

WTC049. Handwritten letter from Jean Bolton (née Susannah Schwitzer), MKS's sister, in response to a draft of MKS's memoirs 'My First Thirty Years'. Jean tells in her own words how she came to England and her first working experiences as a nurse. She flags a number of items, offering more perhaps surprise at the statements than outright disagreement over facts. MKS replied on 6/6/1985, so date of letter likely May 1985. MKS has underlined statements that appear to be problematic for him. Jean writes that, until 1938, she didn't know that she had jewish blood. Unlike Grandad, after 1939 Jean had little or no contact with Czechoslovakia and her earlier life, largely forgetting her Slovak. Nevertheless this letter is important as it challenges MKS's perspective written four decades after the events.

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Dear Mat,

As I mentioned to you over the phone your views expressed here on life in Czechoslovakia are somewhat different to mine due, I presume, to our different experiences. It may well be that by the time I reached the "teens" Czechoslovakia was a much more cohesive state than in your earlier experiences. Equally it could be that I was not interested in politics and accepted people as such without paying much attention to their background, religion etc. I certainly did not find that great divide between Germans, Slovaks, Hungarians and jews. I only had two close girlfriends, Tatiana Gažik & Vera Hormak, both came from educated slovak speaking backgrounds. I also spent (with Anni) a summer holiday in Ružomberok [near Žilina] to improve our Slovak and there we met many highly educated young Slovaks. Though I have forgotten most of it now I must have been fluent as I had no language difficulty at the university in Bratislava.

My one and only boy friend with whom I went out for about 2 – 3 years was Tibor Forgach who went to the Hungarian gymnasium & through him I became friendly with other Hungarian youngsters. All our conversations were always in Hungarian. I met Tibor at the dancing classes you mention (p. 65) where I was never aware of the divisions you talk about. I was certainly – at least not until Hitler marched into Austria – not aware that there was jewish blood in us. Your emphasis on our jewish ancestors struck me at first as slightly exaggerated, on the other hand it may well be that you were more conscious of it & it means more to you because you had so many jewish friends.

Anny Frankel & Duci were both in a form below me. I only knew Anni because at one time our parents were very friendly but that friendship seemed to come to an end. Duci I met simply because for a short time she went out with Tibor's brother.

As regards mother, I don't think she had any intention of coming to England. Also, her relationship with Ernő was – I feel – much deeper than you describe. Somewhere at the back of my mind is the knowledge that she did not marry him because she did not want to give us a Jewish stepfather – but I can't recall if she actually told me this. I was in touch with her throughout the war and she knew of Patricia's birth. We had a cook and a Hungarian speaking maid at mother's flat & this maid (Eszti?) stayed with her through most of the war.

Anni was in the convent for much longer than you say. I remember one occasion in the flat we lived in before the divorce when mother had thrombosis in her leg & she had news from the convent that Anni had scarlet fever. Mother was frantic & eventually a friend of hers travelled to St Pölten to see that Anni was alright. Anni returned from the convent either for the last or the last two years before the "Matura". Like mother she had no intention of coming to England.

As regards myself I did not go to Swinemünde [on Baltic coast just inside Poland] as I was too young – I ran away by myself from father's flat after the divorce - without the governess. Anni was at the convent. This must have been hurtful for father & I have often regretted it – but I was fairly young. After that I didn't really know him.

p. 144. I never had to scrub floors!! Mother with not let me come to England without a definite job to go to. As I was a medical student I had no difficulty in obtaining (though the British Legation in Bratislava) a job as a student-nurse at an L.C.C. teaching hospital. The only thing I did not know was which hospital I would go to. I started my training (with another girl from Czechoslovakia) at St Alfges in the summer of 1939. When war broke out the entire hospital staff (including me) was evacuated [to] St Mary's hospital in Sidcup. Eventually, as there were no air-raids we all went back to St Alfges & our training continued – I even passed the preliminary exam. Then came Dunkirk & as you know we were all "aliens". Alien nurses in the then private hospitals (e.g. Guys etc) were sacked but because the L.C.C. had hospitals which were not teaching hospitals & where wounded servicemen would not be admitted we were sent to a hospital in South London which was full of geriatric chronic cases. I hated that & as I felt that the L.C.C. had broken their contract, i.e. to train me, I sacked myself & got financial support from the exiled Czech government and as you say stayed at the Harris's rent free in return for helping them. It was at this time that I met John.

Hope you are all keeping well – including your new grand-daughter. Love to all from Jean.