Edit Kovacs

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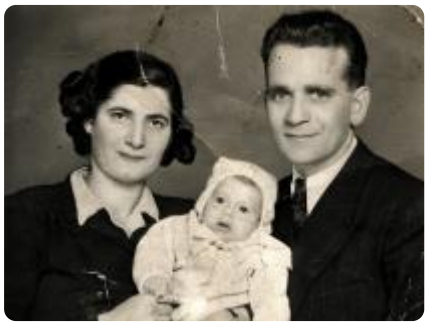
Budapest
Hungary
Interviewer: Eszter Andor and Dora Sardi



I was born on September 13, 1919, in Budapest, Hungary. My father, Arpad Halasz, was born in 1889 in Kiskunfelegyhaza. That is a small town not far from Kecskemet, which had a lively, progressive Jewish community at the time. He was brought up by his grandparents after the death of his mother, Gizella Klein. (His father remarried, and he had a half-brother, Ferenc, and a half-sister, Sara. Sara married someone in Romania and they made aliya in 1938-40.)

Family background

My father graduated from commercial high school and worked as chief storeman in the state-owned local train company (HEV). He magyarized his name from Fischer to Halasz in 1916. (Editor's note: state employees were advised to "magyarize" their family names-change them to ones derived from the Hungarian language. It was impossible to go beyond a certain position in the hierarchy with a non-Hungarian name.) He married my mother, Katalin Friedner, in 1917. Their wedding was in the famous Dohany Synagogue in Budapest. He was not drafted during World War One because the HEV, a public transportation company, could ask government exemptions for its employees.

In 1925, he was fired because of his Jewish origins and was unemployed for two years. I remember how difficult these times were because he had been quite well-paid as an employee of a state company, and we had led a comfortable life. My father started to trade in clothes and underwear on the market, and my mother helped him.

My mother, Katalin Friedner, was born in a derelict district of Budapest densely populated with petty bourgeois Jews. She was quite uneducated, having only gone to elementary school for three years. She later learned the hat making trade. She worked in a hat maker's workshop as an assistant until my sister was born. She was at home until my father was fired and set

up his clothes business at the market. They took on a servant girl who had to sleep in the kitchen because we had only two rooms.

I remember my maternal grandparents quite well. My grandfather, Mor Friedner, worked as a waiter in a cafe. He was somewhat happy-go-lucky, spending a lot of money on billiards, while his wife, my grandmother, was sick at home with tuberculosis. He had a brother who was a captain on the police force, which was rather rare for Jews. My grandmother, Riza Krausz, came down with tuberculosis after the birth of my mother's little sister, Ibolya, but lived another 17 years with it, dying at the age of 59 in 1929. They were very religious and I recall how my grandfather put on tefillin every morning. They kept a kosher household until they became completely impoverished and dependent on their children bringing them something to eat. Mor lived to experience the Holocaust. He was hidden by some distant relatives and was deported with them at the age of 84.

My mother had an older brother named Ignac Friedner, who disappeared in 1919, possibly during the Hungarian Soviet Republic or the White Terror; and three sisters, Szeren, Aranka and Ibolya. Ibolya died at the age of 20 of tuberculosis. Szeren's husband, Ferenc Sarkadi, was a dealer in men's clothing. They were immensely rich, living on Andrassy Avenue-which was one of the fanciest areas of Budapest at the time-in a huge flat. They were relatively religious; every Friday night, he sang in the synagogue. Szeren was deported and witnessed the shooting of her husband. She died in Auschwitz. Their daughter, Klara, hid in Budapest with false papers stating that she was Christian. She left Hungary in 1956 for Australia. I have no relationship with her because she "does not want to socialize with Jews."

Growing up

I attended a state elementary school and then a middle school (editor's note: this type of school oriented the graduates towards commerce, crafts and administrative jobs). I was a good student in school, but I was so uninterested in religion that even though I attended religious instruction in school, I never even learned the Hebrew letters. In the elementary school, there were only two or three Jews in my class, so most of my friends were Gentiles. This was not a problem in my family. In middle school, I made friends mostly with Jews and every Friday we used to go to the synagogue together. I had a very close friend, Zsofi Lieberman, whose family was so observant that her father would not let me into the flat with a salami sandwich. I had to eat it on the doorstep.

I started working after graduation in 1933 and worked in three needlework shops until they had to close down because of the anti-Jewish laws. I was first an assistant, then a salesgirl and finally a shop manager. In all three shops, the proprietor was Jewish and half the employees were too. On the high holidays, the Jewish employees did not have to work, but we did

not have to close the shop because our Christian colleagues were ready to keep the business going.

Religion was not very strictly observed in my family either. Although we celebrated the high holidays and my father would not smoke on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, we did not go to synagogue regularly and we did not keep a kosher kitchen. Still, when we were kids, they would light candles for us on Friday night. This practice lasted until about 1926-27, that is, not long after my father was dismissed and we experienced financial difficulties. My father went to the market for half a day on Sabbath as well, but at home, religion had to be strictly observed. We were not allowed to work, write or light a fire. Even though my parents were not strictly religious, when I came home with my first suitor, who was not Jewish, my father did not allow him into the flat.

