Heni Szepesi

Heni Szepesi
Budapest
Hungary
Interviewer: Eszter Andor and Dora Sardi

On the father’s side, I only knew my grandmother. But I remember the name of my grandfather. He was Sandor Frischmann. He came to Sopron from Deutschkreutz. I didn’t know him at all. He died at the beginning of the 1920s, I think he is buried in Sopron. By the way, if I remember rightly, he had a shop that was carried on later by my father. It was a wheat wholesaler's shop. Peasants worked in the vicinity and they brought the merchandise in to my father, and he distributed it around to the bakery and everywhere.

My grandmother was Roza Frischmann. They were some kind of second cousins with my grandfather. She died in the 1930s, I think it was in 1929 or 1930, in Sopron. She was also born in Deutschkreutz. She was a housewife her whole life. They had 10 children. All of the children graduated high school: the girls, as well as the boys.

My father was called Jozsef Frischmann. He was born in Deutschkreutz in 1887. He graduated high school, then he was called up to serve in the army. He came home with decorations; he was in the 18th Honved (Hungarian Army) infantry. And on Sundays, throughout my whole childhood, we had to go to Ojtozi Avenue in Sopron, where there is a statue, a monument to the 18th infantry. My father was a real local patriot and was also very proud of his country. All the time I heard about the Ojtozi Pass in Serbia and what kind of battle they had fought.

My father was the eldest. Then there was Oszkar Frischmann. He had a very good Keravill-type shop [where domestic appliances are sold] in Mosonmagyarovar. He married late in life, when I was 18 years old, in 1942. He was a charming man. Oh, if he had only come home! He died two days before the liberation in Buchenwald.

The next brother was Jeno Frischmann. There was some trouble with him, I think because he got married to a Christian woman and I-don’t-know-what else; so he went to Budapest and he later died of natural causes here, that’s for sure, but the family didn’t really want to know about him. We didn’t maintain relations with him at all. The eldest of the girls was Olga Frischmann. She had a very cute five-year-old daughter, Marika, Marika Czan. Sandor Czan was Olga's husband. They lived in Sopron and dealt with the family-business. They were deported.

The next one was Elza Frischmann, who got married to a religious man. Oh, how delightfully she played the piano! There was a piano where we used to do gymnastics and Elza played there. Then she got married – it was a marriage arranged by a shadchan [matchmaker] – to a guy from Celldomolk called Erno Lovinger. They moved to Celldomolk and they had a shop and a two-year-old child when they were deported.

There was Paula Frischmann, who never married. She was the housekeeper in the big family house. Then there was Margit Frischmann. She was the factotum, a very clever woman. She was a typist and shorthand secretary and a very big help to my father. She came to Budapest, she worked for the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee and after the liberation she was very old when she got married to a fellow named Miklos Sziklai. She was hiding in Budapest during the war. There was Iren Frischmann who became Mrs. Jeno Braun. Her daughter, Juci Braun, came to Budapest when she was 14 years old and learned hairdressing. She joined the illegal underground movement and got married to Miklos Janosi, a wonderful guy (I say that because I loved him very much) who was the managing director of the Resin Factory. He joined the Social Democrats and then he was also taken to Kistarcsa (Communist labor camp) sometime at the beginning of the 1950s. Judit died in May 1999. Her husband much earlier, in 1976. Then there was Szidonia, “Szidi” Frischmann, who got married in Nyitra to a very nice man called Gyula Lovenberg. They were deported from Nyitra to Auschwitz. And there was Adel Frischmann, who lived in Vienna; she got married as well but there was no child there either. I think her husband dealt with plastic intestines for making sausages.

My father’s family was Orthodox. I mean really Orthodox, with kosher kitchen and everything. At Pesach the shel Pesach dishes were brought down from the attic, there was the cleaning of the chometz. Well, everything was so what-do-you-call-it; the thing you do with a hen, whirling it around [this is the custom called kaparot, which is done at Yom Kippur1]. And there was Rosh Hashanah, and the candle-lighting on Friday evenings, and observing the Sabbath.

