

# Miklos Bence

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Budapest

Hungary

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[My family background](#)

[Growing up](#)

[During the war](#)

[Post-war](#)



## My family background

My father, Zsigmond Braun, was born in Regocze. Today it is called Rigycza. In those days it was still the southern part of Greater Hungary. Now it is Slovakia.

My father's father was called Ignac Braun. I didn't know him. All I know about him is that he had two grocery stores. One of them was run by Julcsa, one of my father's older sisters. In the other, my grandfather and my father's two other siblings, Karoly and Bella, worked. Karoly was quite a heavy drinker and people said that there was something wrong with him. He was a very warm-hearted man, and if someone came into the shop when he was alone, he would shower them with all kinds of things as presents. When my grandfather discovered what was happening to his stock while he was out buying goods, he beat Karoly soundly with a hoe and drove him away, and subsequently closed down one of his shops. He kept the one that was in the same building as their house.

My father was six years old when some thieves dug their way in under the shop wall and took everything away on a cart. In the morning the shop was empty and that is when the family moved to Szeged.

My father's mother married three times, each time to a widower, and she was left a widow herself each time. There were a lot of children from all her marriages. Once I tried to count them, but I gave up at fifty. I didn't know any of my father's family personally; they lived in Vienna, and half-siblings and step-siblings were dispersed throughout the world. My father was raised by a nurse because his mother was very ill. He had only one full sister. Her name was Janka Braun and she was crazy about films and theatre. She worked as the film star Pal Lukacs' maid, among other

things. She didn't care what job she had—attendant, dresser, or whatever—she just wanted to be involved in the theater, near the stage.

My father graduated from secondary school in Szeged after the family moved there. He went to a trade school. He became a bookkeeper, then later a licensed auditor after he got his university degree at the age of fifty. Actually this major had just started then, and he went there in its very first year. He even had a patent. My father was a bookkeeper for various larger firms. He left several of them because he was not willing to do false bookkeeping, as the bosses requested, so he got involved in lawsuits. He always lost, of course, because he didn't have the money, so he had a hard time maintaining the family.

My father had a great talent for drawing. At the age of fifteen he drew pictures that we have preserved to this day. He borrowed theatre tickets, copied them and used them to get into the theatre. Dad was a well-educated man. He spoke several languages: German, French, English, and some Italian. He spoke German fluently and English very well too. He made a lot of drawings at home, but I don't really know about them because he gave them away. There were a few very nice pictures of his at my brothers' place but they were lost. He painted a lot and wrote beautiful poems, he even published a book of poems. Beside these, his war diary has been preserved. And he also played chess and taught us to play. He was a very passionate player and he had permanent chess partners. My father got married in Szeged in 1903.

My mother was born in Torokkanizsa in 1882. Her name was Aranka Buchhalter. This name means bookkeeper in German, but the interesting thing is that her family didn't have anything to do with bookkeeping up until her marriage with my father. She was from a family of craftsmen and her father was a tailor. My mother did not study any trade, but stayed at home and dealt with the household throughout her life, bringing up three children.

## Growing up

My maternal grandmother lived with us. I don't know where she had come from or what she had done, I can recall only that she had lived with us for as long as I can remember and that she was a widow. She died in 1931, when I was just preparing for the final exam in secondary school. Grandmother used to make strudel with potato, if she wanted to get on well with me, or if she wanted me to do something for her. There were family suppers, birthdays, and holidays too. That's all I know about, apart from the fact that she was quite religious. I think she also prayed on Fridays and lit candles.

My father was called up for the army in Transylvania in 1914. He was there for 53 months. He was a captain, the commander of the railway in Transylvania. So the whole family went together to Brasso, because at that time, officers were allowed to take their families with them. (Brasso is now Brasov, Romania.)

