

Hungary

Gabriella Dohi interviewed **Vera Szekeres Varsa**

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Dohi: I'd like to know what kind of adult you pictured yourself being when you were a child.

Szekeres Varsa: I didn't have a clear idea of it when I was a child. An elder brother of a friend of mine was a law student, and once he tried to convince me to study law. He said it would be a good choice for me, I should go for it when the time comes. I told my lawyer dad about it, but he strongly disapproved. It was about that time however that he found an article in the paper about a foreign affairs college that was to be opened by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and that would also accept girls. He talked me into that. He told me that it would be an interesting job, because a diplomat could come and go in the world as he or she pleases, and that it would suit me perfectly because I was good at languages. This was clear by then, I think. I was thirteen in '46, '47. So, I became interested in it. I gave it some thought and at the age of sixteen I applied, I don't know why, but in 1943 there was no secondary school degree required. Well, it was probably because they wanted to fill up the diplomatic corps with working class people. So, I applied. I was a good student, I excelled in certain subjects, the ones that were most important for the profession. In physics, for instance, it wasn't necessary to be good at, hence my grades were not so good either. But at the age of sixteen I spoke two foreign languages fluently, English and French, and I thought this would count. In the reply to my application they said, "At this stage of the class struggle we do not accept comrades from an intellectual background." Period. So then I graduated from secondary school and applied to the Faculty of Arts to study Russian and English.

Dohi: You've mentioned that your parents didn't want you to go to a religious primary school.

Szekeres Varsa: Because my parents were of the opinion that, when I grow up, when I would have gained knowledge and would be able to think it over, that's when I should decide whether I want to follow any religion, and if yes, which one. They didn't want to influence my decision about it at the age of ten. I ended up going to a Jewish secondary school because there was no other option.

Rabbi Rosenfeld, our teacher, was running a kind of extra training course, at the school, within teaching hours. He taught New Hebrew, Ivrit. So instead of attending the bible

classes I got signed up for this Ivrit language course. Well, I didn't learn much, but he taught us Hungarian poems in a really beautiful way. I clearly remember how he would have us recite the poem "Szondi két apródja" ["The two pages of Szondi"] while constantly correcting and making suggestions about our performance. It didn't last long, since in early April '44 we stopped going to school.

Dohi: Did you come to a conclusion as an adult? Have you turned towards any religion?

Szekeres Varsa: No. Although I was of course interested in the Bible. I read it back then. And I've certainly picked it up several times since. It is a deep foundation of our culture.

Sure, I am interested in religions. Later, when I studied art history, I started digging deeper into the topic after learning about iconography. I wouldn't have dared to say during an exam that I didn't know which half-visible saint we could see there in the fresco. Not while the saint's characteristic attributes were also there beside them as hints.

So I got into it and I really loved it. All in all, I really loved it. I still like walking into a church and trying to make guesses about the frescos: Who might be depicted in it? Where is it from? When was it painted?

Dohi: Were you taken to museums as a child?

Szekeres Varsa: Yes, my mother used to take me to museums and classical concerts. We also went for walks with her, and when she saw that I was getting bored she would recite poems for me. Curiously enough, another Arany János ballad comes to my mind again. I learned "*A walesi bárdok*" ["The Bards of Wales"] during our walks. She would recite it to me again and again—although she remembered one line incorrectly. Later I became a teacher of Hungarian literature, unfortunately only for a short time. I loved teaching Hungarian poetry. I loved it so much. But whenever we worked with "The Bards of Wales" in class, I had to be extra careful not to say the wrong line I learned from my mother. She also told me that the ballad was not actually about King Edward. We are not sad about the bards of Wales, but about our great Petőfi. This was when she also taught me that one should not just throw out the name Petőfi, just like that. I should either use his full name, Sándor Petőfi, or I could add a nice qualifier to his surname, like she did.

Dohi: How would you sum up your childhood memories?

Szekeres Varsa: Home. Good and hard. History made it horrible. It was hard because I had an elder sister who died at the age of eight-and-a-half after two years of illness. She caught this disease from our father. He had tuberculosis. He caught it in World War I.

Let me talk about my father for a little. In June 1914, my father completed the curriculum of the law faculty and was planning to get his degree the following semester, but indeed he was on the front lines by then. He caught a bullet in his lungs. He quickly recovered and was sent back to war. It was trench warfare at that time, in the Carpathians. He was

captured, and they took him to Siberia. He very likely caught tuberculosis there in the trenches and was lucky that the clean air of Siberia did not let it develop into something more severe. We know for sure that he got a lung-shot. This suggests that he may have caught it back then. They discovered that he had a big cavern in his lungs exactly where the bullet had hit him. When they found out that it was tuberculosis and not just a simple flu, I was a baby. He never fully recovered from it. He spent a significant part of the rest of his life in sanatoriums. He spent two or three months in a hospital every year, and between 1945 and 1948 he was in the lung clinic in Mátraháza all the time, until his death. So my elder sister caught it from him. It is an enormous tragedy for any parent to lose a child, but the fact that she caught it from him made it even more terrible.

Everybody was good to me. They protected me and taught me a lot. They were nice to me, so my childhood could have been perfect, but the tragedy and the illness made it quite difficult for me. And then the war came, the siege and the Holocaust. I'd rather use the word "Shoah" instead, let me say that.

Dohi: Can you explain why?

Szekeres Varsa: Because this is a Hebrew word. "Holocaust" is a more recent expression, as we know. In my interpretation it is a burning sacrifice. Nazism did not intend to denote a sacrifice to their gods or whatever they believed in. They were pagans, after all. In ancient times, there was always some good reason behind the burning sacrifice. I firmly reject the idea that there was any kind of good reason behind this. I reject it. Thus, I like to say—well, I certainly do not like, but I'd rather use the word "Shoah." I do not want to accept that there was anything respectable or good about it or that there was any good cause behind it. No. Nazism is purely evil.

Dohi: And how do you feel about the German language?

Szekeres Varsa: As a child I was fluent in German because my mother spoke excellent German. She did not speak German in the Austrian dialect as almost everyone in Hungary did at that time; she rather, as she used to say, spoke *Hochdeutsch* [High German]. My mother's side of the family was highly bourgeois, unlike my father's side—though my father did become a lawyer. Anyway, my grandfather on my mother's side had some official relations in Berlin, and he brought the daughter of an impoverished priest from Berlin to be the *Fräulein* [governess] for his family.

So, my mother was watching me develop in Hungarian. As she told me, once she saw that I had a decent vocabulary and I could speak my mother tongue correctly—even though with a slight lisp—she started speaking to me in German. So I became fluent in it. Then my father made a big mistake. He happened to ask my mother in my presence why she was teaching me German and not English or French. He asked the wrong question because my mother's German was like that of an educated native speaker's, while she

spoke French and English like someone who had learned them. She was quite good at them, but it was still not the same. However, the main problem was that my father actually spoke against learning German. This was perhaps in 1938, after the Anschluss [Annexation]. Not too many people were aware back then that English would be the language of the future and that, by the time I grew up, English would be more useful.