My mother, Maria Weinberger, came from a completely different family. Everybody called her Mila. She was born in Zagreb in 1884. She graduated high school in Vienna, and I don’t know where she learned it but I’ve never seen such housekeeping in my life. She cooked wonderfully, and kept everything very spick and span. I still remember that the bed sheets in the sleeping-room wardrobe were put in pink tissue paper. So, she was a real wife and mother.

She had a very large family. There were fifteen brothers and sisters. Only her eldest sister remained alive (everybody was deported from there as well) and a cousin, with whom there was an exchange of letters in 1947 but then they moved to Switzerland. It was complicated with such a large family. I know that my mother sometimes took me to Zagreb in the summer and she took me in Cirbenica to spend there the summer holiday there but we didn’t meet the relatives there either. My mother corresponded with the whole family, copying letters with carbon paper because this was such a [big scattered family] – one lived in Vienna, another in Zagreb, the third in Sesvorten, which was near Zagreb. So I knew some things about the family but not much. My grandfather was a merchant and he led a Neolog life [he was a Conservative]. His mother tongue was German. He didn’t speak Hungarian. He pronounced hens as “hean” . We spoke only German at home.

I was born in Sopron, a town close to the frontier. My father made a very good living there; he was a wheat wholesaler and he had a filling station as well. We used to live a very normal middle-class life. This means that we used to have a family house (but we didn’t live there but in another rented house) and in that family house lived my father’s brothers and sisters and his mother until she died. And there were different storerooms, a barn and a huge garden. Sometimes there were employees too who lived there but I think that most of the work was done by the family members. I know that when I was 14 years old they sent me too to go to the company office to decant petrol.

So that was rather a family business.

The estate was in the middle of the castle district, and now I jump forward because among the papers I found at the town hall in Sopron, I found one in which an Austrian company demanded the Frischmann filling station – our business – in an empty condition. It's all documented, how they took it away from us.

I had a brother who was four years older than me. He was called Alex, Sandor, after my grandfather: Alex Frischmann or Sandor Frischmann. We had a rather beautiful childhood; our parents sent us to very good schools. Maybe that was the reason why it was even more difficult to accept Sandor's death. I can't even talk about it.

On Friday evenings my father usually went to the synagogue with my brother. There was gefillte fish, usually immediately after they came home. Women didn't go to the synagogue. We didn't work on Sabbath. I couldn't carry my schoolbag on Sabbath but I had to go to school, to high school. There were two synagogues in Sopron: an Orthodox and a Neolog [Conservative] one. You can still see the ruins of the Orthodox one. The Neolog synagogue was first bombed in March, it was completely demolished and they built over it as well. We used to go to the Orthodox one. It was very nice and quite big; it had the shape of a cupola, the women upstairs, the men downstairs. On high holidays the synagogue was full. The Neolog temple was bigger, and it was full as well. You can say that there were about 2,000 Jews in Sopron. The Orthodox Jews went to the synagogue twice a day. And I also remember that my father wore tennis shoes at Yom Kippur. He used to pray in tallith and and teffilin every day. Sometimes even at home.

On the high holidays we also went to synagogue and on Yom Kippur we fasted. After the fast there was first white coffee with some walnut biscuits and then an hour later a big feast. The Hanukkiah was lit by my father. We always received some little present. At Hannukah there was masur singing [Maoz tzur]2 and we played with the spinning top for candies. My brother, my cousin and I and maybe a friend of mine. So we held everything, as it is prescribed by religion.

