

# My First Life

*1919-1939*



# 1

## *Childhood*



In Uzhorod today there is a tale about an old man arriving in heaven. St. Peter asks him where he was from. The man replies that he had been born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then lived in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Germany, before finally dying in Russia.

St. Peter is astonished. “What kind of vagabond were you, always going from one country to another in that way?”

“Oh, I never went anywhere,” the old man says. “I was born, lived and died in Uzhorod.”

Like the old man in the story, I too changed nationalities each time Uzhorod did. In 1918, the year before I was born, the Austro-Hungarian Empire ceased to exist, and Uzhorod changed its name from Ungvar and became part of Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia itself was divided into three semi-autonomous states: Bohemia, Slovakia and Karpato-Ruthenia. Karpato-Ruthenia was the smallest and easternmost, and Uzhorod—a quiet, provincial city of some 30,000—became the capitol. Sobrance, where my parents lived and where I was born, was some eight or nine miles away. Russia was approximately 500 kilometers away, and Hungary, Poland and Romania were practically within shouting distance.

The district surrounding Uzhorod was quite unusual for Eastern Europe. Many nationalities lived there side by side, each following its own customs and speaking its own languages: Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Ruthenian, a language related to Russian. Officially, the Czech government had a very low tolerance for minorities, but

## *Childhood*

the Karpathian peoples accepted each other and did not dwell on differences. My childhood experience was certainly no worse than that of my daughter, who grew up in a suburb of Seattle, in Washington State.

Until I was six, my parents spoke to us children in German, the language of culture in Czechoslovakia. Between themselves, they spoke Hungarian, which we learned as we grew older. In school in Sobrance, we used Slovak. These three languages were as different from each other as English, Chinese and Russian. Being exposed so young to so many languages developed my linguistic facility, and for the rest of my life it would always be easy for me to pick up another.

There is a golden glow over my early years that is not entirely nostalgia. My childhood was lived “on the sunny side of life,” where all was health and happiness.

Since my parents already had two toddling sons, their hearts had been set on a girl. Merely by being born what I was, I delighted them. In fact, I was put into the same feather quilt my two brothers had used. My parents were very well off, but true to Middle European customs, they were practical and frugal, wasting nothing and using everything to the last shred.

I was a big baby. Family tradition had it that I weighed 13 pounds, and that my newborn feet stuck out of the bottom of the bunting. I hardly ended up as a giant, being 5’3”, but my family never let me forget my “big start.” In later years, my birth size became part of my mother’s constant refrain of, “*Why must you always be different?*” I never did come up with a satisfactory answer to her question. I was who I was and I had no wish to change.

Sobrance was a town of about 5,000. Despite its closeness to Uzhorod, it led its own full life. It had three banks, plenty of stores and its own school system. At the same time, it was genuinely rural, a place of woods and farms and meadows full of the red poppies, blue cornflowers and white daisies that we children made into wreathes for our hair.

## *My First Life*

We grew up drenched in its beauties. The family took long walks together. In the summer, we swam in the rivers and lakes, and in fall and winter we went to the mountains. We enjoyed four clearly marked seasons—snowy winters, blossoming springs, hot summer days when the sun did not go down until long after bedtime, and autumns of bountiful harvests and flaming leaves.

The Tatra Mountains were our favorite resort. The lakes there were bright green and clear as glass. Wild strawberries grew along the trails and frisky goats climbed the hills. Framed by the hotel windows, the surrounding peaks were a spectacular sight. The clear, dry air brought everything forward into a single plane. I felt I could reach out and touch it all.

I was always at home and happy in the mountains, and still feel the same today.

As the only girl and the baby, I was fussed over endlessly. I was my parents' little darling: a prodigy of beauty and talent, at least in their eyes. I don't remember having inhibitions or fears of any kind. From early youth, I wanted to explore everything for myself. I never lacked for an excuse for doing whatever I wanted or getting whatever struck my fancy. When challenged, I argued my case and often won.

I remember, when I was perhaps six, finding a picture of a garden swing in a magazine. It looked so wonderful—two benches facing each other and interlocked so they would swing together. I showed my parents and asked them to buy one. At first they refused. "Forget about it, Gisel. It's too much trouble. We'd probably have to send for it from some foreign country." But I would not give up. "Please," I persisted. "Can't we just ask about it at a store?" They finally gave in and did ask, only to discover that one could be ordered quite simply. And so I got my wish.

That swing became very popular. On warm evenings, our family would sit in it together, contentedly swinging, me in my father's lap. "What a good idea this was, Gisel," someone would always say.

