

TWO BAR MITTZVAHS—1940 vs 2017.

A brief background to my Bar Mitzvah in 1940 might be in order to put it in better perspective. We lived in Baja, a smallish town in southern Hungary of about 30,000+ inhabitants, of them approximately 1,400 were Jewish. Jews had been incredibly successful in Hungary during the first part of the 20th Century . The approximately 5% of the Jewish population contributed very markedly to the total membership of virtually all occupations and human endeavors, even in the world of sports. As an example, 64% of the Hungarian Nobel Laureates were Jewish. Such high visibility elicited the passing of the first law against them (and the first such in Europe) in 1920, much before the German anti-Jewish laws. This law proclaimed a numerus clausus on University admission, limiting the number of Jewish students to 5% or less of the total. There were three subsequent anti-Jewish laws enacted in Hungary in 1938, 1939 and 1941 that severely limited or forbade the economic and social activities of the Jews before and around the time of my Bar Mitzvah.

When I was 13, in 1940, World war II was at its height, with one German victory following another and the extermination of numerous Jewish Communities. Hungary was allied with Germany against the Soviet Union. The general condition of the Jews of Hungary greatly deteriorated because laws of conscription sent young and middle aged Jewish men into Forced Labor Camps, dispatching them to the front lines against the Soviet Union to clear mines and perform other dangerous non-military tasks. Eventually 40- 50,000 Jewish men perished near the battlefields under horrible conditions, this even before the deportation and murder of the overwhelming majority of the Jewish population of Hungary.

In 1940, the State of Israel was only a distant and very unlikely dream. Zionism was relegated to behind closed doors activities, involving some clandestine lectures, singing songs about Palestine and discussing Theodor Herzl's books.

It was under these general conditions that the date of my Bar Mitzvah arrived. Both my parents were still alive (my father died 2 years later, my mother was murdered 4 years thereafter). Unfortunately I do not recall much

about the actual service in the synagogue. Vayikra was my parshah and I chanted (if what I did could be referred to as chanting) the haftarah. I still remembered a few verses from it as I prepared for today.

We did have a little celebration at home in the afternoon. In addition to the local members of the family and perhaps a very few of my parent's friends, I am sure that our very close relatives, the Roheim family came from their nearby city. Naturally, most of my friends and Jewish school mates also attended. My important memory of the event is that we children were sipping sweet liqueurs, hence my lasting predilection for such drinks.

Each of us received a dedicated prayer book from the local Jewish Congregation after attending Hebrew School. Mine of course disappeared during the Shoah and under quite unknown and mysterious circumstances reappeared before Peter's Bar Mitzvah and played a role in his Bar and in Juliet's Bat Mitzvah celebration.

The years after my Bar Mitzvah included the tragic and devastating time of the Shoah. However, after my marriage to my better half, Judy, in 1951, my life was one happy continuum for 64 years. We were blessed with two of the most wonderful children that anyone could have. Their childhood and the proximity of Gran, that of the Friedman family and frequent contacts with the Roheim family were a delight. While our children were growing up we had nothing but nachos from them. Our happiness continued after their respective marriages that provided us with two additional loving children by marriage (as Judy was so fond of saying), six fantastic grandchildren (again quoting Judy) and later two great spouses. After hurricane Katrina destroyed our home and its contents in New Orleans, we moved back to Philadelphia. Our children and their families were incredibly wonderful to us, making the big change in our lives relatively easy and very pleasurable.

While recalling the past, it is also important to remember the kindness shown to me by my Aunt and uncle after I lost my parents and the important financial help that I received from the Joint Distribution Committee before arriving to this Continent. I also wish to mention how much we owe this

Country of ours that was able to morph us, poor escaping refugees, into full-fledged, devoted, satisfied citizens.

And now, even though I have lost my better half 2 and 1/2 years ago, I am celebrating among my most wonderful family, survival, resilience, endurance, freedom, fortunate turns of events, perhaps sheer luck, or Providential intervention.

While some comparison of the general conditions between the times of my first and current Bar Mitzvahs is inevitable, it would take volumes to deal with. Yet, I cannot resist making at least a short comment about it. The sad truth is that an increasing presence of anti-Semitism surrounds us both then and now. Among the many differences I wish to mention only two: the virtual absence of Jewish anti-Semites then, and their abundant presence now; and the enormous difference represented by the absence of the State of Israel then and its flourishing presence now.

In conclusion, I wish to point out that the first historic testimony for the existence of the Jewish people from a non-Jewish source is an obituary on a black granite chronicle from the 13th Century B.C.E. It stated among the conquests and victories of the Egyptian pharaoh that "Israel is lain waist; her seed is no more". Thirty three centuries later it appears that announcing the demise of the Jewish people at that time was somewhat premature.

I get the same feeling when I look at my family with regard to Hitler's premature satisfaction concerning the extermination of the Jews. Although no other people is as consumed with the notion of remembering as we are, we Jews do not live in the past, but as Elie Wiesel put it, "the past lives in us."

It is my fervent desire that Judaism should endure for at least another 33 centuries to come and it is my hope that my family and the Jewish community at large will play their part in helping to achieve that goal.

Shabbat Shalom!