

# Jozsefne Marta Feher

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- [My family background](#)
- [Growing up](#)
- [During the war](#)
- [After the war and later life](#)
- [Glossary](#)

- **My family background**

My grandfather was Joska Schlesinger. I never saw my grandfather, for he died before I was born. I suppose he lived in Zalaegerszeg. I think they had a pub.

My grandmother was Malvin Singer. She died during the deportation. She was a very strapping old lady; my father loved her very much.

Malvina was very religious. She used to wear the sheytl [*wig*]. And when she was old they had to help her to the synagogue, but she would have never missed a service. She lived with one of her daughters, Pepi, as I remember. Pepi managed a kosher household, just for her sake.

Grandmother's original house was big, with two flats: a separate flat in the front, as well as in the back. There was a big veranda overgrown with morning glory. One had to climb a few stairs to the veranda.

Then there was a big kitchen. That's where everything went on. The rooms opened from there. The pub wasn't there, I think it was somewhere towards the railway. They rented a place there.

They had eleven children. These [*were*] all from Zalaegerszeg. Everybody Magyarized but my father. [*One of them*] was Dr. Marton Sandor. He was a doctor. [*He had*] one child. Uncle Marton died already before the deportation.

His daughter, Ilike, died as well. There was Jenő. He became Jenő Sandor. He lived in Zalaszentivány with his family. I think they also had a butcher's shop and a pub, if I remember correctly. Then there was Gizi, whose husband was Elemer Herczog.

They moved to Budapest. Then there was Pepi. Her husband was Naci Guttmann, a cattle-dealer. They had two children. We used to go to Pepi's and then uncle Naci and Pepi played cards. We went there, at let's say, three o'clock; well, they played until about six o'clock. Then there was Julcsa.



She lived in Janoshaza with her husband, but she must have been very religious, because grandma liked to go there, to Julcsa's place. There was Mano, he was a landowner in Likospusztá. He had his smallholding near Győr.

Then there was auntie Annus. She was a cosmetician. She got married to a vet in Sopron. Then there was Lotti in America. Then there was Pali. He became Pal Szabo. He was a merchant in Keszthely.

Then there was Guci, her name was Augusztá, but we called her Guci. She lived in Győr as well. My father had a twin-sister, Lina.

My [maternal] grandmother was Hermina Hirschon, wife of Imre Lobl. I never met my grandfather, I think he died before my birth. They were from Csáktornya. We went to Csáktornya once; my father came with us too.

My grandparents had two children. Melania was my mother. Nandor was her brother. He was the younger. He was managing director in a porcelain shop in Zalaegerszeg.

He had a boy, Imike. They mostly spoke German in the family, though they spoke Hungarian as well. Melania's mother tongue was Hungarian, but her German was perfect. And she even spoke Serbian as well.

Grandmother Hermina lived there with us. There were two rooms [*in the flat we rented*]; grandmother and I slept in the first room, and my parents in a separate room. Grandmother slept on a divan, while I was on the bed.

Hermina 1 baked very well. We used to have a big box that was full of cookies. There were lots of preserves too. We had a larder so big, you wouldn't believe.

The late Mihály Schlezinger was my father. He spent seven years on the Russian battlefield in World War I. He was taken prisoner. Communism was instilled into his heart out there.

It was such that there was a man who was in the Soviet Union too, and when he came to the lido where my mother worked, my father immediately started to speak with him in Russian.

My father, as far back as I can remember, worked in a textile shop as a shop assistant. He worked on the Sabbath as well, because at that time an employee wasn't permitted not to work on the Sabbath. But on Jewish holidays they didn't have to [*because*] the boss was Jewish too and they closed the shop on high holidays. Then everybody went to the synagogue.

My mother worked at the pay-desk at the lido [*in summer*]. In winter she did needlework at home. When my mother was at the lido I used to splash about in the water. I also played with the boys and rowed and went down to the other mill; we had fun.

### • Growing up

I was born in 1924 in Zalaegerszeg. I had no brothers and sisters. I didn't attend a Jewish elementary school; there was no such school in Zalaegerszeg.