At Pesach, my father conducted the Seder. I said the ma nishtana3. There were about 20 of us, well, it was unforgettable. Everything was kept to the most strict demands, with matzah balls and the Seder plate. Much later, a few years ago, I felt so nostalgic that I wanted to go to a Seder. So I did – Rabbi Scheiber was still alive at that time – I went to Jozsef Boulevard [to the synagogue of the Rabbinical Seminary]. A 71-year-old-man said the ma nishtana. Well, it was so terrible for me, after the Seders I had observed at home, that I left at the first opportunity. I couldn't bear it. Since then I haven't had the desire to go to common Seders. I came home and didn't observe anything. There were Auschwitz committees here and there. In the parliament, on Holocaust day, I rose to speak as a survivor, which was fantastic. So it's an absolutely positive feeling I have towards Jewishness but as far as observing anything, no way.

My best girlfriend was Neolog and she had a completely different attitude. You know, my poor dear mother wasn't religious at all, only when she married my father she promised to observe everything as he wished. And so it was. My girlfriend persuaded me to go to a wonderful shop where one could eat pork. My poor mother -- we didn't tell my father about it -- I said to my mother, "Hey, would you believe it?, we went with Ibi to such-and-such a place to eat pork." She looked at me and said, "You know, my child, what goes into a man's mouth does not make him

unclean but what comes out of his mouth, that's what makes him unclean. Remember this." That was her point of view.

We used to speak German at home. My mother tongue is German as well because my mother came from Zagreb but she grew up in Vienna (so I have no idea how she got together with my father) but mother hardly spoke Hungarian, only a few words after so much time.

You know, we used to have a servant girl all the time and mother used to go to the market with her. My mother was a wonderful housewife and we went to Jewish shops for everything, even for stockings. There were two kosher butcher shops as well, that's where we bought the meat. But most of the time we went to do shopping in Vienna. A coach left from in front of the Hotel Pannonia in Sopron and it went to Vienna. People from Sopron usually went shopping in Vienna – they always said that those from Budapest were rascals, maybe because Budapest was more expensive than Vienna. There were washerwomen, ironers and needleworkers who came to our house, so that was a completely different world. My mother used to go to the hairdresser every week, she dyed her nails like I do – I probably inherited that from her – she had beautiful hands. She smoked a cigarette every Sunday at midday. So she was absolutely modern.

I was a great betarnik [member of the Betar Zionist movement], I was part of a Zionist organization. I always used to go to those kinds of activities and lectures. Zhabotinsky was the main subject and Theodore Herzl. I felt very good in the Betar. I liked Zionism as an ideology. That's why we became Zionists. It hardly fitted with Orthodoxy. Somehow they weren't worried about it at home. They saw that I felt good, they let me go but I didn't become such a great Zionist that I needed to be stopped. We used to go on excursions. This was a very big group and a good one. There were lectures about Palestine. We also learned Hebrew.

In the summer holidays we went to the Loever swimming pool in Sopron with friends and to Ferto Lake and took excursions up to the mountains. There was no coach at that time, we went up to the hostel on foot. In winters we went skiing on Dalos Mountain. There was a tennis-ground and a skating-rink.

I attended the Jewish elementary school, which lasted four years. Then I went to high school, and there was also a religion teacher there. He didn't like me because I was Orthodox. Once I could have been a "bold-lettered" [top student], which would have meant a lot because one had to pay according to one's results, and you know, number 1 was the best mark, the next was a 2. With one 2 you were still "bold-lettered", two 2's still meant "bold-lettered" but it was no longer excellent. And once Miksa Pollak, the Chief Rabbi spoiled it for me; I only had one 2 at drawing – I couldn't draw – and he gave me another 2. I 'll never forget that, as long as I live. Miksa Pollak was a handsome man, he spoke beautifully but we didn't attend that synagogue. Only my aunt attended it from our family.

After the elementary school I attended the public high school for girls in Sopron, which was really an elite school: we had to wear a uniform, hat and everything. We were girlfriends, the five Jewish girls in the class. And my father planned that I would work at our own company – there was enough to do, or there would have been enough to do. After high school he enrolled me in the commercial college where I could have learned typing and shorthand and everything needed for office-work. And in that summer, in 1938, those things were already in the air, that school had an industrial part

with high-school graduation as well but with the difference that there was a greater stress on the practical courses. So my parents thought that I would surely succeed in life with this practical graduation and they transferred me. There we learned sewing and dealing with other materials. Nuns taught there, they were outstandingly kind. I finished this when I was 18 years old. Then I did sewing for a time, under the aegis of a Christian woman.

