

"The Professional's Voice"

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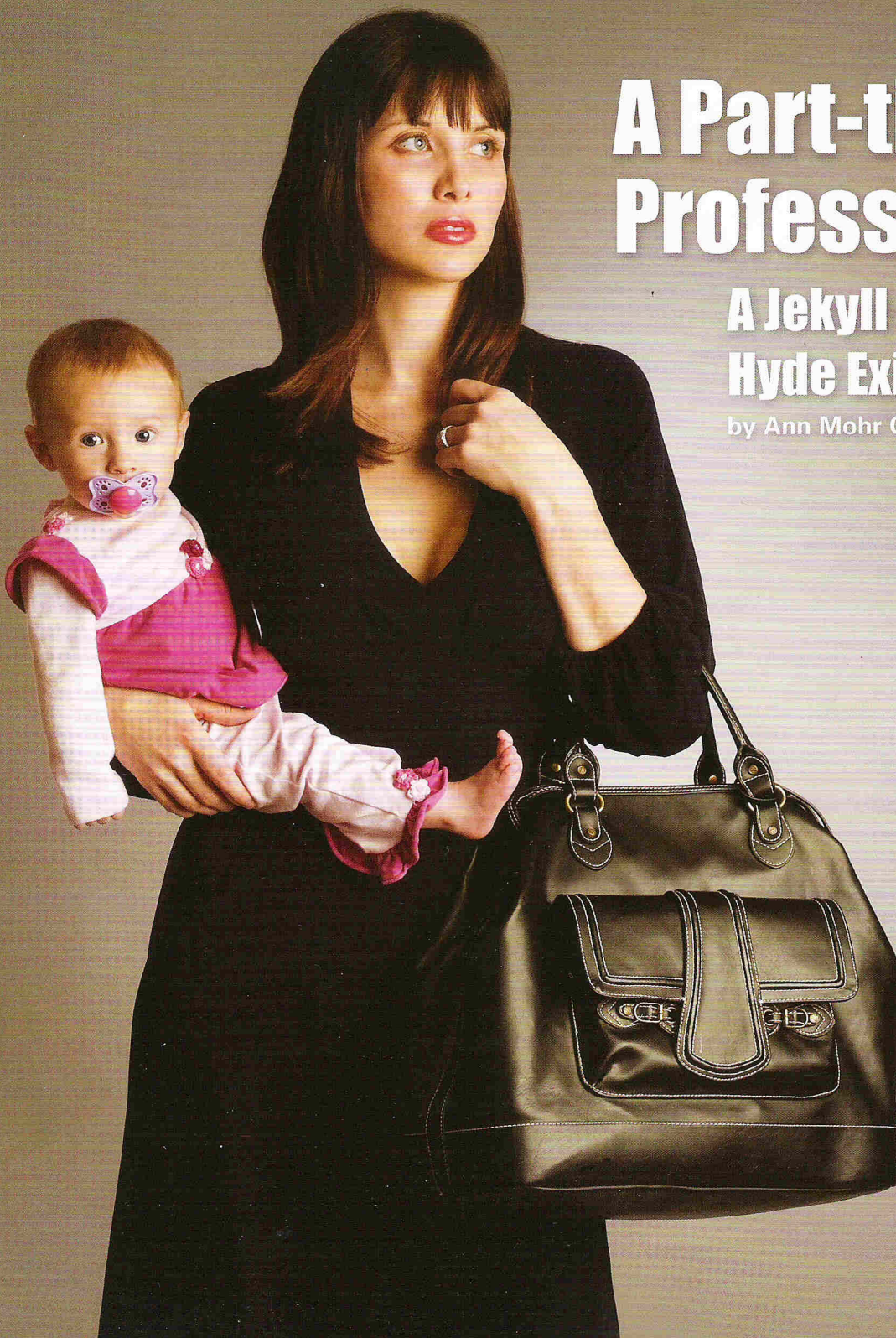
QUARTERLY

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A Part-time Professional

A Jekyll and Hyde Existence

by Ann Mohr Osisek



Research in the Old Country

Andras Koltai

Andras Koltai lives in Budapest, Hungary. The Hungarian Jewish Roots website <www.jewishroots.hu>, where you may find his services, displays two language selections: English or Magyar. What is Magyar? Andras explains, “*Magyar* is [the word for] *Hungarian* in Hungarian. It is an interesting situation. There were several tribes in the area a few thousand years ago. The Huns and the Magors were among them. While we call ourselves Magyars, which comes from Magor, several other nations call us Hungarians, which comes from Hun.”

