

Gabor Paneth

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Budapest

Hungary

Interviewer: Eszter Andor and Dora Sardi

The history of my family is like a fairy tale. Once upon a time, at the beginning of the 19th century, there were two brothers. Their father sent them away from home to try their luck. One went East and settled in Transylvania, and the other went West and settled in Austria. The Eastern branch of the family became extremely religious, Hassidic in fact, and none of them who hadn't converted by the 1930s survived the Holocaust, whereas the Austrian branch assimilated and survived intact. I, of course, am a descendant of the Eastern branch, but let me tell you a little story about the other branch of the family. Joseph Paneth, who was born in the 1870s in Austria, was one of the closest friends of Sigmund Freud, and also corresponded with Friedrich Nietzsche. I never knew Joseph personally, but I'm very proud of him.

So, let's return to my family. My father's great-great grandfather was Ezekiel Paneth. His grandson, Jozsef Paneth, was my father's grandfather. Jozsef Paneth left Transylvania and lived in Tarcsl. He had a lot of siblings. He also had many children, among them my grandfather Adolf (1859- 1928), and some others who left for America to serve as soldiers. He moved to a town called Papa because he got a job as a shochet (ritual slaughterer/kosher butcher) and melamed (teacher of Jewish primary school). He married a local girl, who was considered the most beautiful girl of the town, and had four children. He was a very religious man.

One of their daughters married a Hasid and moved to Beregszasz. They had four children, of whom one married a gentile. The family disowned her, sat shiva (went through the traditional rites for mourning a death) and never knew her again. She was the only one to survive the Holocaust.

My grandfather Adolf's wife Regina, my grandmother, had serious financial problems after her husband died in 1928, but she was helped by her late husband's uncles who had emigrated to America in the 1870s. They regularly sent her money, for which she was especially thankful since the Jewish community of Papa was in such a bad shape that often it couldn't pay her the widow's allowance on time.

My father's youngest brother Jenő was the closest to my father. He maintained his Orthodox life style but moved to Budapest. He lived in the Jewish quarter of the town and worked as a melamed. His wife Margit wore a shaytl (wig). They had two daughters. Marta was a Zionist and she made aliya (emigrated to Israel) at the age of 16 in 1941. Her sister Edit married an architect who, as I remember my father saying, was somewhat of a caricature of the Orthodox Jew. He was loudly religious but didn't really seem to know that much. However, when they made aliya with their five children in 1957, they settled in one of the most Orthodox areas in Israel, in Bnei Brak. Jenő and Margit also left for Israel in 1951 and settled on a kibbutz.

My father Lajos was born in 1887 in Papa. He grew up in a very religious environment. He went to the local Jewish elementary school and also spent a year in yeshiva. He then graduated from the Teacher Training College in Papa and became an elementary school teacher. He first taught in the Jewish elementary school in Nagymarton (one of the so-called sheva kehilot, the "seven communities" of Jews in the present-day province of Burgenland, Austria), but was soon transferred to Liptoszentmiklos, in what is now Slovakia. He met his first wife Margit Erdos here. She was a beautiful woman, the daughter of an atheist social democrat. They married in 1910 and moved to Budapest. My father started to become more and more secular because of the bad experiences he had had with the Jewish community when still in Liptoszentmiklos.

During World War One, he served on the Russian front, and he reached the position of lieutenant. During the Counterrevolution, the 1918 civil revolution, he was put on the redundancy list for political reasons. In 1925 he got a job again as an elementary school teacher in a state school. He worked there until World War Two, and then continued teaching after the end of that war as well. His first wife, who had chronic heart disease, died in 1924, and Lajos married again a year later.

My mother came from an assimilated, Neolog (Conservative) family of Budapest. Her father, Adolf Bergsmann, was a traveling salesman of textiles. They lived in an elegant bourgeois neighborhood. My mother graduated from the Academy of Music and became a piano teacher. Grandmother Cecilia died young. My grandfather Adolf was the only one of my grandparents that I knew. He had eight siblings. For me, the most important of his brothers was Uncle Ignac, who was a doctor. His sons emigrated to England. They established several Jewish old age homes in London and, in the 1990s, set up the Balint Jewish Community Center in Budapest. My mother had only one sister-Sari-and they were very close to each other their whole lives. Sari never had a family of her own. She graduated from a commercial high school and worked as an arts administrator in OMIKE, the Hungarian Israelite Cultural Association.