It seems like I must have been a cheeky kid, because I told them I didn't want to learn German. I resisted somehow. Later, my relationship to German was strongly shaped by the Shoah, and if I was expected to answer even with a simple "ja" to anyone, including my mother or some other respected and beloved person, I would never do it. I just could not think of uttering it. I would immediately feel a lump in my throat. Whenever *ja* tried to leave my mouth, it got stuck somewhere here [*pointing to throat*]. That lump would not let me say it. Later this feeling eased off when it turned out that a book by Freud I wanted to read was not available in Hungarian, and I couldn't even find an English version in the libraries in Hungary. So I said to myself that there shouldn't be anything wrong with reading Freud. He wasn't a Nazi, after all. I had an argument about this with my mother earlier. She would say, "Well, but Goethe wasn't a Nazi." I would mumble, "I don't care." "But then there is Thomas Mann, whom you like so much." "Yes, but I just can't read it in German." But then with Freud this got resolved.

I didn't go to Germany until 1989. Even finally arriving there was an accident, because we got into a traffic jam on our way to France. We got into this horrible traffic jam. My husband was the driver. Every car was stopped as far as our eyes could see. I told him that I'd go up ahead and see how long the row of cars was, and off I went. I walked for five minutes and could see nothing but idling cars. When I went back to the car and got in, I looked at my feet and said, "I stepped on German soil, yet my feet didn't burn." I didn't feel them burn, so I felt like I had to give up this grudge against Germany. Because if I couldn't feel it, then it was phony. Until then I thought I would feel it in my feet.

People did tell me that there were plenty of Arrow Crossers [The Arrow Cross Party (*Nyilaskeresztes Párt – Hungarista Mozgalom*) was a fascist party, aligned with the Nazis, that ruled Hungary from 15 October 1944 to 28 March 1945. Under its rule, thousands of civilians were murdered and many more deported to concentration camps] in Hungary, too, but I said that it was my home after all. If I remember correctly, I did not call it my homeland in the beginning but referred to it as the place where I felt at home. Indeed I would be badly offended whenever someone tried to tell me that I was not Hungarian. I was a very patriotic little girl. This is how I was raised. I adored Hungarian poems. Especially those which expressed patriotism towards Hungary. Well, Hungarian poetry in general. I would say, "Who are these people? They don't even know all these poems that I can recite by heart. How dare they try to tell me such a thing?" So, I got offended and turned my back on the whole thing. But this became a conflict within me, and then, for

decades, I'd call Hungarian poetry my homeland. Then of course these feelings were resolved with time. The way the Germans tried to relate to their past helped a lot with this resolution process. So it somehow helped me with finding resolution, and many decades have passed since.

Dohi: Did you speak in German to any Germans during the Shoah?

Szekeres Varsa: There were a few occasions.

Dohi: Did you travel outside the country when you were a child?

Szekeres Varsa: No, not really. Wait, that's not true, because my mother's birthplace was Törökbecse [Present-day Novi Bečej, located in the autonomous province of Vojvodina, Serbia]. It belonged to Serbia back then; or was it Yugoslavia at that time? No, I think it was Serbia, and we'd go there to see my grandfather three or four times every summer. My grandmother had passed away long before I was born. But my grandfather and his son moved in together when my grandfather retired. My uncle remained a bachelor, so they moved in together and lived in Pancsova [Present-day Pančevo, also in Vojvodina, Serbia]. We would spend whole summers there with my mother, and my father used to join us for maybe two weeks.

Dohi: What was the farthest destination you travelled to as a child?

Szekeres Varsa: Pancsova.

Dohi: Did the concept of European-ness exist within the family?

Szekeres Varsa: It certainly did.

Dohi: As I understand it, you first said you hadn't been abroad because Pancsova was still under the rule of the Habsburg Monarchy back then. Were you thinking more in terms of the monarchy at the time, or already starting to think in terms of Europe?

Szekeres Varsa: My parents had a strong sense of European-ness. My father was explicitly and fiercely opposed to the Habsburgs. We were not allowed to speak a word about the monarchy in the family. Though it was different with Upper Hungary... Well, Slovakia was also part of the kingdom, but he looked at it differently. But being Austrian, or Austria in general, wasn't an appealing topic at our house. No, they had their eyes on Paris.

Dohi: When did you visit Paris for the first time?

Szekeres Varsa: I was thirty-one years old. It was an incredibly big thing to do. A mind-blowing thing. By that time, I had already developed shame over how the number of Nazis had grown in Hungary [during the war]. I knew how the anti-fascist resistance had operated in France, Serbia, and Norway; I knew exactly that this had to be taken seriously. And then I went there with György Szekeres, a mathematician, who had connections with

the liberal French elite of Paris. As soon as we arrived, the phone would not stop ringing. His friends were calling one after another to make sure that he had arrived safely. We visited truly exceptional people. I would have fallen in love with French social life at that moment if I hadn't been too biased towards it by then. Even at home, I always heard good things about it. This was during the time when you could apply for a passport every three years. You had to apply. You would either get it or not.

Dohi: Did you ever consider a life in Paris? Didn't you want to move there back then?

Szekeres Varsa: I've never thought of moving there. But living there... If I were about to be dropped by the stork, I'd probably tell it to drop me there. If we were still up in the sky with the stork, I'd say Europe; nothing else could come into consideration. And now if we were above Europe, I'd suggest to find a hexagon-shaped country and move toward the sea. I'd say: "We don't need to go as far as the ocean but just to find that bright spot well-lit by streetlights before reaching it. Now let's descend and find the 5th or 6th or 7th arrondissement." And then I'd kindly ask it to drop me there somewhere.

Dohi: What if it were foggy and you couldn't land there? Where else would you go?

Szekeres Varsa: Then we could fly across the Channel. We wouldn't necessarily have to head to the capital. There is a place called Cambridge. That's what they named it. That wouldn't be bad either. Or Oxford. Well, if these options are also out, then Amsterdam, too. That's it. That's already a decent variety of choices for a stork.

Dohi: Do you have any object that you've managed to keep since your childhood?

Szekeres Varsa: Of course. The star I wore. This must have been in February 1945. I'm sure it was February because I remember that the wood stove was on. My mother was furiously tearing [the stars] off the clothes and throwing them in the stove one after another. I told her to save one of them. I had grown up by then. If it was February, then I was not even twelve years old yet. But I know I was already grown up. So, I told her to put just one aside. She didn't really want to do it, but we saved one in the end. Later it turned out that there were a couple more on some summer clothes. So I had two. I gave one of them to Yad Vashem many years ago. Many years after that.

Dohi: You have seen the world change several times in your life. How did your need for security change during these periods?

Szekeres Varsa: On 15 October 1944, my uncle came over. He was from a Christian branch of the family. My uncle would come and take me for walks on Sundays when we started living in a yellow-star house. Since we had tuberculosis in the family it was a must for the child to spend time in the fresh air. The child's health was more important than anything. This was always in the focus. So he took me for walks; we often went to Margaret Island. Let me share a small detail. It's a lengthy story about a minor detail, but I think it's a characteristic one. After our walk one Sunday, he took me to his place and

my parents also joined us for lunch there. This man who came to pick me up was my father's elder brother. My parents came wearing the yellow star on their chests, while I obviously did not wear one during my walk with Uncle Dezső on Margaret Island because otherwise I could not have gone there. I wouldn't have been allowed to even go to Szent István Park, much less Margaret Island. So, my parents came to have lunch and then to take me back to our yellow-star house. Now let me tell you how crazy this was. The reason why I wanted to share this seemingly ridiculous detail.