And then unfortunately, in November of 1942, the news came that my brother had perished. He had been taken in 1941. He was taken to Russia from Koszeg – he had to enroll in Koszeg. He was a very strapping lad. Then we lived in the times when they took away even my father's living. I have that paper somewhere in which he officially gave up his profession because he couldn't continue according to the rules. This was sometime in the 1940s, when he wasn't allowed to do this or that anymore. Then the Germans came in on the 19th of March, 1944, on the 5th of April the yellow star had to be put on. Then we heard that those who would go to Sopronpuszta to work as farm-servants, young people, wouldn't be deported. Well, all the remaining young Jews from Sopron went to Sopronpuszta to hoe carrots. There was a Polish foreman and he used to shake his head, saying that we didn't work well. It was no wonder that we couldn't do it because none of us had done it before. Then we were taken into the ghetto anyway.

At first we had a five-room flat in Sopron and then we had to leave it. The ghetto was marked out in Szent György Street, where there were a great many of us in a single flat. And we had hardly arrived in the ghetto when it was decided that we would be taken to another ghetto called Jakobi; it was a half-completed side of a cigarillo-factory, a ruined building, and everybody was brought in there from everywhere. That was a terrible place, no windows, nothing, horrible.

We were put on the trains on the 5th of June and on the 8th we arrived at Auschwitz. That was when I saw my father for the last time, he was 56 years old at that time. And my mother was separated from me. And all the family members – this was a very large family – everybody was annihilated. I spent three weeks in Auschwitz. When Mengele selected us for the first time, when we got out of the wagons – you know, naked, with hands up – we had to present ourselves in front of him with our hands raised; Mengele was a very handsome guy. He dealt with us with a wave of his hand: this one this way, that one that way. And when we arrived at Auschwitz, there were these Polish boys. You know, all of us arrived with kit-bags with the things we were allowed to take in and then they asked for them, saying, "You won't see each other anymore anyway, so you can give them away". They said that in Yiddish. And we understood it. We gave them all we had. And then, as I said, Mengele selected us for the first time. After three weeks of terrible Auschwitz torture we were selected, again by Mengele. I was a very thin girl anyway, I was in a really bad condition and I only saw – well, with my young mind anyway – that it was interesting that those who had been sent to the other side were in much better condition than myself. Well, I could see that. I was just thinking this when a very big air raid came, the first serious one, which was against Cracow, very near to Auschwitz. There were Germans flat on their stomachs, and panic, and terrible screams. Meanwhile – I still don't know why – I was down on my belly and I crawled over to those who looked better than me. They left us out on the ground for a night and later they took us into the fumigating chamber and the next day we got to Hessich-Lichtenau after a train-journey. And those who were in the other group, to which I should have belonged, those were gassed that night. I still have those screams in my ears which we heard on the ground. And they were gassed!

And then we got to Lichtenau. There they were frightened of us because of how we looked and they tried to feed us up, because we were put into a munitions-factory, which wasn't an easy job. At first we had our barracks in Lichtenau and the factory was in Furstenhagen, which is now called Kirschhagen. It was a gigantic, hidden munitions-factory, and we didn't know – when we went up there along a winding road, we didn't see anything of the factory but greenery and trees. It was completely hidden underground. It was very hard work, because grenade-making was going on there, which had different working phases. I got into the foundry, which meant that we had to stand on a platform – there were about six of us there, in a circle – imagine a gigantic boiler, in which there was yellow TNT powder, which had to be boiled. Then it had to be poked. It was horrible work, everybody was yellow, we looked terrible. And there were three shifts: day-, midday- and night-shift. There were no shoes, we walked to and fro in wooden clogs – there was a six-kilometer road from the railway-station to the factory – and we were very happy when we found a newspaper somewhere, which we could use to wrap our feet. It went on like this until the 29th of March.