During the War

I married my first husband, Vilmos Weisz, an apprentice electrician, in June 8, 1941. The marriage ceremony was held in the Neolog synagogue on Pava Street. Vilmos was born in 1909 in Jaszbereny. This is a mid-size town in northeast Hungary with a relatively large and traditionalist Jewish community. He was drafted into a forced labor battalion in 1942. At first he worked in the Weisz Manfred Steel Factory (which had also been Jewish before its confiscation) in Budapest.

His parents were good Neolog Jews. They were rather religious as long as they lived in the countryside, but when they moved up to Budapest around 1930, they became lax in their observance. The family was very poor because they had three other siblings beside Vilmos. Vilmos's parents were the only ones from the family who survived the Holocaust, and they made aliya (emigrated to Israel) after the war. I regarded them almost as my parents after my husband died, and I kept up correspondence with them until they died in the mid-1950s.

Vilmos and I had one daughter, Maria. She was born in August 1942. My husband had already been drafted into forced labor in June 1942, but he was allowed to come home to see his newborn baby. He saw her only a few more times before he was killed in 1945. He was beaten to death in a camp in Balf, near Lake Ferto, in early 1945, because he stole one small potato.

During the war, in June 1944, my daughter and I, my mother and my sister, and my sister's little son, who was the same age as Maria, were together in a yellow-star house in Nepszinhaz Street. We were crammed into a three-room flat with a dozen other people. The men were in forced labor battalions. In July, the women and children were taken to a stadium from where we would have been deported. A decent Arrow Cross (Hungarian Fascist) man-because there existed such people as well-told me that everybody with a child under

the age of two should try to sneak away, while they would be looking the other way. My family and I went back to the yellow-star house and we were left in peace until the German occupation on October 15, 1944.

A week after that, the Arrow Cross people came again and collected all the younger women and set them off on foot on a death march towards the Austrian border. My sister and I managed to escape and arrived back in Budapest in early November. In the meantime, my mother had been taken to the ghetto together with the children, but we managed to find them when we got back. My father also managed to escape from the Austrian border and he found us in the ghetto. We pulled through the ghetto times somehow. On the day before Liberation, in February 1945, I went out of the cellar where we had been hiding during the bombing to get some food. I was injured by shrapnel and I was left lying on the street for some days and got blood poisoning, so my right leg had to be amputated below the knee (the operation was done in the Jewish Hospital). This marked me for the rest of my life.

After the War

After the war, we got back our flat, where we all lived together until my sister Gizella left for Canada with her son Gyuri and her daughter Erzsi, who was born in 1950. I bought a one-room flat in the same house where my parents lived. We have kept up a very close connection with Gizella and I visited them more than a dozen times. And my nephew Gyuri calls me once every three weeks even today.

I married again in 1948. My second husband, Jozsef Schwarz, was born in 1911 in Nadar, Szatmar county (now in Romania). I know nothing about his family and very little about his life before and during the war. I know that he was in a forced labor battalion during the war in Poland. He was not religious at all, but I think that he came from quite a religious family, because when I asked him to come with me to synagogue on the high holidays, he would always say: "I would do anything, absolutely anything for you, but I am not going to the shul (synogogue) because I have been through such horrible things that I have already expiated all the wrongs I have done." He died four years after we got married in 1952, and I felt that such a man should be buried in a kitl as any good observant Jew. I got married a third time in 1984-I was not so young then-but he died three years later. He was not Jewish.

My daughter did not know that Jozsef was not her real father. I asked him to magyarize his surname to Varnai so that I could change my daughter's name, Weisz (after her father, my first husband), to Varnai, and I could allow her to believe that Jozsef was her father. Jozsef agreed to it readily. But after his death a "friendly" neighbor told my daughter that Jozsef was only her stepfather. When she asked me why I had never told her

this, I replied: "Jozsef loved you as if your were his own child, and anyway, the last time you and your father saw each other was when you were six months old. Even though you are his daughter inside, you needed, and you received, a father for your life."

After the war, I could not work because of my leg injury. So I first started working after Jozsef's death. I took up a position as a cashier in a big state-owned dress making company and I was promoted to the position of a shop manager after four years. My daughter graduated from an economic high school and worked first in a ministry and later in social services. She has two sons, Tibor and Zoltan. Tibor married a Gypsy girl and became a peddler. They have one daughter, Anita, who is 10 years old. We do not really keep in touch with them. Zoltan is now 36 years old and works as a cook. He married a Bulgarian girl and they have a child, Sandor. They live with me in my flat. I am painfully conscious of the fact that everybody in my family married Gentiles, and I feel as if I were the only Jew left in the family.

But I believe that it does not matter whether somebody is Jewish or Christian, all that matters is that they should be good and kind-hearted. Still, I feel proud to be a Jew, I would never deny it, and I used to go regularly to the synagogue up to quite recently. Now I am too old and frail.