My mother put my yellow star in her purse with the yellow silk yarn, in case Erzsike didn't have any yellow yarn at home. I mean, why wouldn't she have any, but mother wanted to make sure we had some. She was planning to sew the yellow star back on my coat before going home, which had to be done with yellow yarn. The question was either: Why would a Jewish couple walk in the street with a child who is not Jewish. Or: If the child was also a Jew, why would an eleven-year old not wear her star? This was very dangerous. So my mother put it in her purse, but when my father noticed it, he snatched it from the purse with a very determined motion and quickly stuffed it in his own pocket. Because it was dangerous to carry a spare yellow star, and when it came to danger, it was the man who was expected to face it.

I think I used the word crazy earlier, but this rather shows the absurdity of what was going on.

So, we were there having lunch on 15 October, and that was when we heard Horthy's radio proclamation and learned that the horror was over [Regent Miklós Horthy announced an armistice with the Allied Powers on 15 October 1944. Horthy's son was then kidnapped by the Nazis and he was forced to abdicate, handing over power to the Arrow Cross Party]. The adults were thrilled to hear this, and me too, of course. I was well aware of it by then. I had my doll Györgyi with me. I didn't play with dolls much anymore by then, but I had Györgyi-doll with me because mother advised me to always have it on me, so people could see that I was a small child. That's why my Györgyi doll would always come with me on the walks.

So we were all sitting around the table when the radio broadcast suddenly stopped. Various military marching songs were played, and the broadcast kept on breaking off, always in the middle of a line. I think everybody who was alive then knows this by heart. We heard the following: "Colonel General Beregfy is ordered to Budapest with immediate effect," then the music went on and it stopped, and we listened to the same announcement again. Then they also played German military songs. By then, the adults understood. Especially the two men with military experience from World War I. They then understood that something serious was happening. They started debating about whether we shouldn't go back home. To the yellow-star house, I mean. I heard my mother saying the following sentence: "He who can save time can save lives." From that point on I could

completely understand what was going on. I started reciting the “Szózat” [The “Szózat” is a Hungarian patriotic song] to myself. I knew all the lyrics, not only the first part. And I thought to myself that the line “Here you must die!” was now most relevant to us. [The line to which she refers, “Itt élned, halnod kell” in Hungarian, can be translated in full as “Here you must live and die.”]: “Look at that, I can think like an adult now.” I put the Györgyi-doll down and I became an adult in that very moment. From then on, I didn’t talk back anymore, I just did what I wanted. I did all kinds of silly things and many of them. I would go to places where I shouldn’t have gone. This is why I had to see a family being murdered.

Dohi: You have mentioned the yellow-star house several times. I have the feeling that this might be a vague concept for foreigners. So let’s say a few words about it. In June 1944, a decree was issued ordering all Jews to move to designated houses within three days. From this point it starts to get complicated, because it weren’t only Jewish people who lived in those yellow-star houses.

Szekeres Varsa: No.

Dohi: So the ones who moved out of the yellow-star houses were not the same people who moved into the Jewish houses. So, there’s some big chaos here.

Szekeres Varsa: Our flat remained empty. For a short while. Then a family who had fled from Transylvania moved in. They were decent people, as it turned out later. For one they didn’t touch a thing we left behind. We used to have a big black dining table with a huge crocheted tablecloth on it. Thick dust made its pattern visible—which meant they didn’t even open the door so a draught could blow away the dust.

When my father went there in February to introduce himself and tell them that we wanted to move back, they asked for a couple of days to find another place to stay. They were very correct. Then by chance they found another flat in the same building and lived there. They were nice people, we always respected each other.

Dohi: An eleven-year-old has a lot of problems, and you had already learned a lot about the world by then. What was it like losing your home? How did it feel having to leave home and move into a stranger’s house?

Szekeres Varsa: It was difficult for me, but... I don’t know, I adapted to it. I don’t remember suffering from the lack of space, or from the fact that we had nothing. I didn’t mind living in a stranger’s flat with other people. It was a three-room flat and theoretically there were seven of us living there, but maybe less as there was one who was taken to a work camp.

It was quite unpleasant and weird. I could only take a couple of books with me, and a doll. I didn't want to take the doll, but my mother insisted. And it was a fairly big doll. Like I said, to create the illusion of the little girl who plays with dolls.

Dohi: And how was it after that? Did that sense of home come back with moving back to the old flat?

Szekeres Varsa: When we moved back, we didn't move from that place. I'll tell you soon how and from where we moved back.

I had an incredibly high temperature. There was no doctor, no medication, nothing. The war was still raging, Budapest had just been liberated. I must tell you now that I insist on using the word "liberated." I declare it here, in front of the Soviet monument, yes, they did liberate us. But I will certainly also ask why they stayed. Why did they stay here so long? They should have left in 1955 at the latest, when they let Austria out of their grip. But it meant liberation for everyone—not only for us Jews, who would have died otherwise, but for those Hungarians as well who were not Jewish.

It was terrible, pure horror. All the bridges collapsed into the Danube. All the valuables were taken. It was horrific. Just remember that the Germans had arrived here before. So it was not only about how the Russians, or rather I'll say the Soviets, got here, but also the Germans, too, before that. So, it was sheer devastation.

Dohi: Those who argue against the word "liberation" always offer as reasons the mass rapes and a second wave of looting. I don't know how much you knew about these things as an eleven-year-old. Did you have any experience of this?

Szekeres Varsa: No, I didn't. I had no knowledge about this. We saw no violence, no brutality when we were finally liberated. By then we were living in the basement. I only noticed one odd moment. We had water in the toilet, down in the basement. The tap was dry, but we had water there. And I saw one of the soldiers wash his hands in it. Then I understood that this was a different culture; he didn't know what flush toilets were. That was very odd.

But before that... I'll tell you why I'm saying this. In that basement of an upper-class building, everybody had their own space. There was a retired general among us, who often received visits from two Hungarian officers. I clearly remember one of them. So, as I said, we had plenty of space there for ourselves. There was this "Aryan" lady: my mother with false documents. The officer clicked his heels when he introduced himself. He was a German officer, too. He would say to her "*Gnädige Frau*" [Madame], and this "Gnädige Frau" could speak German, so they talked. They talked in German. The conversation was in highly sophisticated German. This forced me to resolve a conflict in my soul about the difference between that polite officer, the educated man who was actually the evil enemy, and that smelly man dressed in rags, behaving in an incredibly strange way—God knows

he might have even had lice, too—who was the liberator. So, this one was our friend and the other one was the enemy. I had to resolve this terrible inner tension. That is because I was raised with poems, and was taught German, and that culture was important in the family. It wasn't easy to come to terms with. But that was as bad as it got because, as I said, we experienced was no violence.