Hungarian Jewish Roots

Andras shares the philosophy and mission of Hungarian Jewish Roots. He speaks of how the Jewish communities in Hungary flourished before the Holocaust, but then were completely wiped out: “If I look at the family trees of our clients, or my own family, there was just a huge number of family members in each family. Hardly a few survived the war. And many of those who survived left the country after the war. So I believe it is our mission to bring back some parts of the colorful Jewish past of Hungary. When we research the old newspapers and documents we find proof that there was a rich Jewish history in Hungary. We owe our perished loved ones this much.”

The Hungarian Jewish Roots website has multiple goals. The first is to give information about Jewish genealogy in Hungary and how research can be done. Another goal is to give information about its services. Andras also strives to make it a deep information pool for researchers who can use the guest book to exchange information about the families they are looking for. The database and the resource list are both tools that researchers can use to find out more about their ancestors.

Research in Eastern Europe

Andras explains some aspects of Hungarian research: “The parish records until 1895 are kept at the National Archives in Budapest. They are easily searched—you order them one day and get them the following day. Civil recording was introduced in 1895, from then on it is the civil records we have to search. (Several Jewish communities stopped keeping their own religious record books in 1895.) These records are held at the various county archives around the country. The most important rule to follow centers on privacy protection: you are not allowed to search the birth records of the past ninety years, the marriage records of the past seventy-five years and the death records of the past thirty years. Anything within these years is out of reach.” When this occurs, you must use other resources.

Cemeteries can be very difficult resources as well, because plots in Christian cemeteries must be paid for again and again. If a plot is not paid for and the space is needed, the headstone and coffin are removed. In Jewish cemeteries it is a different story. “In Jewish cemeteries you do not have to renew the payment,” says Andras, “because according to the Jewish laws, the remains of the dead are not to be moved. However, after the Holocaust, several of the old cemeteries have become abandoned: nobody lived to take care of the old graves. So, these cemeteries fell apart, the stones have been vandalized, or stolen—there is nothing to be checked.”

There are some formidable obstacles for Hungarian research. Andras writes, “The censuses of the twentieth century are not publicly available, either. What remains to be checked are phone books and some registers. There are several databases about the Holocaust, too, so we often have some indications from 1944–45 about what happened to the families.”

Hungary is a lot smaller than the United States; the farthest you have to travel from one border to another is 350 miles, and Budapest is located more or less

in the middle, so you can drive anywhere in the country with in a few hours. On the other hand, Hungary's small size can make research difficult. At the end of World War I, the country lost two-thirds of its territory and population to the surrounding countries. Andras explains the difficulty this incurs: "We get several requests to do research in the surrounding countries, as those parts belonged to Hungary in the nineteenth centuries and their records are also kept locally. Not all of these archives are easy to search: some impose bureaucratic measures upon foreigners, others are located very far away."

Guiding Research Journeys

Andreas describes an unheralded part of his work, his guided research journeys: "I really love those tours, I always have the opportunity to tell [visitors] about our history and tradition while driving them to the ancestral sites. And when we find relatives, or the sites where the families used to live, it is very emotional to see the descendants 'arrive back home.'"

Just this summer I took two young men to a small village in Slovakia where one of the men's grandparents came from. He had old pictures with him; on one of them there was a person he was not sure he could identify. When we planned the trip, we asked the locals at the registry office to find the family for us. But when we went there we did not know whom we would find there. So, we ended up meeting an old and extremely poor woman. When we asked her about that person on the picture, she said, 'My father.' It was another very emotional moment."

Andras explains why genealogy is less popular in Europe than in the United States: "People here know where they come from—for hundreds of years (or at least until there is written documentation of birth records) they had been living in the same small villages. Everybody is family there. So, if they want to find out about their ancestors, they just walk into the parish."

Hungarian Jewish history is a little more difficult because Jews arrived in this area only about 200 to 250 years ago and were extremely mobile, moving from place to place. "If you want to track them down," Andras says, "you need to search the whole country. It is different for those with noble background, too. For them, genealogy was part of their way of living, so they mostly know about who is who in the family. They can trace their ancestry back to several hundreds of years. Several books were written about these families."

Andras continues researching his own family history and is happy when a discovery proves especially serendipitous: "Just last week I found out that one of the librarians at the main Budapest library is a relative—and we had talked to each other a few years ago about research in the library without knowing anything about being family."

Treasure of a Treasurer Cath Madden Trindle

Cath Trindle serves as treasurer for the Federation of Genealogical Societies, where she deftly untangles the maze of financial data in the pages of reports. She answered my FGS financial questions patiently and with clarity, which is not an easy task dealing with someone used to reading a financial document no more complicated than a bank statement. I am so grateful for her presence on the board that the only title befitting her profile is the corny one you see headlined.

An Accountable Past

Cath came to the board well suited for the office: after spending thirty-two years in the accounting field. Her business, CAT Business Services for Small Businesses and Non-Profits, offered services for small businesses and non-profits: setting up bookkeeping systems, supporting book-