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Interviewers: Dora Sardi, Eszter Andor

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My family background

The Czitrom family originates from Spain. At the time of the expulsion in 1492, a lot of Jews came to Europe, and the Czitroms were amongst them. Of the Czitroms, many went to France and also to other countries. Our family came here from Germany. They were already living here in the 1800s. Their mother tongue was Hungarian, but I don't know whether they spoke German as well. They probably did. There are also a lot of Czitroms in Transylvania. I know that there was a rabbi named Czitrom in Debrecen too. But he could only have been a very distant relative, if he was a relative at all, because I know the descendants of all six children of my paternal great-grandfather.

My paternal great-grandfather was Benjamin Czitrom. He was religious, and he wore a hat and a beard and had earlocks. By profession he was a kind of farm manager. He lived in Berettyoujfalu. His wife was Lidia Asztalos. They raised six children: Rezi, born in 1869, Regina, born in 1871, Jenő, born in 1877, Béla, born in 1879, Sarolta, born in 1884, and Miksa.

Miksa was my grandfather. He was born in Berettyoujfalu in 1870. He and his brothers and sisters became orphans at an early age. Miksa was in his teens and he was a street-porter at first, I think. However, that wasn't in Berettyoujfalu, they had moved from there, but I don't know when. Later, he worked his way up by himself, and worked in some sort of official post in the capital [Budapest]. He was living in Soroksár when he met my grandmother, Adel Fekete, born in Nagyvácsány in 1875. They were already in Budapest when they got married. They had three sons: Tibor, László, my father, and Ede. My father was the middle boy, so he was the most disadvantaged because Tibor was the big child, and Ede was the spoilt little one.

Tibor was a bank officer, and so was Ede. But both of them Magyarized their names before the war; Tibor to Rethegyi; I don't remember what Ede's new name was. Ede had a daughter, Ági, she lives in America and has two or three boys there.

I was six years old when my grandmother died. My grandfather had died earlier. I remember having been to the Fekete family, my grandmother's siblings. I'm sure they kept the high holidays because I remember that my mother told me that they went to their place on foot on Yom Kippur,



and they stayed there for supper. Things like sewing couldn't be done on Saturday, nor washing and ironing. They must have been moderately religious. And so was the Czitrom family. My grandparents were quite religious; I know that my father had had a fiancée before my mother. She was also a socialist and didn't want to get married in the synagogue. His parents didn't give their consent to the marriage because they wouldn't allow my father to get married without a synagogue wedding. I know from my mother that they had horsemeat soup [which is not kosher] at their house, but they didn't tell him that that's what it was.

My father was born in August 1901. He probably graduated from some kind of industrial school. He learnt the mechanic or locksmith trade. Perhaps he didn't even want to study, though he taught himself a lot; I saw lots of books on mechanics and other subjects in his home after the war. He took different jobs: anything from mechanic to locksmith jobs. I know that during the war, he worked in the petroleum factory.

My father got along very well with his Uncle Bela, my grandfather's brother, who was a socialist and had worker's sentiments. Bela was the leader of the Leather Union. He was probably some kind of leather worker. He lived in Zuglo with his family.

My mother, Ilona Fischer, was an only child. Her mother was Irma Schwartz, born in 1883, and her father was Mihaly Fischer, born in 1880. Both of them were from Gyoma. My mother was born in Gyoma in 1905, but only because her mother went home to have the baby – they already lived in Ujpest at that time. My grandfather was already dead at the time of mother's engagement, back in 1931.

My maternal grandmother spoke Yiddish, though her mother tongue was probably Hungarian. But our mother already didn't speak it. She understood it, so if my grandmother didn't want the children to understand what they were talking about, she spoke to my mother in Yiddish. I don't think my grandmother was kosher, and she didn't have a wig either. I remember, that she told us that her mother, my great-grandmother, had a cooking shack and she used to go and cook for construction workers.

My grandmother had a younger sister and a brother. I know that her sister, Auntie Bella, became the wife of Ferenc Grosz in Bekescsaba, and there were six children, who came after each other like pipes of an organ, as I saw them in photographs. The oldest girl, Boriska, went to France before the war and she was the only one in this family to survive, except for Ferenc Grosz because he also survived the war. My grandmother and Auntie Bella and the other children perished in Auschwitz.