But I didn't say why we were there with the general where my mother was a Hungarian lady. Uncle Dezső took care of things in time and bought birth certificates for us. They happened to be Lutheran ones. He was able to barter them with different useful things, a bicycle, binoculars, etc., in the summer of 1944. Until then our family name was Varsa, but the certificates had Wágner on them. When we saw that our lives were in danger—we had to line up in front of the house, they had robbed us, everybody had to hand over everything. I still have the records of it. I can show them to you. Well, it was just a mob. I believe they only joined the Arrow Crossers because they realised they'd have a chance to do some looting.

At this point the adults had realized that our lives were in immediate danger and so we moved away. By then we already had the two birth certificates. My uncle Dezső went to his daughter-in-law to pick up the keys to her aunt's flat, which she was looking after.

Her aunt was the wife of an army doctor, and as an army doctor he had left with the army for the western front by then. I think it was an upper-class flat with at least five or perhaps six rooms. And there were two flats on each floor. Ours was, I think, flat number two on the first floor. It had two entrances, one from the landing, of course, and another from the hanging corridor; it was the kitchen door. The servants' room also had a window looking out on the hanging corridor. I deliberately use the word servants' room. So, it had a window and the kitchen had a door leading out to the hanging corridor. On our front door, the one that led off to the landing, there was a sign that said "Vitéz Dr Alajos Návay od Náva, Colonel General," I think. I don't remember his first name for sure. Of course, when we arrived, my father had to go down to the caretaker with his documents and inform him that we were here now, and that we had got the key from our relative, his goddaughter. So, our documents showed that our name was Wágner. And when the caretaker's wife noticed this, she cheerfully clapped her hands and said, "Oh, so you are Her Ladyship's relatives!" It was not at all typical of my father, but possibly because of the danger he immediately started joking around. He said, "Yes, she is my cousin, but we rarely meet, because, you know, we are too busy." So, he was acting a little. By chance, the Colonel General's wife happened to have the maiden name Wágner, too.

It was a very odd building, I'd never seen anything like it before or since. In the back section they were able to build five stories instead of four so the flats there had lower ceilings. These flats were smaller and cheaper. Because of the level difference between floors there was a flight of back stairs, the so-called service stairs. There was even a sign

saying “service stairs.” There was a note next to it: “Beggars and organ-grinders are only allowed to use the service stairs.”

I think, flat number three was on the first floor. That was the District IV office of the Arrow Cross Party. It was District IV at that time. There are documents in the archives to prove it.

The Arrow Crossers would always pass by our kitchen window on their way to the office. When they saw the sign “Colonel General” on our door and saw that somebody was in the flat, they would knock on the window frame and say, “Perseverance, Madame!”—this was their common greeting. “Have you seen Brother Nagy?”

This is how I learned what they called their leader. This is what they called him, he had no first name; “Brother” was his first name. Arrow Cross Brother was his first name, or Arrow Cross Murderer. I have to say it out loud, I wish he had kicked the bucket much earlier. I would have choked if I hadn’t said this out loud now. I have to say it: I wish he had been dead earlier.

Once I went out in the yard when I shouldn’t have. There were strange sounds coming from the service stairs. They were pushing an entire family down the stairs. There was an interior wall in that building, one floor high. I don’t know why an interior wall was there. The family was pushed up against it. I was coming up from the cellar, it was down a couple of steps, but not too deep. It was close to the service stairs. So I could hear it while I was coming up and I stopped. I could hear that the family was pushed down the stairs and up against the wall: they were the father, the mother, the daughter, and the son. The girl must have been a little older than me, thirteen or fourteen.

God! Léna, my great-grand daughter, is fourteen years old now! That girl was quite tall, and the boy was younger than me and he was short. He was shorter than my great-grandson Kristóf, Léna’s brother. My dear God—how I wish that Arrow Cross hangman had died an early death! Excuse me, but this must be said out loud. Yes. And I really mean it.

They were all lined up and shot. But since the boy was short, no bullet hit him. So that devil stepped closer and shot him, too. The boy was alive for a few more seconds after his family had died. He shot him and the boy fell. He did not collapse but fell forward. Then that devil went up and kicked his little head.

Then they left the dead bodies lying there for several days in the snow. Bloody snow.

Well, from then on, I wouldn’t wander around ever again. There were whispers in the basement that it was the Kiss family. They also said which street they were from. One of the streets bordering Kálvin Square, I can’t recall its name now. But others would say they were the Roths. I only remember these two names. They were probably either the Kiss

family or the Roths. We must mention their names. It must be heard that this was the Kiss or the Roth family. So for a moment they can be with us again.

This is what happened to them, this is what I saw. And I didn't dare to talk to my parents about it.

There was a field kitchen parked at the gate of building number five. It took several hits, so it was out of order. The wooden gate must have been used for firewood, as it was missing. This was after the liberation. I would often go to the broken field kitchen to look and see what was going on outside, but I never went out in the street.

They were still shooting in the streets from time to time. I was sitting there in that field kitchen—it provided very comfortable seating—and I was staring outside, when brother Nagy appeared. He was not wearing his uniform, but I knew his face well as he would always come to give speeches. I didn't only see him from the back when he shot the Kiss or the Roth family. So, he just walked in, and headed to the Arrow Cross office. I immediately rushed down to the basement and grabbed the first Russian I saw there and told him that I saw the Arrow Crosser in the building. That poor soldier had no clue what this Hungarian girl was trying to tell him. But I kept on shouting and pointing in the direction and I was shaking him by the coat.

You asked me earlier about the silly things I did. Now, this was one of them. I grabbed and started shaking the soldier by his coat. I can still remember how rough the material of his coat felt. So, I was shaking him and pointing upwards, and I don't know why but he came with me. We were already in the yard and I was still shouting out loud and kept on pointing. Then Brother Nagy opened fire at us. I'll call this Russian boy Ivan as I have no idea what his name was. And with his left arm, Ivan pushed my head against the wall and with his right he fired back. He held his arm in front of my face. He was hiding my face behind his elbow. The rough material of his coat stank. I can still recall that smell. I knew at that moment that he was protecting me, shielding my face with his arm.

Then more Soviets came, and they captured the Brother, brought him down and set him against a wall. They shot him that very moment, no questions asked. His brain splattered. This was the situation.

Many, many years later, when I was with Amnesty... Well, I had been against capital punishment long before I joined Amnesty International. I am absolutely certain that I have been against capital punishment for a long time, but about this one, I'd still say it was right. If we went to Királyi Pál Street right now I could show you the exact square meter where his brain splattered. Whenever I walk that way, I always stop there for a moment, and sometimes I deliberately go that way. I stop and look at it and think: it had to be like that.

Dohi: Can we talk a little about your university years? What profession did you want to choose?