## *Childhood*

Victories like that gave me a self-confidence that has always stayed with me. I grew up believing both in the worth of my ideas and my powers to persuade.

My father, Armin Herskovits, was the director of the local Duna Bank in Sobrance. He was a well-liked and respected man, with a gentle, retiring disposition. And while I loved both parents dearly, I was closer at first to my father, because he showed me affection more easily.

My mother, Margaret, was an intelligent and very pretty woman who acted as our teacher, critic and disciplinarian. She could awe me with her commanding gaze. I remember thinking she ought to have been a general. She had a definite purpose in mind for me. Although she had never known anything but comfort and security, she had a profound, almost foreboding sense of the unpredictability of life and the need to prepare me for any possible future.

She wanted me to have a good formal education, but also to know all about cooking, sewing, nursing, business and art. She often said, "*Parents don't live forever, and I don't want you to get lost in this world.*" She had many such slogans. Each time she began some new teaching, she would say, "Let's hope you never have to use this, but you should know how to do it, just in case." Self-reliance, she said, was as important for a woman as a man. I never heard her suggest that marriage should be the goal or solution for myself or any woman.

She instructed me personally in almost everything except sewing. Later, I discovered why: She couldn't even thread a needle. For me it was different. The hours I spent on needlework were profoundly enjoyable and gave me my first awareness that I was unusually good with my hands. From the age of six or so, I could whip up a doll dress so fast that my girlfriends wept with envy and begged me to outfit their dolls too. Already, I was very much the artist, wishing to use my handiwork to express myself and practice my skills, rather than to please others.

## *My First Life*

By contemporary American standards, our family relationships were formal. We called our parents Father and Mother, not Daddy and Mom. We never saw them in the morning until we were fully dressed. We sat with them for breakfast, but had to behave properly or else be sent from the table. This happened to me with some frequency, since I was lively and outspoken. My mother often described me as a frisky colt that was hard to harness.

After breakfast, we saw little of them until evening. I remember dinners as interminable. We children had to sit quietly after we were finished, until all the adults were finished too. To fill the time, I would sneak a piece of bread into my lap, take out the soft part, and roll it with my fingers until it was malleable enough to mold into shapes—flowers, birds, animals of all kinds. If I liked what I had done, I would mount it later on a toothpick, dry it out in the sun or on the stove, and then paint it. This was the humble beginning of my sculpting career.

The happiest hour of the day was the time I spent after dinner with my gentle, attentive father. He loved to sing Hungarian folk songs, and I remember his soft baritone voice in the garden in the long, warm summer evenings or beside a cozy stove on a freezing winter night. I would always urge him to sing “just one more,” this favorite or that, until it grew late and I was unwillingly dragged off to bed.

We lived very well in Sobrance. Our home was large and beautiful. The eight rooms of the main floor were built in a straight row and joined by double-paneled doors. The floors were of hardwood, polished to a slippery surface. In the summer, the doors were kept open and we children could run the full length of the house. And, when no one was watching, I would work up a run, skimming from room to room like a skater in my stockinged feet.

The rooms had high ceilings and were spacious and airy. Sunlight poured in through large windows looking out over gardens and trees. The grounds were lovely. In front was a garden, blooming

## *Childhood*

all spring and summer long, filling the many vases in the house afresh each day. The back yard had masses of roses and fragrant lilac bushes, and a variety of shrubs and tall fir trees. Several wooden outbuildings were at the far end of the yard, including a large carriage house. It was the early 1920s, and automobiles were still a great rarity in our community. We did, however, have electricity and indoor plumbing.

A small river flowed through Sobrance and there were several lakes close by where we went fishing. But the pride of Sobrance was the Health Spa, only two miles from town. Its famous waters were full of sulfur and you could smell the rotten-egg odor from some distance away as you drove up. The water tasted bitter but was considered marvelously curative. People from distant cities swarmed to the spa during the summer months, bringing excitement and glamour to the sleepy town. In our carriage house we had a handsome black-lacquered carriage that we used for taking our guests to the spa. It was pulled by rented horses because our barn had only a single stall, reserved for Rose, our cow.

Rose was a very important member of our family. When we went to spend the Jewish holidays at our grandparents' big flat in Uzhorod, Rose always went along. My mother believed that growing children should always have safe milk to drink, the fresher the better. So, Rose was put on a long leash and walked alongside our carriage for the ten-mile trip. My grandparents were always delighted to see us. They were somewhat less delighted to see Rose, who complained loudly all night at her temporary accommodations in the shed in their yard. Her bellowing disturbed my grandparents' tenants as well as all the neighbors in every direction. Yet my mother would not make the trip without her.