My mother managed to look after the three children practically alone throughout World War One. We went to Gyimesbukk afterwards – which was the former Romanian border – and from there, we escaped when the invasion came. It was a mess there, explosions and other things. I can remember only the trenches because I was quite young at the time. We came back to Budapest in 1917. My father had six war medals, and had been wounded twice. That is why he received thirty

forints disability pension for a while, plus one forint as child support. That was my monthly pocket money.

When we came back to Budapest, we lived in a big apartment building in Lonyai Street up until 1935. The flat was a two-room apartment overlooking the courtyard. The building had two courtyards and we lived on the fourth floor of the second courtyard. The children were in one of the rooms and the adults in the other. For a while we had a servant. It is interesting that we lived in an apartment building where there was a mixed crowd. Jews who were at the same financial level as us had servants, while Christians didn't. It's interesting.

I got along well with my siblings despite the fact that there was a big age difference between us. I am ten years younger than they are and because of this, they were already going out and having fun when I was still learning to write.

My sister Klari was born in Szeged in 1908. She got married when she was quite young, to a man from Fiume (also known as Rijeka), a Croatian city by the Adriatic Sea. Her husband, Francesco Nauman, was a merchant, descended from a rich merchant family. They had a large shop and I think they also owned the building it was in. They sold fancy leather goods, clothes and all kinds of accessories. They were quite religious. In 1943, when Germans occupied Italy, they were taken away along with their children. They were transported through Hungary in 1944, but we could not meet them. At the time I was not even at home anymore. We don't know anything more about them. They were probably killed in Auschwitz, if they ever made it there at all.

My brother, Ferenc, was born in Budapest in 1906. At the time my parents were living here, in Pest. He was a textile agent. He got married but didn't have any children. He married a woman older than he was, Vilma Goldner, who was born in 1900, but I think they got along well. He traveled quite a lot; he never liked to sit still. He continued to be a traveler even after the war so that he could be on the move all the time. He had chess partners in many parts of the country. He was a passionate chess player and had learned the various tactics from our father. He wrote poems too, and I think he also had a talent for that. After the war they lived in Zuglo. He often visited us, and he used to play with the children. He died at the ripe old age of 92, in 1998, after being a widower for a long time.

I went to the elementary school on Lonyai Street for four years, then I completed four years of Realschule (secondary school where emphasis is on the sciences and languages) on Horanszky Street. From there I transferred to the upper trade school on Vas Street. I graduated from there in 1931.

Whether or not one was Jewish was not a consideration when making friends, nor was it important when choosing one's wife. But the school and the times were such that one sensed who was Jewish and who wasn't. As a result, one did not dare to make friends with just anybody, not to mention founding a family. If I remember correctly, there was nothing special on that subject at elementary school. There was only mild anti-Semitism, which I could put up with.

Passing the final exams was hard for me because a few of us received serious warnings from the director of the school and were almost expelled. About six or seven of us went to the Hungarian Socialists, or whatever they were called—illegal communists went to these meetings too. One of

my classmates was the leader. His uncle was a Social Democrat representative, and his father worked for Nepszava, a leftist newspaper, so he was sympathetic to their cause and he got us to join. All of us in this group were Jews, I think, with one exception. Before elections we “lollipopped”—put up posters in prohibited places—and we had private seminars. Here we discussed literary questions, introduced books one at a time, and surveyed the works of writers. There were a couple of quite talented kids among us, most of whom died in the war. This whole thing somehow came to light in the school, and then the six or seven of us were taken to the director.

And then there was Levente training (Levente was a right-wing quasi-military organization which gave compulsory military training to secondary school students). We were rebels, we threw our guns away. Somehow we managed to get off with just a warning from the director, so we were allowed to take the final exams.

I always did a lot of sports. I swam and I played table tennis, I was good at skating, and I also played water polo. I used to go to Uncle Komjadi, to whom Hungary owes a debt of thanks for all he did for the sport of swimming. He was always wet—always around the water. Uncle Komi was a very good soul. Then there was hiking, which we often did with our father. We’d get up at dawn, at two or three in the morning, and leave—we didn’t take the tram or anything like that—and by 9 or 10 o’clock we’d be in the mountains. We also used to go to the open-air pool in Csillaghegy in the summer.