I even attended the convent school when I was 9 or 10 years old. That was because an acquaintance of ours who lived with us was a teacher there. Then I went to middle school. The middle school lasted until I was 14 years old.

I think I was 15 or 16 years old when I went to learn sewing – because at that time they didn't admit Jewish girls to the higher commercial school any more. I think I had three years of apprenticeship.

Then I went to a dressmaker's shop. [*The boss*] was called Mrs. Lovas, she came from Pecs but she got married and moved to Zalaegerszeg. I worked, sewed, at her place.

We usually went to the dressmaker's shop at 8 o'clock and we always had to clean up after our shift. There was a magnet, which we had to use to gather up the pins that had fallen down during the day.

There were only Neolog families in Zalaegerszeg. Dr. Mozes Junger was the rabbi. There was a nice big synagogue. The synagogue was close to the house. I went to pray every morning with uncle Gergo.

They were our neighbors; they came to live there when they bought the family house from grandmother Malvin. And his uncle Gergo was very religious. He worked at the post office as an administrator. We were on good terms with them and I always went to the synagogue every Friday and lit a candle. My mother only did so on high holidays.

Because at that time one had to rent chairs in the gallery, as so many people went to synagogue; that was quite expensive. But my parents got married under the chupah.

I always got new clothes for holidays. There was no such thing as not getting new clothes. New shoes, new hat, a new outfit. There was a Jewish dressmaker and everything was made there for me.

I used to know the prayers well. I even had an exam with Dr. Mozes Junger, Chief Rabbi, and I was so good that he gave me 10 pengos. My mother couldn't read Hebrew, but I had to read to her for a half-hour every day.

There was a religious book written in Hebrew, which was like the prayer book, and I read from that. My mother listened and I was proud. Sometimes she asked me what was I reading and then I tried to translate it but I didn't understand everything either.

When I was a child we ate goose and duck. A 10-kilo goose was always ordered for holidays, well in advance. My mother took care of that. She took it to the shochet to have it cut.

At that time, you know, they used to buy chicken for Shavuot [2](#). And then my dear grandmother went to the market place and plucked the chickens [3](#) there in order to have fresh feathers. But sometimes, if I remember correctly, there was pork as well.

Grandmother Hermina, who lived with us, wasn't so religious. We didn't observe the Seder. There wasn't a man in the house who could have led it. Once my father took me to a Seder.

He had a friend, and they observed the Seder, and then my father took me along. I liked it very much, I knew the Haggadah: I had learned it in school. My father made a spinning top for Hanukah.

This had Hebrew letters on it according to which we had to give each other certain sums of “money”. We played for nuts, for 8 days at Hanukah.

I heard about Zionism for the first time at my uncle's. I was spending my summer holiday at my uncle Nandor's place in Marcali, where he had married and settled down. There was the family of the vet, whose son had left for Israel.

They said that out there in Israel they would have to fire bricks themselves for the house. After the war it came to my mind to leave for Israel too. When we could sign up, my Christian husband told me that we should go together.

We went to register but then we never received any notification. But I was scared that the Russians would separate us again. One carries these bad memories over from the deportation.

I had Christian friends as well, but I mostly [*mixed*] with Jews. There was my girlfriend Vera and her sisters Dora and Zsoka.

We lived close to each other and used to see each other very often. My mother saw a great deal of their mother.

They were Neologs too but on high holidays they went to the [*synagogue*] as well. Neither their mother, nor their father nor Zsoka came back [*from the deportation*]. I didn't really have other friends before the war.

For fun I used to dress up, do [4](#) myself up, and go walking around in court shoes in the Main Street. I had great success and that was enough for me.

Before the war I was engaged. A Jewish teacher, Simon Spitzer, the son of a rabbi from Tapolca, was my betrothed. He was a soldier there in Zalaegerszeg and asked me to marry him.

