and also because it was not a snob-school. They didn't want us to grow up isolated from poorer children. It was a good school in many ways. We were very well taught, largely by German pastors who had lost their parishes to the Letts. It was also very strict and disciplinarian, and I lived in fear of reprimands. I never had any bosom-pals among the German girls, but was not excluded from games or other group activities. Eva Weinberg, the only other Jewish child in my class, was my best friend. I participated in Religious Instruction because my parents felt that it was a valuable part of general knowledge. I loved singing hymns in morning assembly and carols at Christmas. I suppose that I would have liked to be a Christian like all the others, but before the poison of Naziism infected the school and the whole German population of Latvia, it was no great disadvantage to be a Jewish child in that school.

It is hard for me to remember when and how we suddenly realized that we were surrounded by hostile fellow-pupils. There was a lot of secretive murmuring among the children, and they fell silent when either Eva or I approached.

Gradually it became evident that almost all of the children had joined the Hitler Jugend and were acting on the instructions they received. Our principal, Pastor Kruger, and some of the teachers were fiercely opposed to this development, but they were unable to stop its momentum. Life became unbearable for us Jewish children, and I announced defiantly to my teacher that I would not return to "Your Nazi School". That was in 1935. From then til our departure in October 1939, I attended a private Jewish school with instruction in German. It was an outstanding school academically as well as socially. What a relief to escape from such organized hatred!

The Jewish school was mixed, whereas the German one had been a girl's school. We were normal teenagers, mainly occupied with our private affairs. However, politics played a disproportionate rôle in our lives. Most students were either fanatical Communists or Zionists. The Zionists were further fragmented into left- and right-wingers. I was recruited by the Communists and, after some hesitation, joined an underground cell. My reasons were that I believed in universal brotherhood and disapproved of nationalism, but the main attraction was that of belonging to an illegal underground organization. I'm afraid that the "cops and robbers" aspect of the enterprise exercised a powerful attraction on me. My older sister was in sympathy with the Communists, but had reservations about them and didn't join.

The Spanish Civil War engaged the sympathy of all anti-Fascists in Europe, even those who were moderates. Several young men we knew left secretly to join the International Brigade. At our secret meetings we would sing anti-Fascist songs. My parents were worried that I might be arrested and imprisoned. Our apartment building was a hot-bed of Communist school children, and it is likely that the authorities knew about our activities. At the insistence of my father, I withdrew from the cell and gradually lost that uncritical belief in the rightness of Joe Stalin and Company.

As Hitler's hold on Germany tightened, many German Jews fled to surrounding countries. A number came to Riga and were helped by the Jewish community. These refugees brought horrifying tales of arrest, torture, execution, dismissals, etc. My own mother witnessed the "Kristallnacht" when Nazi thugs broke the windows of Jewish shops and daubed offensive slogans on them. At the same time there was a tendency to ridicule Hitler and the Nazis, to tell jokes about them and to attribute Jewish ancestors to all Nazi leaders. It was "gallows humour". The reality was too frightening to contemplate. Hitler ranted and screamed to the applause of mass audiences. We sat glued to the radio, heard ourselves denounced as the scurge of humanity and threatened with anihilation.

So approached the summer of 1939. My sister Mira had been a medical student in Lausanne. She had slimmed down a lot and had become much more attractive. My father had bought a summer cottage and we had fallen into that wonderful routine of our sea-side summers. Relatives and friends from abroad congregated. There were large gatherings, outings, swimming, walks, etc., etc.

Political news kept intruding on this otherwise unremarkable sea-side holiday. Germany, having concluded a pact with the USSR, proceeded to threaten Poland. Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania had agreed to allowing Russian troops

to be stationed within their borders. They guaranteed not to interfere with the governments of the three small Baltic states. Many people were doubtful about this and feared a Soviet take-over. In fact, this did happen shortly before Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941.

In spite of the threatening political developments, plans were made for me to go to boarding school in England to complete my high school education in English. I attended private English lessons dutifully and followed the O. Level syllabus with my comical teacher, Miss Bretherick. The school required the pupils to dress formally for dinner, and I was duly provided with a long blue taffeta dress. I liked the dress very much, but was convinced that war would break out, and that I would never attend boarding school anywhere. My sense of foreboding was such that I did not think of the future, doubting that there would be any. I remain unable to plan ahead; tomorrow is forever the threat of total anihilation.

My father was the only one who felt that Europe was a "mousetrap". He was anxious to emigrate to Canada or the US and had taken preliminary steps. My mother refused to leave because she did not want to leave her relations or her work with a well-baby clinic in the slums.

And then, Poland was invaded. We listened to broadcasts from Warsaw. They started with "Uvaga, uvaga ... (attention, attention)" and had a note of desperate urgency. The Blitzkrieg followed. The Russians and Germans carved up Poland. England and France declared war. Dita and I went back to school. My sister Mira and my father were getting ready to sail for San Francisco. As she could not return to Switzerland, she was to attend the Medical School of San Francisco.

We returned to the city and attended school. The memory of those early September days is blotted out by the shock of Mira's death. It was totally unexpected and destroyed our lives. It also saved us from death at the hands of the Nazis. She dropped dead in the bathroom on September 18, 1939, her hair wet from being washed. She had Oliver Twist in English propped up over the sink. She read while shampooing her heavy brown hair. It was decided that she had been poisoned by a gas leak from the water heater. And so my childhood ended. Maybe Dita's as well, although she was only 11. Both of us loved Mira above everyone. We had to learn to love each other.

Early in October we flew to Stockholm to wait for permission to emigrate to Canada. Our aunts, uncles and cousins remained in Riga and became victims of the Nazis, not statistics, but loving, thinking, feeling human beings, dear to me still. Is there no limit to human cruelty?

## EPILOGUE

This brief essay is only a sketch. I am afraid that it cannot convey the texture of those pre-war years. We lived like people sheltered from an approaching thunderstorm, falsely secure in the familiarity of the surroundings, of each other's proximity. I am tempted to generalize: human beings seem

unable to face their condition without self-deception. When we are five or six years old we are obsessed by the inevitability of death, and then we "mature" and live as though we were immortal. We see preparations for nuclear war being made and dismiss the chances of it breaking out as too remote to contemplate. Cassandra was the only far-sighted Trojan, yet she was reviled.