Szekeres Varsa: I wanted to become a literary translator. But not poetry. I knew that would have been too difficult for me, unfortunately. But by then I had already read a lot of old Hungarian literature. I had read novels in English, but not in French. And I had studied Latin for six years. I was good at languages in general. I already started teaching at the age of fourteen-and-a-half. Well, first it was only tutoring, but the following year I held English classes for children. We needed the income badly; we were incredibly poor. We had beautiful old furniture and beautiful china sets, but we were dirt poor. We often had fried bread for dinner. My mother would heat some lard and she would fry slices of bread in it. However, to save some lard, she didn't add more, she only soaked the last slice in what was left in the pan and she would have that one. If we had to save lard that much you can imagine the situation.

So, I participated in academic competitions where they took me to compete in the subject of history. I was good at history. I was really interested in it. I was supposed to get first place in the Budapest competition, and I was to continue on to the national competition.

But there was this boy. I heard his performance and it was brilliant, but I felt that I had performed a little better. In the end he got first place, he went to the national competition, and I got second place. When I was walking out of there in a sad mood, a teacher from the jury came up to me. He must have been in his thirties. Anyway, he told me that my performance had been excellent, but that boy, I forgot his name, was a working-class kid, so they wanted him to continue on to the national competition. I was very angry at the time, but today I know that they were right. If he could perform almost as well as me, that was a greater accomplishment. At home, we spoke languages, we talked about history. We had the twenty-one volumes of the Révai encyclopaedia on our bookshelf. I could read a lot of Jókai at home; we had a lot of books by Eötvös. This teacher asked me if I had applied to any university programs, and if so, which ones. I told him that I chose Russian and English Studies. Then he said, "Listen, you are accepted."

He had some connections there and offered me this as a consolation prize. He was playing fair. So, after that I didn't worry. I passed my exams; I graduated with excellent grades. Then I spent my whole summer having fun at the indoor swimming pool. Because by then I already considered myself engaged.

Well, I was engaged after all, because I had been dating this guy for two years by then. And he indeed became my husband later. He was studying in Leningrad, in the Soviet Union, at the time. We hadn't seen each other for twenty months, but he came home by the time I graduated from secondary school. Before that we'd been seeing each other for a year here as kids, and then we would write letters to each other all the time. I had to

wait about a month for a reply. A letter would take two weeks to arrive. Well, because they read them. We didn't believe that back then. So, he came home for the summer and stayed for five weeks. We spent the whole summer together at the pool, we were together all day long.

I started university on 1 September 1951. When I arrived, they told me to go upstairs to the big hall. I went upstairs and there they were, three or four of them sitting at their desks. They greeted me formally, since I was now a university student.

It was in the Piarista secondary school in Mikszáth Square. So, they said, "Comrade, you applied to study Russian. Is that right?" I said, "Yes." As I've mentioned, I spoke English and French very well and had studied Latin for six years. But I didn't know a single word in Russian apart from the lyrics of a few songs, and I didn't even know them correctly.

"So, you'd like to apply for Russian Studies." "Yes." "Are you interested in Russian then, Comrade?" "Yes." "Have you studied English, Comrade?" "Yes." "Comrade, have you..."

After the fourth or fifth time I heard "Comrade" I realised that I was accepted to study Russian but not English. As it turned out later, it was just the summer before they had made Russian a compulsory subject in schools. After a while somebody finally realised that they would also need Russian teachers for this.

Somehow it took them a little more time to realise this, hence they started to train as many teachers as possible. There were three hundred of us in that year. They told us that we would not have five years, but rather that we would learn Russian from scratch within four years. Almost everybody started from scratch. Can you imagine that? But we could actually speak it by the end of the first year. I could speak Russian fluently, because we would have only Russian classes from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. Then until 2 p.m. we had other classes.

My mother told me that she would pay for my textbooks and exercise books at the beginning of the year, but if I needed other pieces of stationery during the year I'd have to buy them from my own earnings. I also had to pay for all the stamps I needed, for movie tickets, for my amusement in general. I started university in 1951. I got married the following summer and I got pregnant immediately after that. Judit was born nine months and eight days after our wedding day. My husband was in Leningrad. I was still living in my mother's bedroom then, because, due to my father's tuberculosis, we had to keep him separated.

We had tons of furniture. We had this enormous dining table with chairs. We weren't living in poverty before, but we were never a rich family. My father's illness was what really determined it all. So, due to the situation in the flat, I happened to sleep in my cot every night until I was ten. If I wanted to stretch out my legs, I had to stick them through the bars.

Dohi: How much time did you spend together with your husband Sanyi Virág?

Szekeres Varsa: Well, first we were dating as children for a year and then we got married. No—before that, he came home after I graduated from secondary school and stayed for five weeks, that's when we were jumping around at the pool. And when we got married, he was home for another five weeks. So that's ten weeks right there. And then we spent a week together here and another three weeks there. Over three years. That didn't work. Things like this don't work at all. We developed in different directions. We changed a lot. And, to start with, we'd come from different cultural backgrounds. He came from the working class. His family took it seriously. Sándor Virág Sr. was an intelligent man. His son Sanyi Virág was a very smart, diligent, and serious man. However, the cultural background was still very different. As I said, I had hope in a socialist and Communist future, but I have certainly always been that bourgeois little girl to some extent. Well, perhaps it's true. One who had a *Fräulein* living with her at her mother's house...

Dohi: Amidst all these different values, can you say what values were important to you in your youth? What were the important values in the approaching Communist era? How do you look at them now, in retrospect? Because there has been change, as far as I can tell.

Szekeres Varsa: My values were cultural, the bourgeois attitude. Trustworthiness was a sacred thing, too. One would never tell lies because it meant humiliating oneself. You must speak your mind and be responsible for your opinion. And yes, culture was a great value. An absolutely important value. And that this was our homeland, we had to live here. And it was a homeland for all the others, too. If somebody had a different opinion about something, we respected it if that person was serious about it. And if one was of this religion or that, and had this view or another, and the person complied with that and had humane opinions, not such horrible things, but serious opinions—we respected them.

And then when the Shoah came, it turned out that they didn't take things seriously. Then this defiance developed in me. And from this horror, where they murdered those children and would have killed me too if they had known that we were Jews hiding in that building—from this horror we were saved. The Russians saved us. The Soviets. How could I have known that song that goes, "There is no richer, more beautiful land. Everybody feels they're free"—how could I have known that every single word of it was a lie? We didn't know in general. When my father came home from Soviet or Russian captivity, he said that the ordinary Russians were good people. I remember, he said something like that. They were the liberators and Ivan protected my head with his arm. So, we felt it was true. There wasn't the slightest doubt about it.

And then they said that there would be socialism in our country, too. How great it would be, because then all people would be equal, they said. That would include the black, the yellow, the Christian, the Jewish. This was important. I could accept this.

Then I got married, and we were dirt poor. And every night, that chair bed, which was already nine years old by that point, would collapse under me. It was old and of course my weight had increased as I was pregnant. We had tenants at that time. My father had passed by then. I was fifteen-and-a-half when he left us. My mum rented his room out. The current tenants were to move out by 1 March, and I told my mother, almost eight months into my pregnancy, that I wanted that room. I offered to pay the same rent they had paid. We couldn't have afforded it otherwise. After all, I had an income, I was teaching many classes. My mother was old, she was sixty-one by then. She was forty-one when I was born. My parents-in-law, the Virág grandparents, as we can call them now, were both company directors. But listen to this: they never actually cared about supporting our only child, who had to be educated by the state, even though they lived in Leningrad and were well-off. They never thought of helping, if not their son's wife, then at least his child. Then there came a moment when I realised that I couldn't feed a child with air, even if it was enough for me. So, for example, I had to buy carrots for her. I didn't breastfeed her for long.