My parents proposed him – I didn't really want him, but at that time, things used to happen as the parents wished. He couldn't establish himself as a teacher, and then he came up here to Budapest as an adult re-trainee at a technical school, as a turner, I think.

He couldn't come to Zalaegerszeg very often. When he did come, my mother made strudel. And once his parents invited me to Tapolca. There was this charming rabbi, and his wife, Jutka, was even more charming. Well, I went there all done up: Gloves crocheted by my grandmother, hat made in the biggest salon.

They were very impressed; I looked like a dame from the capital. When they entrained him [*took him to forced labor*] he ran over from the railway to say goodbye to me. But when I got back [*from the concentration camp*] he had already gotten married.

I wrote him another letter, and I didn't receive a reply. And once I received an answer, telling me not to keep on writing, because he was married – his sister wrote that. He couldn't wait for me. You can imagine it. I met him once more.

- **During the war**

In Zalaegerszeg, it was suddenly announced that we had to go to the ghetto on such and such a date. As I said, we heard a lot from those German soldiers, however, that order took us by surprise.

At first there was the yellow star. I remember I sewed myself an “elegant” star of a very nice canary-yellow material. I even wanted to make something fashionable out of this too. And then suddenly in May 1944 we had to go to the ghetto.

There were many people there. We got only a kitchen. Everything remained behind in our house. Everything was packed in big boxes, all our dishes, and our beautiful tableware. My grandmother brought me a Singer sewing machine, it was wonderful; well, that remained in the house too.

And all our belongings remained in the house. My father used to go out of the ghetto to work in a gardener’s establishment. They allowed that. We were allowed for a week to go to the synagogue as well. Of course, I went.

After that the gendarmes took us away. And my mother already knew... [*what would happen*]. When the Scarlet Pimpernel was showing at the cinema in Zalaegerszeg my mother and father said we should hang ourselves.

I told my mother I couldn’t hang myself. I was young, so I couldn’t imagine what would happen to us. They took us out to the brick factory. They said that everybody could take along just 2 kilos of “pogacsa” [*salted scones*], [5](#).

I can’t say if there were 65 or 75 people entrained in a wagon. I know that people said that [*they put*] more [*in a wagon*] than they usually did with horses. I think this was in June. My uncle died on that train.

We got out at Auschwitz. At first I didn’t do any sort of work there in Auschwitz. This was the extermination camp, they used to take the weak ones to be gassed, that’s why they didn’t tattoo a number on me. Then they took me to Bergen-Belsen – I went there without my family – we didn’t work there either.

Then I worked in a supplementary part of the Buchenwald camp; I don’t remember what kind of work I had to do there. They moved us from there to many other places, when the noose was tightening around the Germans’ necks.

- **After the war and later life**

Finally I was liberated in Teresienstadt. The Russians came in and they captured the Germans, and we were really liberated. I went into a workshop where there were Jewish boys. And then one of them lifted up a basket and gave me a salted roll. Then just once, I got meat as well.

I ate it the next day and I became very ill. Then Lili, who was from Zalaegerszeg as well, and with whom I was on good terms in Auschwitz, got some Epsom salts, (I don’t know where from). We put two bricks together and toasted the bread on them. I got better somehow; one can endure many

things.

What happened later to these Jewish boys [6](#), I just don't know. These Russians gave us pearl barley: A whole kettle-full. We just ate and ate from it, starved as we were. We ran to and from the toilet all night.

We were lucky not to perish. Well then, there was the medical examination. A Hungarian doctor said to me, "Wouldn't it be better for you to stay a while, here in the hospital?" "No, no," I said, "I know that my mother is not alive, but I'm sure my father still is." I was wrong.

I remained alone. We got to Keleti Station [*Budapest*]. There at the Station, they gave plum-dumplings, to all of us who came from the camp. That's how I got home, or rather to Budapest.

My first husband was a Jew. He was called Imre Neuwald. I met him there in Zalaegerszeg, I don't know why, because I didn't get anything good from him. His brother put us in touch with each other.