My mum was a dependent before the war; she was at home with her four children. The village tradition, which had come from her grandmother, or from her great-grandmother, says that it isn't good for a child to know more than its mother. My mum completed six elementary classes. Otherwise she was very smart because I remember that when I studied physics in the 8th grade, she could help me.

Growing up

Before the war, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment with a kitchen. My mother, my father and us, children, slept in the room, and my grandmother stayed in the kitchen. And the monthly rent was my father's salary for one week, so we were poor, even before the war.

We went to the synagogue on Gyorgy Dozsa Street once in a while. But we went more often to the movie theater, which was there, too. We weren't religious. My mother fasted duly. My father drank water occasionally, sometimes in secret, during the fasting. But my mother was kosher, she knew what to do and how to do it. She also knew that the liver has to be made kosher on the cooking-plate. So, she was kosher. It wasn't like it was in many Jewish houses. In our house things weren't separated so that there were special dairy utensils – but we didn't wash the utensils used for meat products together with those used for dairy products. I have never washed them together to this day. There was no pork, there was no lard, but mostly poultry. But there was no rigorous observance of the kashrut, only that this cleanliness had roots in the kashrut. I remember, there were special cakes at Yom Kippur, Purim and Rosh Hashanah.

As I went to a state school, religion classes were held separately, and I had to go to another school for those. I know that my mother was good friends with the mothers of the children I went to religion classes with, but there was no special circle of friends. My mother had one girlfriend; she was Jewish. In the evenings she played merils or other similar games with my father by the light of the oil lamp.

I had a relative, Aunt Piri, who lived in Kisterenye with her husband. She was the cousin of my maternal grandmother and I went there two or three times for summer holidays. They lived in a rented house. Auntie Piri was a dressmaker; Uncle Guszti probably worked in a factory. They couldn't have been very religious because when we were coming home on the way to the railway station, I remember that we went into a shop, and they gave me a kind of bread, into which they must have cut pork products. Uncle Guszti said, 'It's tasty, isn't it? You haven't eaten anything this good'. So they weren't religious either. Uncle Guszti survived the war, but Auntie Piri didn't.

I was born in 1935, my brother Rudolf in 1933, Klari in 1937, and my youngest sister, Gabriella, in 1943.

During the war

During the war, my mum, we four children, and my maternal grandmother lived on 18 Sip Street in the ghetto. First we were in a yellow star house [1](#). My mother fell into that age group from which the women were summoned to the brick-factory. Many of them from the house went there. One of the women called her to come. My mother arranged the family first, and by the time she got there, there were so many in the brick-factory, that those who had a child under three were let go. She came back to the yellow star house from the brick-factory. There were a lot of people in one apartment in the ghetto, but as there were six of us, we had a room that had a double-drawer bed, and we slept on that, all six of us. We ate potato-peel soup, and similar things, so we didn't starve to death. We could go to some kitchen on Sip Street where they gave us cooked meals occasionally, and we had whatever we had been able to take with us on our backs from the yellow star house. I remember that I found a cup of apple seeds in the larder, and that was very tasty. We ate that bit by bit; we rationed it.

My father was taken to forced labor. He was at home to visit one week, and was going to come back the following week. While we were waiting for him one late afternoon or evening, a member of the skeleton staff appeared, and said that my father hadn't gone back to Keleti railway station. He hadn't come home either. He'd just disappeared, but there had been a shooting right around Keleti; so we don't know exactly what happened to him.

Post-war

After the war, we were in a Joint [2](#) home for a while. We were in Budapest first. It was like an orphanage, or a boarding house, and we went to school from there. We used to go home in the summer. I was there for two years; I completed the 4th and 5th grades there. My sister transferred to Szeged a year earlier.

After the war, we ran a shop. During the Rakosi regime [3](#) the taxes were higher than my mother's income, so she gave up this endeavor. Perhaps also because she didn't want the children to be recorded as 'class-alien' at school. She delivered to the South-Pest Factory Catering.

My brother made aliyah. My mother said she wouldn't let the girls, but would let a boy, go without parents. At the end of 1947 already, he left with those who couldn't get in anymore, so he was in Cyprus for a while, and in Italy [in a DP camp]. He was posted into the kibbutz, so that he would learn the carpenter trade, but all his life he wanted to become an electrician. So later he studied to be an electrician and auto-electrician. He had two children, both born in Israel. His wife was a Jewish girl of Belgian origin. My brother later divorced her. Eva, his current wife, is of Hungarian origin. Hungarian culture is important to my brother, he couldn't live with a woman whose culture isn't Hungarian.