We did not go on holidays very much. I was six years old when my father had a meeting with someone, somewhere around Lake Balaton, I can’t tell you whether it was in Boglar or in Lelle. I ran after him and asked him to take me along because I had never seen Balaton before. So I saw Balaton for the first time then. I used to row a lot; we had a shared second-hand boat and went rowing on the Danube in it. On some occasions, we took a tent and went for a longer period.

My father was not a very religious man but he showed us everything and observed everything. So Pesach was kept. There was Seder night, for example, which, my father conducted. We read the Haggadah and I asked the ma nishtanah, the Four Questions, and I looked for the afikomen (a matzo hidden for the children to find). I don’t remember having a set of dishes used only at Pesach; the house wasn’t kosher anyway. We didn’t go to the temple on Fridays. I don’t know whether my father went, but I went with the school. My religion teacher was the famous Hungarian rabbi Scheiber and I had my bar mitzva in the Nagyfuvaros Street Synagogue. (editor’s note: Sandor Scheiber is best known for having remained in Hungary after the Holocaust, where he convinced the Communist authorities to allow him to continue running a shrunken, but still active, conservative rabbinical seminary. He died in the mid-1980s).

My father was of the opinion that he would show and teach everything to his children, and allow them to decide for themselves. Well, none of us decided in favor of religion. I have special views on this because I believe one can pray anywhere, not only in the synagogue. I don’t visit the cemetery either because one can remember anybody anywhere.

After graduation, I worked in one of the branches of the Coffee Importation Company of Fiume. I must have been about twenty years old when it was arranged, with the help of a lawyer, to have me officially declared of age, so that I could become a shop manager and have a liquor license

registered in my name. Of course it wasn't that kind of a liquor shop, but they sold all kinds of drinks in corked bottles there, so the regulations required us to have a license and it had to be in the manager's name.

Actually, now I come to think of it, it is interesting that Jews worked for Fiume and Christians for Meini (editor's note: Julius Meini was and remains Vienna's best known coffee importer). It was not a rule, but it happened that way, just like Jews always going to class "C." It was like that in every school: it was just another unwritten rule. They always said it was necessary in order to allow for religion classes, so that Jews could go to the same class. Well, what sort of teachers were actually assigned to these classes, that's another matter and really doesn't belong here.

Vera Wexler, who later became my wife, worked in an office at the Electric Motor Factory on Csengeri Street. There, a girl sat in front of her who kept telling her that she herself had had a suitor who was handsome and was a gentleman and all. Although they had broken up, she always remembered him fondly. This gentleman happened to work in a branch of the Coffee Importation Company, a big corner building on Szent Istvan Boulevard. Well, that was me.

Vera lived on Sziget Street and on her way to work she passed in front of the shop, so we took quite a good look at each other. And one time she came in to buy something. Then I asked her out, she agreed, and that's how it began. This was in 1941. I had already been drafted into forced labor once and had been sent to Transylvania.

### **During the war**

On the 19th of March, 1944, the Germans came in, and on the 15th of April we got married, feeling that nothing mattered anymore. We went to the registry office between two air raids. We had only a civil wedding, and didn't have one in the synagogue. (We are going to celebrate our sixtieth wedding anniversary in a synagogue. That'll be in three years' time.)

By that time I was working as an unskilled worker in the factory where Vera worked. I had been fired because of the anti-Jewish laws in 1944 and I entered the manual labor staff of the factory and became a semi-skilled worker. I balanced revolving engine parts on machines.

