

I Yellow Stars

Robert Reitter

My parents would have no more children after I was born. The newsreels were then full of the march of Hitler's armies, and the rounding up of Jews was spreading throughout Europe. The rounding up always began with the yellow stars...

My mother was brushing her hair, looking in the mirror. I still have that mirror in my crowded attic after all these years since that day I am remembering. It has a wide silver border and used to stand upright on her dresser by means of a hinged device on its back, like a large picture frame. I took comfort in watching her and in being with her in those days, when I was a young boy and we lived in Hungary. One of our two maids entered the room on that day I am remembering and I watched her reflection in the mirror as she spoke to my mother.

"They say Jews must now wear a yellow star every time they go outside, madame," she said. My mother glanced at me and began a pretended laugh, so tense and shrill I found myself cringing. Looking back on that seven year old and his mother, I can find some words now for what were only mute feelings then. We were Christians, my parents and I, but keenly aware of our family's Jewish past. And what the maid had heard was true, so all that fall and winter, none of us left the apartment without a coat that had a yellow star sewn on its lapel. They were hand-made, these yellow stars, cut out freehand from yellow fabric by a seamstress in the neighborhood, each a little different from the others. For us they all meant the same thing though. They meant shame.

Before we started having to wear them, our stance outside our home was ostensibly forceful and proud. My father particularly carried himself like a man of the ruling class. He was an executive and successful at what he did; anyone who addressed him with less deference than he thought his due was in for a dressing-down. My mother had a gentler and friendlier nature, but she too was not humble. Her father lived nearby; he was a dignified man, with a strong erect posture. Grandfather Ernest dressed carefully in custom-made clothes of expensive fabric. He had a deliberate way with him, and I knew even then that he and I were rather alike, and that I wanted to grow up to be like him, respectable and self-respecting.

My father I found less easy to emulate, though there was much about him I admired, including his proud honesty. When he was 16 or 17 In the early days of the First World War, he had volunteered for the army. During training, he had left something undone, I don't recall just what. The officer in charge assembled the men and asked who was responsible for the neglected task, and my father was proud that he stepped forward and shouted, "I am responsible." I too was proud of him for that.

But for so talkative a man, it was surprising to me that my father never said much about his religious beliefs. As a teenager I once pressed him to declare whether he believed in God, but he would only answer, "each person must decide on that score for himself." My father would not say that he was Jewish. He was baptized as a child and so far as I know may never have entered a synagogue, although he once recalled having been in a place as a small child where men wore a tallit – a dim recollection that sent a cloud of embarrassment over his face.

The neighborhood where we lived was called Rószadomb – Hill of Roses – a quiet suburb a half-hour's walk from the Danube and Parliament. Coming home from school one day wearing my yellow star, I saw that I was being watched by a dour looking man, from the open window of a ground floor apartment. "You filthy Jew," he shouted at me, and spat on the ground. From how I'd been brought up, the words rose to my mouth, "I am not a Jew." But my yellow star held me back from saying them.

A few months after we started having to wear the yellow stars, it was decreed that Jews could only live in Jewish neighborhoods, in houses specially designated as Jewish. We moved then to a large building downtown. It was noisy and crowded compared to where we lived before. Outside on the sidewalk stood a kiosk to hold placards which were used in peacetime to advertise, but during these times served for posting official notices from the government. These days they were mostly headlined in huge dark black letters, "ZSIDÓK!" "JEWS!" The restrictions they spelled out became more stringent from day to day, limiting when we could leave our buildings and for what reasons.

My father became determined to find another place for us to live, even though we would effectively be then in hiding. He had friends who were not Jewish and one of them, Joseph Visontai, wanted to help us. One day, during the hours we were still permitted to leave the building, my mother and I took a streetcar to meet Mrs. Visontai at her apartment. Their boys aged 7 and 10, were not home just then, and so while the two women were talking to get better acquainted I found myself a door to play with.

It had a handle large enough for me to hang on, and I made it swing freely on its hinges, carrying me back and forth. I heard my mother say, "O, he is a very easy child, he will play with a door such as that for hours."

And so the arrangements were made. Peter and Bucko, the Visontai boys, were simply told that we were staying with them for a while. The days passed and one morning the brothers and I were laughing about

some thing or other, still in our pajamas and bathrobes, when I blurted out the truth about our being in hiding with them. Abruptly, they fell silent.

I went to find my mother who visibly paled when I told her what I had done and said, "Go back now and say you were only joking." So, hitching the belt of my bathrobe tighter, I returned to the room where the brothers were, and told them with a fake smile that what I had said about hiding was only a joke. The lie was my greatest loss up to that time.

After we had been there about three months, it became too dangerous for the Visontai family to keep us hidden with them, and they asked us to leave. My father went out to find us some other place to hide. He wore no yellow star that day, for by that time, even so identified, a Jew would risk capture and deportation to the camps, or worse, if he happened to encounter roving Arrow Cross, the Hungarian Nazis. He was even more at risk without the star, because any official could ask to see one's papers in those days, and one identified in his papers as a Jew, as my father was, could be shot on the spot for not wearing one. He was asking himself as he later told me, "Who can help me here, who can I turn to?" when on a sudden impulse to visit a Christian friend, he ascended into a trolley car that looked to be without passengers. But once in the car he saw a passenger sitting there after all - and it was an officer of the German army! His instinct told him that flight or even the slightest show of fear would prove fatal. My father spoke German well, and he did not have a Jewish appearance. So he strode up to the man and asked, "*Wieviel Uhr ist es?*" "What time is it?" Civilly the officer looked at his watch and provided the answer; and so this moment of danger was faced down.

Father, mother and I were spared from other successive dangers as well and after the War, we three came to America. But Grandfather Ernest did not survive the War. He died after hiding from the Arrow Cross in so constrained a space that his only food came from one small can of tomato paste, which he made last for two weeks. Sixty years after these events, having undergone step by unplanned step a gradual transition from Christian to Jew, I found myself studying for my adult bar mitzvah. I realized that during the ritual I would be asked for my Hebrew name. But I had not been given one by my parents; they chose the name Robert for its acceptance throughout the Gentile world in which they expected me to lead my life. "What shall I be called in Hebrew?" I kept asking myself.

And then through the researches of a historian acquaintance, I chanced upon the native records of my grandfather's birth in rural Hungary. There in a firm hand in Hebrew letters was his real name: not Ernest as

we all thought of him, but rather Ephraim. This was the Hebrew name I chose for myself. I chose it to signal a return to an old path Ernest had abandoned, to give him, sixty years after his death, a new beginning.

6/18/10