Klari was a miller, a skilled laborer. In those times the children were taught at school in such a way that they had to learn a trade. She got married to a Christian boy named Andras Szabo in 1951. There were no Jewish boys because the boys went to Israel earlier than the girls did. And the boys didn't insist on Jewish girls that much. At the place where she worked there weren't really any Jews, only Jew-bashings. Her husband became an independent craftsman, a tool-maker. He made tools for export, and he did his private work in his own workshop, in their house. Klari also worked in the workshop. They have two daughters.

Gabriella worked in the catering industry. She was a trainee at Csemege [socialist food-shop chain], then a saleswoman. She graduated from the evening faculty of a commercial secondary school, and she learnt bilateral chartered accounting while she was working. Now she is a deputy head book-keeper. She also had to make do with a goy [Gentile]. She had Jewish suitors, two actually, but finally, to avoid staying an old maid, she got married to Laszlo Legendi; she wasn't young any more. They don't have children.

After completing eight years of elementary school I dropped out of technical school due to great poverty. I worked for a year and took a special matriculation exam. We were almost starving on my mother's salary in the Rakosi era. I was able to go to the special graduation exams because I starved less when I worked and earned 400 forints per month in the stationary factory for a year. There was a dormitory, there was breakfast, lunch and dinner and there was, I think, a stipend of 70 forints.

After that I went to the teacher training college as a mathematics-physics major. I taught there, in the 13th district, in Domb Street elementary school, and in the meantime I qualified as a teacher of mathematics at university. The headmistress was a very decent Jew, but she was a member of the Party, and she was always nagging me to join. And so I became a party member quite early and I was a pioneer-team leader. I did my work diligently in Domb Street for ten years, then I went into computing, working for a company named Imperol [which later became SZAMALK]. I was a programming mathematician, later I became a program-developer, a program designer, and

system developer. And later, the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Worker's Party asked for a person for the computing centre. SZAMALK recommended me for this programmer position. Later, I was the computer-system manager of the library.

Where I worked [in the school], there were no Jews among my colleagues, and I probably wouldn't have been able to love a non-Jew. So that's probably why I didn't fall in love with any of the boys. I lived with my mother, I nursed her, and I got married very late.

I met my husband, Ferenc Deutsch, when he was at home on a visit from America, not long after the death of his third wife. We have an apartment here, and we have an apartment in America. We live here for half a year, and there for half a year. I'm learning English and we have many friends there, too.

Glossary

1 Yellow star houses

The system of exclusively Jewish houses, which acted as a form of hostage taking, was introduced by Hungarian authorities in Budapest in June 1944. The authorities believed that if they concentrated all the Jews of Budapest in the ghetto, the Allies would not attack it, but if they placed such houses all over Budapest, especially near important public buildings it was a kind of guarantee. Jews were only allowed to leave such houses for two hours a day to buy supplies and such.

2 Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee)

The Joint was formed in 1914 with the fusion of three American Jewish committees of assistance, which were alarmed by the suffering of Jews during WWI. In late 1944, the Joint entered Europe's liberated areas and organized a massive relief operation. It provided food for Jewish survivors all over Europe, it supplied clothing, books and school supplies for children. It supported cultural amenities and brought religious supplies for the Jewish communities. The Joint also operated DP camps, in which it organized retraining programs to help people learn trades that would enable them to earn a living, while its cultural and religious activities helped re-establish Jewish life. The Joint was also closely involved in helping Jews to emigrate from Europe and from Muslim countries. The Joint was expelled from East Central Europe for decades during the Cold War and it has only come back to many of these countries after the fall of communism. Today the Joint provides social welfare programs for elderly Holocaust survivors and encourages Jewish renewal and communal development.

3 Rakosi regime

Matyas Rakosi was a Stalinist Hungarian leader between 1948-1956. He introduced an absolute communist terror, established a Stalinist type cult for himself and was responsible for the show trials of the early 1950s. After the Revolution of 1956, he went to the Soviet Union and died there.