I was born in 1926. We had a big three-room flat in an elegant neighborhood of Budapest, which we shared with my maternal grandfather until his death in 1939. We had a day servant until the Great Depression when we had to give such things up. My mother didn't work, so we lived on one salary, the salary of an elementary teacher in a state school. Before the Great Depression we had gone on holiday to Austria every summer. We used to spend six weeks at various holiday resorts in Upper Austria. Then, starting in the mid-1930s, when we could no longer afford holidays abroad, we rented a little house in a village near Budapest.

In the first two years of elementary school, I attended the school of a Jewish orphanage. Now, my father regarded Judaism as a personal matter. He was a Jew inside, but he lived in a Christian environment. He wanted me to get used to that environment, and he decided enroll me in a state school. This is how I entered a state gymnasium in 1936 when it was getting increasingly hard to get into a non-Jewish gymnasium.

The following story could have only happened in such a state school in 1938: we were looking at some slides of the Holy Land and when the slide showed a Jewish holy place, my non-Jewish classmates laughed loudly. When we got to a Christian shrine, I turned to the boy sitting next to me, a Jewish boy, and told him, "Now they aren't laughing." Somebody heard me and accused me of having said "Rotten Christians!" The board of the school exaggerated the case and found me guilty of this offence. Thanks to my father's being a teacher, I wasn't kicked out of school. The

matter was slowly forgotten. I ran into my headmaster 17 years later on the tram. He greeted me saying, "So you survived, Paneth?" I asked him, "Do you remember my story from the second year of school?" He said nothing, and, avoiding my eyes, he got off the tram without saying goodbye.

It was on the day of the oral part of my graduation exam in April 1944 that I had to wear a yellow star for the first time.

I was drafted several times into different forced labor battalions. First I was sent to Felsőhangoly, where I spent three months between July and October 1944. At the time I felt that I, and many others, were saved from deportation by being sent to forced labor there. We weren't too badly off there. Of course, there wasn't enough to eat, but sometimes after working at digging ditches, we had nothing to do, so we just hung around. In September I was taken to Kecskemet and soon after to Szolnok. On October 12, I went home to my parents but two days later I was drafted again and taken to Szekesfehervar, 60 kilometers from Budapest. On October 15, the news came that Hungary had broken away from the German alliance. Everybody was sent home from the camp. By the time I got to Budapest, I heard the newsboys shout that the Arrow Cross (Hungarian Fascists) had taken power. I crept home and found my mother and aunt there. My father had already been taken to a collection center in Budapest. I went to the Swiss embassy where I found a huge line. I was standing around looking at this queue when suddenly the door opened and an acquaintance of mine came out. When he saw me, he shoved me in through the door. I found myself inside at the head of the queue. The embassy gave me four false Schutzpasses, protection letters, and those enabled us to survive. I went and got my father out of the collection center with one pass, and we all moved from our house, which was then a yellow-star house, into a protected house. Later, in January, we had to move into the ghetto. We were there until the liberation.

I started medical university in the autumn of 1945. I studied in the summer and caught up with those who had already done the first semester of the first year in the autumn and winter of 1944. I became a psychiatrist in the biggest mental hospital in Hungary. In 1991 I started working as juridical mental specialist.

I married a Gentile girl. We never had any children. So I could never teach anybody the Judaism I learnt from my father. Every Friday my father went to the synagogue to daven (pray). He sang beautifully, he had such a beautiful voice that it is a pity that he didn't become a chazan (cantor). Inside, he was always Orthodox, but in practice, he behaved as a Neolog. He was the kind of Jew who had a constant personal relationship with the Creator, although in 1944 he had a serious quarrel with Him. Later, as he was getting old, he came to terms with Him again and their earlier close relationship was restored....

Until 1944 I lived as a full Jew. Since then, however, I never go to synagogue and I don't maintain the traditions, but I think about them. On Succoth, for example, I recall how my father, my uncle Jenő and I sat on the balcony in the succah (ritual tent built on the holiday of Sukkot) and prayed, and how my father kept shaking the lulav (palm frond).

In my father lived a kind of "Jacobean" self-identification: like Jacob, he faced many trials, through which he passed with the help of God. Once, for example, my father fell into an elevator lift shaft and the lift started descending. He started praying loudly and a girl nearby heard him and opened the grate and the lift stopped.... I'm more like Joseph in that I have diverged a little from faith, I'm critical of it and I am a bit of a swindler in this respect. But maybe I'm mixing myself up with the

Joseph of Thomas Mann.