But let's go chronologically. I was drafted in January 1942 and I got back home in November 1943. I had been at the Don River Curve (not far from Stalingrad in Russia) and all kinds of "good places"; my best friends died, and I survived by chance. For a year we were in Sianki, on the Northern side of Polish Carpathians, which was Polish territory. When we went there, we still had our uniforms. Then in October 1943 an order came that civilian clothes should be sent to us from home. We were not soldiers any more, we were simply prisoners, slaves, or whatever you want to call it. I was able to survive only because I was transferred from the work company to the motorized unit because I could drive trucks. When the front at the Don River Curve was broken through, we towed the truck away with a tractor, and after an adventurous journey in it we arrived in Kiev.

Then, in May 1944, I was drafted again. There was a motorized-unit army post on Ezredes Street and I was sent there. I went home regularly from there to 40 Sziget Street, a yellow-star house that my whole family had been transferred into. Once I wanted to cross Margit Bridge and I was caught at the gate by a filthy sergeant major and he ordered me back. Ten minutes later the bridge blew up. When Governor Horthy came, we believed everything was going to be all right, but the Arrow

Cross (Hungarian Fascist, or Nyilas) men came in the evening and the army post was closed. Then we were put in trains, crammed in wagons at the railroad station of Jozsefvaros. We had to get off at Pozsony Ligetfalu and we went to dig tank traps. From there I escaped with a friend of mine, and after a few days' illegal loafing around we got into a printing shop called Ervin Metten. The pay-books for German soldiers were printed there in some twenty languages. We obtained illegal papers there but we were caught and imprisoned. From there I was taken to the Lichtenwort concentration camp and I was still there when the Soviet troops arrived.

When there hadn't been any news about me for months, my wife said to herself, "If he is alive, he'll come back on our first wedding anniversary." That was on the 15th of April. I had had typhus at the time and had just recovered, more or less, and it wasn't until the 16th of April that I staggered into Sziget Street, frightfully thin.

During the war my mother and father were together in a yellow-star house in the ghetto. Then a few days before the liberation, my father went to fetch water, because there wasn't any water in the house at all. When he was just in front of the gate, he was hit and killed by shrapnel from a grenade. So my mother was left a widow. She lived alone afterwards; I asked her a few times to live with us but she preferred to stay alone. I visited her quite often. I think my mother used to go to the temple, perhaps not every week but regularly, anyhow. She died in 1960. I can't really remember any more.

My mother had a younger brother, named Jozsef Buchhalter. He was a textile merchant. He married the daughter of a provincial property-owner and they lived in Budapest. He was on the Italian front at Isonzo during World War One. Then after that he had a textile shop on Vilmos Csaszar Avenue in Budapest. During World War Two he was shot into the Danube but he swam away and then lived on for quite a long time. (Editor's note: after the Arrow-Cross takeover in October 1944, their vigilantes ravaged Budapest and drove many Jews to the shore of the Danube, where they were shot so that their bodies fell into the river.) He wrote a book which begins with the phrase, "I was born twice."

## Post-war

When we were liberated we moved back to the building we had lived in, not into our old apartment, but into another one we found empty. Forced laborers taken by the Germans had lived in this apartment and they had taken everything they could carry when they left. The apartment was empty and full of bedbugs, but we were happy we could go back.

After the liberation I was asked back to my former firm, the Coffee Importation Company of Fiume, where I had previously worked for more than ten years. I didn't go back because I felt that I didn't want to be an employee any more, and so I set up my own shop. For a short time before that I became a partner in a stationary shop but I quarreled with my boss, so we set up our own business on Hold Street. There I got acquainted with a man whose father was at the National Bank. We obtained a space from them and we ran this small shop for about four years, dealing in stationary and office machines. Then we gave it up and found jobs. I worked at the official Schoolbook Publishing Company, then I went to various companies, one after the other. We dealt with the nationalization process. Every time I nationalized a private company, I handled the records and moved on, leaving somebody there to become the director. Finally I nationalized the goose market on Klauzal Square, and this is how I entered the food trade. I worked in food stores, in delis and for

the FEKER (Food Trade Company of the Capital), which was a company that ran the markets.