My mother's concern over our nutrition was almost fanatical. She allowed us only the freshest and most wholesome foods and raised us to be conscious of everything we ate. Beside fresh milk, Mother felt the same about fruits and vegetables, and we always

### *My First Life*

stored at least 300 pounds of apples in our cellar before the first winter snow. I remember this so well because we children had to sort them. Only the perfect ones were saved, then individually wrapped in newspaper and placed in a huge wooden crate, row after row. They lasted beautifully until spring. Pears were kept the same way. Grapes, in large bunches, were tied together with string and hung from nails on wooden pillars. Potatoes, onions, carrots, kohlrabi and green peppers were laid out in rows in very fine sand to survive our long, cold winters.

This cellar was fascinating to a child. It was always locked and we needed permission to go in. The key was very large and heavy. When the door was opened, many steps led down into a dark, cavernous underground. The place seemed huge to me, mysterious and full of surprises. I have very early memories of seeing huge chunks of ice piled up in the darkest corner. Later on, we got a large icebox that made it unnecessary to keep ice that way.

At one time we raised our own chickens in a large coop in the back yard, but we stopped doing so when I was about six. The coop still served a purpose though. When I was naughty, I was sometimes threatened with exile to the hen house. I took the threats seriously and made up secret bundles of food to eat while there. The threat was never carried out, but I continued to keep rations on hand, just in case.

One day, after such a threat, I decided to exile myself. I took a supply of food and went off to the coop. About half an hour later, I heard voice frantically calling my name. I decided to let them worry for a while. It was my turn to punish them.

I soon discovered I was bored and very itchy, and decided they had suffered enough. My mother and governess happened to be close by when I came out, scratching and covered with crumbs from my private picnic. Instead of running to hug me, they screamed violently for me to stay where I was. White with fury, they ordered me to strip off everything but my slip. Then they poured some

## *Childhood*

cleaning fluid over me, rubbing it into my hair. The smell was frightful and I screamed loudly at this end to my triumph. It took about an hour before I was considered free of chicken lice. After that, no one ever threatened to send me to the hen house again.

With my love of the absurd, I rather treasured the memory of the hen house and the lice. It certainly never occurred to me that a war would force me to live with lice in a far worse place than a hen house, surviving on hoarded bits of stolen food, and with no one to come to my rescue but distant armies.

Despite all the help we had in the house, we children all had our chores. My belongings were my responsibility to keep neat and in order. Even when I was very small, there were always jobs for me in the kitchen, such as sifting flour, grinding walnuts, getting the peas out of their pods, or polishing apples for display in a bowl. I enjoyed these tasks. They gave me a sense of accomplishment.

We were materially better off than most because of my father's position at the bank. So my mother insisted that for every gift we received—clothing or toys—we had to part with a similar item. This was hard for us children, since gifts were a rarity, usually coming only on special occasions. Even so, this lesson in not becoming too attached to material things would become important later.

We had a constant flow of poor people and beggars at our door. Some needed food and asked for a meal; others needed a drink and asked for loose change. Some needed dowries for their daughters and asked for a contribution; others peddled cheap merchandise in hope of making a living. My mother was tactful to all. One old man in particular always showed up on the same day of the week. On that day, she made extra soup for him. As a rule, we kept our clothes until they were unusable. But sometimes people came needing clothes for their families. If I was at home, Mother would consult with me, as if I was a grown up.

“Should we give away brothers’ or father’s clothing, or even my own?” she would ask. Her questions made me feel important, and

### *My First Life*

taught me the rudiments of decision-making. I learned how to choose among options so that no regrets would follow. My mother was also sensitive to the peddlers' pride. She wanted them to believe that we needed whatever we bought and were not just doing them a favor. She and I would put on a show to convince them that their shoestrings or pencils or bits of lace were exactly what we needed. I knew each one of the peddlers and how to act in front of them.

My brothers, Bandi and Laci, were only a little older than I was, so we were playmates together.

Bandi, the oldest, was very handsome and willful. Because he was the first-born boy in a society that overvalued first-born boys, he was indulged and made to feel very important. This had unfortunate consequences later on, but that could not be foreseen in his early years. Bandi and I fought a lot. Two such willful children, fierce competitors for the position of favorite child, could hardly help but clash. But we became close when we grew up.

Laci and I were close from the start. He was only two years older than I was, and had my father's quiet, thoughtful temperament.

It was a happy home. My parent's opposing personalities were complementary. They treated each other with trust and respect. According to custom, they had been virtual strangers when they married, but love came to them and remained with them though all the years they shared.

*(Editor's note: For additional family recollections, see Appendix)*