He said he had a younger brother; "You'll have such a good life with him that you won't even have to put your hands in cold water", he said. Imre lived here in Budapest. It was his brother who lived in Zalaegerszeg.

But originally they came from Keszthely. Imre was a second-hand dealer. The wedding was in 1946, I think; here [*in Budapest*] in Nagyfuvaros Street [*in the synagogue*]. I think we lived together for three and a half years. Then he died of cancer. He was sick almost from the beginning until the end, and I was nursing him, he couldn't even work. Those were bad times.

My second husband, Jozsef Feher, wasn't Jewish. But we lived very happily and loved each other very much. He was born in 1926. He was two years younger than me. He was from Mezotur, but was born in Szent.

I met him in such a way that he lived where we lived, in lodgings there on the first floor. We stayed on in this house because my husband was a car-lover and there was a garage there. He was an electrician and later a purchasing agent in AFESZ.

Then he worked at the underground too, as an electrician. After the war I didn't care much about Jewishness. I didn't miss it. It was he who made my life complete. By my heart was always Jewish. And remained as such. I didn't join the party.

Neither did my husband. I didn't even discuss politics with my husband. We didn't care about politics. We were happy.

My first job after the war was at the Wholesale newsagents. I was a filing clerk there. We were the ones who noted down on the cards that such and such news vendor out there in the provinces needed this much newspaper of this kind, and that much of that kind.

I worked only about a year and a half there, and then it closed down. Then I went to the food shop in Rozsa Street as a saleswoman. And my husband came there, and you know, in this kind of job men can be very informal with their colleagues.

My husband heard this and told me, "Well, you won't be going there anymore". He just became jealous. Then I went to the big food shop at Kodaly Circus. I was in the chocolate section.

After that I worked in the May Day clothing-factory. I sewed on buttons there. Then there was a pause, and after that I went to the Medimpex. And I really liked it there.

At first I was there as a lift attendant. And then they took me up to the herb section; I worked there as a manager in the herb warehouse. I retired from the Aurora clinic. I was posted there as a medical clerk. But when an assistant was absent, they used to put me on. So I worked in quite busy areas.

After the war I kept in touch with auntie Annus and her husband, uncle Guszti. The daughter of auntie Annus was deported from Gyorszentivany together with her daughter.

I couldn't mention deportation in auntie Annus' house, because uncle Guszti (he was a military officer, a Gentile,) said: "I couldn't save auntie Annus' daughter, I was just happy I could hide Annus."

My uncle Jenó survived too. His first wife died out there [*in the concentration camp*]. When he came home, he first went to Zalaegerszeg, then he got married.

He dealt with horses before the war, and afterwards as well. He bought a horse and ran it in the trotting [*the race course in Budapest*]. [*His horse*] did very well [*in races*]. He had a car, a driver, everything.

Now fate has arranged things in such a way that since I've been alone I feel more and more a Jew. Every second month I get potatoes, onions, two tins of sardines, figs, dates, oranges, a bar of chocolate, flour, sugar, eggs and everything.

At first, a long time ago, I got warm dishes too, every day. And they brought me kosher food, but it was awful. I quit that. The cold food pack is due to every Jew whose financial situation or circumstances make it necessary.

It's nice to feel that I am cared for. I watch the Jewish programs on TV, and on the radio, I listen to the programs about this. Since I've been confined to bed, this has been my only amusement.

- **Glossary:**

**1 ]Hermina as well as who? This is correct, but the sentence makes no sense in Hungarian either**

She is not being compared to anybody.

**2 This is a Christian holiday isn't it? Is it right here?**

**3** In English we always say what bird the feather come from - but here I can only guess She mentioned chickens before, so I assume it was chickens that Grandmother plucked.

**4 I changed the phrase, but kept the meaning**

to make one self look beautiful.

**5 This was "cakes" before, but that makes me imagine Doboztorta or maybe a muffin**

There is no word for "pogácsa" as far as I know. "Pastries" is much more general, but in this context, most people would then imagine some sort of large, filling scone.

**6 To whom? Is it really to them, or to us?**