Then the Virág grandparents told me that they would find a job for me. I didn't think of it back then, but the following came to my mother's mind. She was only carefully suggesting it, and I only realised it myself later: the Virágs shouldn't have found a job for me, they should have given me 300 forints a month.

My scholarship was 380 forints, and if they would had given me 300 forints, I could have finished my studies. But if a girl didn't go to university, it was not a big deal. One shouldn't have shown off anyway. Going to university was not that important for a girl. So they found a job for me at IBUSZ [IBUSZ Rt.—*Idegenforgalmi Beszerzési Utazási és Szállítási Rt* or "Tourism Procurement Travel and Transport Co."].

I started the semester, and on 1 October I started my job. The IBUSZ office opened at 10 a.m. It was on November 7 Square, which is called Oktogon today. This is where I went at 10 a.m. Judit stayed home with my mother. In the morning I started at the university at 8 a.m. The seminars would be over by a quarter to ten, so I had plenty of time to get to work. While I was at university I tried to take assignments wherever I could, completed my tasks, I had translations to do as I was in the Translation Department in my third year. And then in January, I went to take the exams in those subjects for which I wasn't required to attend the seminars. I pretended that I had completed that semester. However, from October on, I hadn't been attending anymore. But I still had a few exams to pass at the end of the first semester of my third year. That didn't go on for a long time, and I ended up only working my job.

So, while I was there, we had the Moiseyev Dance Company coming—do you know them? The Soviet-Hungarian cultural month was held and the Moiseyev dancers came for that. There was another sports event where I, as an IBUSZ employee, was assigned to guide the Soviet team. I got some money for overtime. I think my salary was 760 forints at that time. I could save a thousand forints by working overtime. I had ten hundred-forint banknotes in a box in the drawer of my desk. I was dating Konrád György, whom I would marry in 1955, when this happened. We were in the same year at university. By that time my marriage was in ruins. I was silly enough to write Sanyi that it was because I'd found someone else. That was a stupid thing to do, because the Virág grandparents used it against me. They used it against me in a disgusting way. I don't think it was the grandfather, but the grandmother.

In the end I was kicked out of the Translation Department. They didn't want me to continue my studies. I managed to pass my exams, though. I passed my translation theory exam with the best grade, and I was heading to the next exam when I looked at my report card and saw that the exam was crossed out and it said "invalid." We had to hand in our report cards after each exam at that time. "I got the best mark, how come it's invalid?" Then I saw that all the exams in translation had been invalidated. I immediately went to the head of the Department of Student Affairs to ask what was happening. He made this specific gesture with his hands which meant, "There might be something in the room, let's go out in the hallway." We walked together in the hallway for a while, then he carefully looked around and said, "Listen carefully. Don't try to get into conflict with them. Don't try to do anything, because you will badly regret it later." Eventually, I came to the conclusion that I could continue my studies if I switched to the teachers' training course. I had to take loads of different exams, too. This way I could finish my fourth year. I had forty-four exams to take. I was allowed to submit my original thesis on the topic of literary translation, and they accepted that I had only completed five or six teaching practice sessions instead of thirteen or fifteen. I had a lot of experience in teaching by then anyway. But I was an earnest student. I liked it. So, this is how I became a teacher. They sent me to a primary school, which I didn't like much initially. I didn't like that I had to do this. But then to see the children sitting there with a trustful look in their eyes was very compelling. This was a primary school, so they were tiny little tykes. It was a very intriguing experience.

It was around that time that they realised that it was not enough for us to be trained in a single subject. By then I had completed several courses in English because we were constantly demanding to be able to take on another subject. And when we were in our third year, they allowed us to do so. Whoever spoke German or English could take on the course. That was just what I needed! And I had passed a few exams by then.

Dohi: Did the teaching job bring any financial stability?

Szekeres Varsa: The teaching job did. I had a 1004-forint salary. One could make ends meet with that. Still, it was hardly enough for one person, and I also had Judit there to support. By then Sanyi Virág was back, and once he had a job he would pay child support for Judit. So we didn't starve, but we didn't have much more. I took on English when they said it wasn't good that there were so many single-subject students of Russian. And they said that whoever committed themselves to completing the Hungarian or History courses within three years as a correspondence student could do so. I went to the Department of Student Affairs saying that I was a single-subject student, for English didn't count as a second subject yet; I'd only passed a couple of exams. I told them that I only had one subject and I wanted to take on Hungarian. And that was it. I was there. Then I asked the primary school if I could teach Hungarian. Teaching really kept me occupied. I had a small child; I had a household to keep up with almost no money. I gave many private lessons, too. In the meantime, I was trying to fulfil the requirements of my English and Hungarian studies. Becoming a translator was becoming out of question.

Back then Magyar Nemzet was a good daily paper to read, and my mum found an advertisement in it saying that the Ságvári Endre Training School was looking for a head Russian teacher. She gave me that job posting. "What?" I was excited because they required five years of experience and I had six. So I applied, believing that surely I'd have to stop teaching Hungarian for a while. It was obvious that a head teacher of a single subject only deals with one language. I got the job and became a head teacher. I was the youngest head teacher ever appointed in the country. I was twenty-eight years old. Later, when I got to know my colleagues, they admitted that initially they had thought that I was some apparatchik for whom they wanted to find a position. But I wasn't one, of course; I wasn't a party member!

Dohi: Nice of them because they could have also guessed that you were someone's mistress.

Szekeres Varsa: You're right. They could even have thought that, too. Yes, a young woman. It would have been easy to think that. Perhaps they indeed thought that, but it would have been very inappropriate to say. By then they already knew that I wasn't a party member. Who knows what they were thinking?

You asked me earlier what it was like. Well, for a while I thought that I was a Communist, and then when I was two months into my first year at university, I saw that slogans were nailed on the wall letter by letter. One of the slogans said, "Mayakovsky was the greatest poet who ever lived and will ever live. —Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin." At that time my opinion was that Petőfi and Ady were the greatest poets. "But Comrade Stalin must know better"—and I did not know Mayakovsky. "Well, that's all right then, but how does he know that no greater poet will ever live?" This was the first crack in my true faith in the ideology. Then came the relocations, and there was a family living in our building. They were decent

people, yet they were kicked out of their flat. All kinds of strange things started happening, and I started to lose my faith.

I cried when Stalin died. But when the crimes that happened under Stalin came to light, I couldn't believe anymore in the glory of the Soviet Union. I had questions again, like, "How can it be that the history of the party was written by Stalin, and it says everywhere that the great Stalin realised this and that, and no one ever knew any better than Stalin?" My faith kept falling apart then.