Then they evacuated us, or I should say, then the death-march began. They hurried us along night and day because the camp commandant wanted to be liberated by the Americans. But then the Russians came, like in the film " Meeting at the Elba shore." We were hanging around there until the 25th of April and then we went to the Lurzen barracks. For three days the Americans were there, then the Russians came. They took us into a town called Sagan. So I was liberated in Lurzen but the tribulations still weren't over. This place called Sagan was a completely international place: there were Italians, Spanish, so there was a holiday-camp. It was enjoyable and we tried to recover. Then, one fine day, they came and said that a train was coming and they would take us home. But they didn't bring us home, but took us to Berdichev, to dilapidated barracks in the Ukraine, where the conditions were much like those we had "enjoyed" in the concentration camp and we were kept here for six months. Of course, there were plank-beds there too, they were big barracks, it was a terrible place. You can imagine, there were so many people. And there were also some SS-soldiers as well, who had a tattoo on their armpit. We went up to ask how it was possible that we were there and we told them what we thought of it. And they told us that it was the Hungarians' distribution-camp and from there everybody would be sent home to receive their just punishment, or go home, or whatever. So from June, 1945 I didn't get home until the 22nd of October, 1945, I spent such a long time there. Needless to say, that there was nothing: our house had been destroyed by bombs, our flat had been destroyed by bombs. Not a single person survived from the whole large family, not an aunt, not an uncle. A cousin lived who had hidden in Budapest but that was all. Done!

The foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 meant a lot to me. We betarniki couldn't get away from ourselves, you know: at last the Jewish state was founded! I know many people who went there. And now, when in 1989 a Jewish-Hungarian Friendship Association came into being, I became a member immediately and I'm still a member.

I came from Sopron to Budapest in 1949. Between 1945 and 1949, I lived in Sopron. At first my friends supported me there because I had nobody and I had a camp-mate (the poor soul died since then), who ran a textile-shop and I helped there. In the end I remained in that profession entirely, with pretty good results. I was told that I had good taste and the clients listened to me, though I was young. And then, when I came to Budapest I applied to a company, which was called Valasztek

at that time. There was a textile trade center and I went there (my fiancé was already in Budapest at that time) and I told them that I would like to find employment (and that I came from Sopron.) It didn't matter if it was as a salesperson or as a cashier, whatever they needed. They told me to come back two weeks later and they would see about it then. I told them, “look, I’m a poor girl, I lost everything I had, I don’t have the funds to live two weeks on such promises.” They looked at me: “Wait a moment, please!” They went into the other room, then came back and said: “There is somebody, one of our shop managers, who’s right-hand has fled the country.”

The day after that I already entered service. This shop was on Teleki Square. I was there as a salesperson but every evening I helped with the closing of the register. The cashier was terribly grateful and I was happy to do it. One fine day they came and told me that at their shop in Kiraly Street the cashier had to go to hospital and they'd be glad if I'd take the job and be a cashier there. I took it, I went there as a cashier and I was there for quite a long time, until that colleague recovered. Then they took me to their shop on Endresz György Square, as a cashier administrator. I enjoyed it there as well; I did it with pleasure. Then a cadre official phoned me up and said, “There is somebody who was a housekeeper until now and she would like to learn this whole business, could you teach her?” I said, “Look, if the person is not a complete idiot, my answer is yes”. Thereupon he said that it was his sister. I did indeed teach her, she was a cashier until she retired. Then I was made a manager in Zuglo [a district of Budapest].

