

LILLA SEIBER

Julia Seiber Boyd

Born into a professional Budapest family, Lilla Bauer was the youngest of three daughters born to architect father, Emil and his wife, at the start of turbulence for Europe and the disastrous diminution for Hungary.

Lilla lived through both World Wars, had a professional career, emigrated to England after travelling widely in Europe and the USA — hardly a normal path for a young lady at the time. She also lived to the age of 99 — beating her mother who made it to 93, and outliving most of her friends and colleagues.



Her long-term memory of her childhood experiences, whether sitting on the knee of ‘Gusti Bacci’ (a grandfather or great uncle), while he sharpened her crayons with a special carved knife, her mother’s Hungarian housewifely pride telling a visitor (when he tried to decline another helping of red cabbage) by saying, ‘I’ve had two already’.

‘No, you have had three, but I don’t see why you shouldn’t have a fourth!’.

She had the skill in encouraging a bachelor family member that it really was alright, and not rude to tell his housekeeper that he had had enough pancakes she kept making for him, or resolving the problem of another who had asked two women to marry him simultaneously. These and other thumbnail sketch episodes remained crystal clear - even a week before her 99th birthday and final illness.

Her artistic young group in Budapest was interested in all the arts— she recently recounted going to concerts whenever Bartok was being played and in order to support his music because he was never part of the establishment as Kodaly was.

The groups included writers, thinkers, art students and professionals and discussions were lively. Early romance was not successful. After a brief relationship with (the well-known artist) Gyorgy Buday in Szeged, she had an equally brief marriage to Willi Levi (the sculptor) which was dissolved as soon as they were both safely out of the country. By a very curious coincidence, Buday ended in his days (in a mental home) in Coulsdon, and his remains are in Redstone Cemetery only a few miles from mother’s nursing home.

Much photographed and sketched as a beautiful young woman, she developed a career as one of the principal dancers in the Ballet Jooss, the first modern ballet company. She starred as the young girl in *The Green Table*, a political commentary on the events unfolding in the 1930s, which ballet successfully toured Europe and the USA.

The National Photographic Museum in Kecskemet have confirmed that they have at least three of these photos in the national collection and were delighted to find that she was still alive and would have wished to interview her, but she was too ill.

A review of her performances in Hungary in 1938 said, ‘the ease of her movements and their elegance, the fantastic beauty of her dances captivated the audience in one stroke’, and another comment read, ‘the strictest critics had to concede that all rumours preceding the performance of this young woman of beautiful figure, lovely face, this gifted artist of great intelligence, were true’.

Her students also recall her elegance and poise combined with modesty about her earlier career achievements. The comment has been made that little was known or written about the historical development of modern dance at that time. Her students had little idea of her accomplishments. They did, however, find a rigorous insistence and the ability to draw the best from them, as well as her much kindness.

Her visa from the ballet allowed her out of the country. After a brief final visit to perform in 1938, her parents urged her to leave as soon as she could.

The early part of the war was spent with the Jooss ballet and refuge was given to her, and others, at Dartington Hall by the Elmhirst family. The contrast between living in Devon, courtesy of such philanthropic sponsors, and in a country where it was permissible to say what you thought and where corruption was not rife, and her earlier experiences were not lost on her. She never returned to Hungary.



Her teaching career at Goldsmiths spanned the end of World War II to her retirement in the early 1970s. She taught modern dance and labanotation and her duties included her role as an examiner.

A great achiever herself, she was always interested in the potential and achievements of others. Her dissertation for the Forebel Institute in 1965-6 on 'The Sense of Achievement through Dance and Drama with reference to others in the arts, in Junior School Children' makes interesting reading. (I have a copy)

Her artistic interests were wide. She enjoyed needlework, embroidery, weaving and visiting art galleries and museums. She was widely read. After her cataract operation, she re-read Proust 'just to make sure she had not missed anything the first time'.

Whenever the summer holidays started, they would somehow inevitably end in Italy to look at some other Renaissance grand master or another museum and enjoy the sunshine.

Her own career, while married to the great love of her life, Matyas Seiber, (she married him at Marylebone Registry Office in the first half of 1946) was always placed second to support him with his musical works and his teaching composition at Morley College and at home where she would provide lunch, tea and biscuits or whatever was appropriate to the visiting pupils.

She was also a devoted mother to Julia.

Matyas's premature death in 1960 was a devastating blow which took her many years to recover. Nevertheless, she continued teaching, travelling and supporting several charities and, in retirement supporting St Lawrence's, a local scheme (in Caterham) helping those with learning difficulties.

She remained fiercely independent and was blessed with a good constitution which meant that she was seldom ill. Sadly, she eventually lost the sight in one eye and the other went eye into decline. The

same happened with her hearing. Losing these main sources of enjoyment, her quality of life was inevitably much reduced. Despite this and her loss of strength and balance she remained living at home until over 98.

A series of falls meant that she decided to go into a nursing home in early 2011. There she enjoyed her 99th birthday only three days before she was taken ill but she had delighted in re-meeting two of my best old school friends which whom she was associated in the 1960s.

She was much admired by many people from many different aspects of life.

I was privileged to have her as a mother.

She died on 8 August 2011 in Redhill.

(see essay about [Matyas Seiber](#) in the composer section of this site)

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