At the time of Imre Nagy's government we heard about a lot of things. I liked that a lot. It was not the same hard line anymore. In 1954, they started releasing the political prisoners, and we heard a lot from them. I didn't know my husband György Szekeres (1914-1973) back then at all. But him and many others were released then, and it turned out that many great people were among the victims. That's when I was pulling back, and I knew I wasn't a Communist, not a bit. And this feeling got stronger and stronger, and in 1956 it wasn't a question for me which side I belonged to. But in 1957, I was completely out of it. Because many things happened in 1956, there was lynching, too.

I was there when Imre Nagy stood on that balcony and said, "Comrades!" The crowd reacted with a loud noise. "Compatriots!" So, that was a really uplifting experience. It was good.

I wasn't there when they shot into the crowd. I had a child, so I had to stay at home. I was reading Móricz tales to her, and they usually took a long time to read. I wanted to go and was trying to cut it short. She noticed and said, "Oh, Mummy, you didn't say that part." Then I recited it at a fast pace and she stopped me again, "You didn't say that part." She never let me skip things or read too fast.

So I didn't go out much. But whenever I could, I went. It was exciting. It was a very big thing. One could feel the fresh air; that it was cleaner. It was thrilling. We had a new spring starting.

Then it was drowned in blood. Many of my friends were in prison. A lot of my friends fled the country.

Dohi: Have you ever fought for freedom as an individual or in a group?

Szekeres Varsa: No, I educated others. I taught people about the love of freedom and about how to form their own opinion. There are many who can vouch for this, and in fact they do. It was my birthday recently and I didn't just get simple birthday wishes. Former students who are over sixty now wrote to me saying that I taught them to think, to form an independent opinion, to respect others and to have a thirst for knowledge. I worked with Amnesty for six years. I worked for other people's freedom and for human dignity. I'm very proud that at an international Amnesty congress I was the one who suggested

that dignity should be included in the principles. Human dignity should also be among the basic principles we keep repeating. How far am I ready to go for it? I'll stand up for it; for others' dignity, too.

Dohi: Would you put on the yellow star if another Shoah happened again today?

Szekeres Varsa: No way! What do they think? Only when I decide to do so. What do they think? It cannot happen again. Don't I have the right to live here? They'd have to use force to take me away, but even then, I would have a weapon, a kitchen knife at least. I'm dangerous. You understand me, don't you? After all these memories . . . I certainly wouldn't have the mental or physical strength to do it, but I feel that I could go that far.

Dohi: Based on what you've told me, I have the impression that, as things turned out, you were not able to do what you really wanted in your life. Various circumstances defined your path and led you to something you didn't choose.

Szekeres Varsa: Yes, but I loved it very much. I really managed to get into it, and I felt very much at home in what I was doing. I was where I truly belonged. I was able to give more to my surroundings than if I had translated some good novels. Even if I probably would have done that really well, too. This way I was able to give more. And I have nine descendants. I have a daughter, three grandchildren. All three of my granddaughters have children. Five kids altogether. They are between three and fourteen years old. Five great-grandchildren. Lena is fourteen, she's the oldest. She told me last year before Christmas that I should send the money I was going to spend on her gift to UNICEF. And that's what I did. Although I still gave her a book.

Dohi: What profession would you choose if you were twenty again?

Szekeres Varsa: Perhaps I'd like to be a teacher. A teacher, yes. And if I didn't have to work much beside that, I'd like to translate a little. When [my husband] Szekeres was the lead editor at the Európa publishing house, Imre Makai [Hungarian literary translator. His translations of the works of Dostoevsky, Gorky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov are still read today], who was working for them at the time, heard that I was his wife and he remembered me as his former student, He told my husband, "I'd like to give your wife some work. Whenever I am offered some work and I can't or don't want to do it or don't have time for it, I'd like to give it to her." Szekeres told him that it could only happen when he wasn't the lead editor anymore. No way would he allow there to be any semblance of bribery.

Dohi: Did you agree with this?

Szekeres Varsa: Yes. Szekeres had such high morals to begin with. It was exceptional. He was cheerful, gentle, warm, nice, you could do foolish things with him and really have fun. And he wasn't like that only with me, but with other people, too. And deep inside he was an unbreakable flawless diamond. Interesting, he was very interesting.

Dohi: How did you come to join the SZDSZ?

Szekeres Varsa: In 1989, I felt that I had to do something. Because I'd wanted to work in politics all my life.

Pozsgay [Imre Pozsgay, Hungarian politician who as Minister of State played a key role in Hungary's transition to democracy after 1988] once asked me. The director's secretary ran up to me one day and said that I should come immediately because Comrade Pozsgay was on the phone. So Comrade Pozsgay asked me to meet him. At the meeting he told me that they were looking for a new member to serve on the board of the Patriotic People's Front. A board member had died, he had been told that a woman would be best to replace the person, and he'd thought of me. No, thanks. It's a great honour, but no. It wasn't appealing to me. Wait, it was not even the Patriotic People's Front but the National Peace Committee. Even if its name contained the word "peace," which appealed to me, I rejected the offer. I said no.

Dohi: If you always wanted to be engaged in politics, why didn't you ever become a party member? I mean, before regime change.

Szekeres Varsa: It was probably cowardice, me not joining the democratic opposition. We only exchanged and read a couple of issues of samizdat [a form of dissident activity across the socialist Eastern Bloc in which individuals reproduced censored and underground makeshift publications, often by hand, and passed the documents from reader to reader], but no more than that. I know exactly what I was so scared about: those travels abroad. Because I knew that they would revoke my passport. And I didn't dare to risk that. Around 1988, I got engaged in a samizdat action. I forwarded issues and copied some others. Júlia Rajk gave me something to keep for a while, so I did. Things like that. I highly respected Júlia, I thought of her as a great person. She honoured me with her friendship. I consider it a very important value. But in 1989 I really wanted to do it and I thought this was the time to join a party. It was the Social Democratic Party. I went to a party meeting and realised that I didn't feel comfortable there. That was not my place. I liked it, but no. It didn't feel like home to me.

And then there was this party called 4 6 0. They were all kids. They were really sweet. But I was fifty-something at that time and they were barely twenty. 4 stood for the first, 6 for the second, 0 for the third world war. All right then. I went to another place. Oh my, what was [György] Krassó's party called? I don't know what their name was back then. Maybe the October Party, at least this was how they referred to themselves. But I had the feeling that they were anarchistic to some extent. I knew Gyuri well, and Miklós, his older brother, was a good friend of mine while he was in Hungary back then. So, I didn't like that either. They somehow reminded me of a group of anarchists. That party was much like Fidesz at that time. Fidesz was also too much to the left for me. Then I finally found

the SZDSZ. When the elections were around the corner, in autumn, they nominated me as their candidate to our District Council seat. I told them to leave me alone. I didn't want to have to care about whether the elevators were working or not in the buildings of the district. Then they told me it wasn't about that at all, it was going to be something else than that. So then for four years I was head of the Cultural and Educational Committee. I enjoyed doing it. We had many things to deal with. We succeeded with some of them. For example, we organised an exhibition for the artists of District V in Saint-Paul-de-Vence on the Côte d'Azur. And then the teachers in the district: when we took over the district, the teachers' salary there was the fifth lowest in the city. At the time our mandate expired it was around the fifth highest. We worked a lot on that. I enjoyed doing it, but I liked Amnesty International better.