My husband's name was Andor Szepesi, he magyarized from Schwartz in 1949. He was born in 1916 in Sopronkovesd. They had a wood-yard. This is how we met each other: in Sopron, when the Jewish youth hardly had the opportunity for any kind of entertainment, we had a huge house, with a piano and everything and my mother said that it was not possible after all that Jewish boys and girls had no place to go. There was a big room, and somebody played the piano and we could dance there. And my mother made all kinds of little tea biscuits and refreshments and we spent very pleasant afternoons there. From 1943 on, these get togethers went on quite regularly. The Jewish young people used to ask each other, “Are you going to Frischmann’s bar?” It was every Sunday and there were lots of us there. That’s how Andor came there, who by the way was entirely Neolog – so they didn’t observe anything. Andor’s original job was textile-technician but he hated it. He was a POW in Russia for six years. And when he came back – he returned in the summer of 1948 – then we met again. And then he came to Budapest and he told me already that his intentions were serious and I was preparing to leave to Budapest because I had had enough of Sopron. We got married in 1950. We just had a civil wedding, mostly because my husband was an important man in the party.

Then Agi was born, in 1951. And then they put me here in the Margit Boulevard in a nice separate textile goods shop and I came home to nurse from there because we lived on Pozsonyi Road at that time. I worked here for 15 years, in Margit Boulevard, I thought I would retire from there because I liked it very much there. Then we moved to the Fo Street – Csalogany corner, which was also close to the shop. It was nice, there were good results and there were nice colleagues. And one day I was called in and said that the manager from the downtown shop was leaving for a diplomats’ shop4 and they thought about me. Since I had already been proposed a bigger shop, I couldn’t say no this time. I said yes. That’s how I ended up downtown. And I retired from there in 1966. Agi is my only daughter and I have three grandchildren. I divorced from Andor after a long time in 1975. He died in 1993.

My girlfriends kept asking me, “Why don’t you join the (communist) party, that's where you belong!” – they said this again and again. “All right”, I said, “I’ll go there once and I’ll see.” I knew exactly which building the headquarters of the HCP was – the Hungarian Communist Party was its name at that time. “Well,” I said, “I’ll make the effort once and I’ll go up.” And I entered this room and found myself face to face with the biggest Arrow Cross (Hungarian Fascists) man from Sopron. I took one look at him turned on my heels and slammed the door after myself. After that I never went back.

In 1950 Andor got into to the Ministry of Defense and became a Russian interpreter there. And when the problems started in 1956 they called him in too and he couldn’t come home for a long time. My daughter was 5-years-old at that time. It was rather hard, and I would have liked to leave. The car was in front of the house. But my husband’s aunt was 81 years old at that time. She had nobody except us and as a matter of fact we supported her. There was a 5-year-old child. And a husband who didn’t like to work. That’s why I didn’t leave. I had two opportunities. And [I had] friends in Vienna, too. My best friends went abroad as well. And I said that I had to work here as well and that something would happen anyway. That’s why we didn’t leave.

I only had Jewish friends. I don’t know why I’ve never had any Christian girlfriends, not even from school. I had a good pal in Sopron, who is the same age as me; he was always very kind and I respected his father as well. It was a very nice family. Well, he’s the only one in Sopron with whom I have a nice chat every time I go there.

Agi graduated the college of foreign trade, she passed her English language exam and she turned to the textile profession by coincidence. And now she has a few shops, retail-wholesale, and she had the opportunity to buy that downtown shop in which I used to work. That’s pure nostalgia.

We didn’t raise my daughter as a Jew, not at all; she attended the Honved kindergarten, you know, because of her father. Of course, she knew she was a Jew. And once she came home from school (she was about 12 or 13 years old), she came home and asked how it was that every child had two grandmothers and two grandfathers and she had none. I told her, “Look, you’re still too little for this. When you grow up a bit, you'll find out.” And when she was 15 years old, I took her to Auschwitz. And then I told her there, and she saw it, though there isn’t much to see; everything is idealized, you know. They present a barracks in which there is a bed of straw. Straw? Where? It was the bare ground. And every year, on the day of mourning she comes to Sopron with me. I am sorry now, I tried since then but she doesn’t care about religion. She knows many things, and sometimes she asks, but now it’s all the same. That’s how I raised her, that’s just how it is.