Dohi: When was the first time you voted?

Szekeres Varsa: When the first free elections were held [in 1990]. It wasn't an extraordinarily significant experience, but I gladly went to vote. It was out of question that I would miss it.

Dohi: Do you still go to vote?

Szekeres Varsa: Of course! I certainly do.

Dohi: How did you feel when the borders were opened?

Szekeres Varsa: It was magnificent! Back when they weren't open yet but you were allowed to leave the country multiple times a year, you only had to prove that you had fifty dollars, I think. We had that much in the bank, so we took it out, but wouldn't spend it, because if we did spend it, we wouldn't have it for the next occasion. So, we didn't spend any money at all. We went to Vienna and were joking around. I was with my husband András Román (1929-2005) and we had a Polski Fiat. We had a joke about our Polski Fiat, that it would find its way to the parking lot of the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* [Museum of Fine Arts]. We would go to Vienna every two to three months to sniff and look around. And we ate our salami sandwiches. Where's the problem? We always did that. We would travel and eat our salami. We could go in summer, because as a teacher, you only have a holiday in the summer.

In the summer of '63 I went to Greece with Szekeres, which was an incredible experience. I am an exceptional maniac for Ancient Greece. I consider Ancient Greek culture one of mankind's greatest accomplishments. Back then, you could see it there and could even touch it. I could touch the Acropolis. At that time, people were allowed to walk up to the Parthenon. On the way up to the Acropolis, you could go close to the Parthenon, and I was able to touch it. It was a fantastic feeling. It were 45 degrees Celsius, so terribly hot. We couldn't get salami, so we packed some English bacon. And that bacon started

melting. When we touched it, and had it with some sausage, that red pepper-coloured grease would be dripping from our elbows. So what? We didn't care.

Dohi: Is there a European country you haven't been to?

Szekeres Varsa: Moldova. And Belarus.

Dohi: Do you consider Russia part of Europe?

Szekeres Varsa: Yes. Yes. I want to emphasise that in 1800-and-something, I'm not sure when, but before 1810, the teachers from Tsarskoye Selo Grammar School wrote a letter to the merciful little father, the Tsar. I saw the letter, of course under glass. They humbly asked him to mercifully abolish the death penalty, because it's inhumane. This is a European attitude. An incredibly small segment of the society had this European attitude, but they could still create such valuable literature. It is truly wonderful! A basic human right, along with, as I said, dignity. Human dignity. Yes, everybody has the right to it. I also think that, for example, homeless people have the right for dignity, too. Even if some of them might have drunken their way to where they are. Yes, that might be the case, but still we cannot let them freeze to death in the street. We have to do something for them, too. If they tend to avoid work, we'll have to try to help them get used to working. That's why I pay my taxes.

We all have two roots, which are both double roots. Judaeo-Christian and Greco-Roman. And the Ten Commandments are obviously part of this. One of the commandments, which is indeed an order, says: "Don't kill!" We don't play around with that. There is no reason for you to kill your neighbour just because his land is richer. It's not possible. And another part of it: if there's a tsunami in another country and I am able to help—well, so it might cause some inconvenience for me to give what I have. Oh, well. I'll give it anyway. I don't mind if it feels inconvenient. If a famine breaks out in Africa, we must help. And we should give shelter to those whose lives are in danger. Especially if they are threatened for thinking in a different way. But we must be careful who we let in; we must check. Not just anybody. We must check. We must be sure that it's not a terrorist criminal who wants to come to our country. The best would be to help by sending help there. Then we will have less, we won't have a new car every year because we sent some help there, so they could have water and whatever. We should not try to force our culture onto them. If they believe in a shaman, well, then they should. We can still tell them how we think about it differently, they might even believe us. And we especially have a lot of work to do where we had colonies. Yes, we did make a mistake when we split up Africa and North Africa. How dare we?

Dohi: Has there been any political or cultural event in recent years that moved you?

Szekeres Varsa: I'm usually very interested in going to demonstrations. I was also there when we made a human circle around the ghetto. The MIÉP party organised one event

back then where they wrote someone's name on a board and hung it on a streetlamp. I always go. If there's a demonstration, I'm there.

Dohi: When do you feel like a European and when a Hungarian?

Szekeres Varsa: Always.

Dohi: Do you always feel like both?

Szekeres Varsa: Of course.

Dohi: Do you trust European institutions and politicians?

Szekeres Varsa: I can only respect a small few of them. I don't think all of them can rise to the challenge. But I cannot judge it well. I think Mrs Merkel is absolutely magnificent, and I hope that Mrs Ursula von der Leyen will be good, too. Although I don't know much about him, Juncker didn't seem too bad either. Tusk! I like Tusk.

Dohi: Is there anything you explicitly don't like about Europe, or that's frustrating for you?

Szekeres Varsa: Yes. Of course, it might be that they are not responsible for it. They didn't imagine it would be like this. The rules are not like that. They didn't think that there would be any European country that wasn't happy to be part of the European Union. They were not prepared for this. They should be working on fixing it in the meantime, but somehow this seems to be going slowly, as far as I see it.

Dohi: Do you think Europe has managed to develop in your lifetime?

Szekeres Varsa: Most likely many people's lives have become more humane. I think I am mainly referring to the material things here. More people can live a better life now at the cost of less sweat, less slavery-like work, and more people have been able to get access to education and culture during these past few decades. Had my phone gone off by accident, because I had forgotten to turn it off, you would have heard my ringtone. The "Ode to Joy." Because that's another way I want to express how important Europe is for me. Earlier, well, a few hours ago, I said that if a stork dropped me now, I'd choose Europe. I really wouldn't want to end up in the US at the moment, for instance.

I was curious about it. I am very happy that I've been there and that I have had the chance to look around in those gorgeous museums. Those incredible museums! I do like a lot of things about it, also about the society. But I wouldn't want to be American and I really wouldn't want to live in New York. It's not at all for me.

Dohi: How do you relate to the National Anthem of Hungary?

Szekeres Varsa: My father taught me that I shouldn't just stand up when I hear it but that I must stand up straight. But as a teacher I tried to show and teach and demonstrate that "Szózat" was a better poem.

Dohi: When did you first sit on a plane and where did it take you?

Szekeres Varsa: I flew to Paris. It was in 1967 or '68. No, it was '68 because in '67 we went there with a tourist passport. Then we went again in '68 but we couldn't get tourist passports so we couldn't get money. I mean, we couldn't exchange foreign currency. And we could only go by plane. So we flew, which was far more expensive than travelling by train. We weren't well off. We didn't have much money, to be honest. But the flight was a great experience. I loved it very much. It was fantastic. A beautiful big bird and it's just up in the sky, flying free. I know it can't fly just like that but that was my impression.

Dohi: What can make you laugh the most?

Szekeres Varsa: Any silly thing. I would have grown much older by now if I hadn't laughed so much in my life. One can giggle about anything. I love to giggle.