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Growing up
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Family background

I know much more about my grandparents on my father's side (whom I didn't really know), because I had relatives who told me stories. There is an anecdote in the family about my grandfather, Ignac Deutsch. He was the son of Lipot Deutsch's first wife, and when his father got married for a second time, he didn't feel like staying at home with his stepmother. Because he was apprenticed as a butcher, (in those days journey-workmen used to go traveling), my grandfather wandered up and down the Austro-Hungarian Empire for two years. Then he decided to pay a visit to the parental house. He appeared all of a sudden. His second wife was cooking potatoes in the oven, and was just taking them out. The prodigal son stopped at the door, and said that he had come home. The second wife became very angry. Her son was goggling at the potatoes. But she grabbed a potato of the pan, and squeezed the potato into the stepson's hand. I don't know the consequences, but I don't think he felt like staying there. Then my grandfather, realizing this was not the kind of woman he wanted to spend much time with, left, and settled down in Felpec. He didn't continue in the butcher's trade there, instead he started a pub. My grandfather died young. He had some land as well, and his widow raised the children in such a way that almost every one became qualified. Jozsef graduated technical college, Sandor became a mechanic, Bela was an architect with a university degree, and Janos was a doctor of law. And my father had two years of university as well.

I knew my grandmother, Mari Perl, because she lived almost a hundred years. She was born in 1841. She might have had basic schooling because she could read, and she did read, mostly the prayer book. Just like a country woman. I was shocked by the fact that if she couldn't eat something she said it would be good for Mari. And the servant ate the food she left. There was nobody else but the servant, a farm laborer's wife who helped out if needed. But she raised her daughters to know how to run a house, and they could cook and bake, and they made all kinds of decorated fancy-cakes and sweets when their suitors came calling. My grandmother was a hard, energetic woman, but she had to be like that [in order to get on with housekeeping, the children, and the land]. But she read the prayer book night and day, and knew every prayer by memory. I can't remember her ever reading anything else. I remember that she didn't have glasses, she read

the prayer book with a magnifying glass; I can still see her reading with the magnifying glass, but I could only see Hebrew letters there. I don't think she was interested in anything else. Come to think of it, though, she was interested in gossip.

My grandfather had a street room, from which a so-called sitting-room opened. My cousins [the daughters of uncle Gyula] saw their suitors there. The sitting room had also a double glass-door, which opened onto the veranda. This was a big porch, L-shaped, onto which the kitchen opened from the longer side. There were two kitchens: a summer kitchen and a winter kitchen. The summer kitchen was closer to the porch, and I never saw anything going on in the winter kitchen, because I was there only in summer. In the back of the kitchen there were other rooms; those which had windows onto the porch were rather dark. And at the very end of the porch there was the outhouse. There was no water in the house, but there was a wash stand in every room with a washing dish and a pitcher, and a servant always made sure that there was fresh water in the pitcher. My grandmother had wonderful furniture. It was beautifully carved, and the year was on every piece, eighteen hundred and I-don't-know, forty or something. If you stepped off the porch, there was a yard, and two tiny flower-gardens (enclosed with wire-fencing) opened from there, one to the street, the other one to the yard. And at the back of the yard there was the pigsty.

My grandmother's family observed their religion in a very particular way: they observed what was more comfortable to observe. The housekeeping was not kosher. They ate pork. We were always invited there [to the house of my grandmother on my father's side] for Seder Eve, and all the brothers were there. The high holidays were observed by everybody in their own homes. The Seder was led by my oldest uncle, and for a time it was I who asked the Four Questions. There was no synagogue in Felpec, only a prayer house. At festival times, the Jews gathered together there. There were a few Jewish families in neighboring Tet, and they visited each other.

My mother's whole family lived in Oberland [today in Slovakia]. I don't know anything about them, they all died, nobody survived. My grandparents lived in Kassa [today: Kosice]. Grandfather was a sportsman, he was tall and neat. He swam splendidly. He had a little moustache. They were not orthodox (nobody was in our family), no, they weren't religious at all. They didn't observe Sabbath nor were they kosher. They didn't go to synagogue, not even at festivals. Grandfather came from a large family. He said that when he was seven years old, his parents told him: "Well, we have kept you for a long enough time, from now on you shall keep yourself; so off you go!" And he went to work at a near-by shop. He was completely uneducated, but he educated himself. He was a very curious man, he read a great deal; he spoke Hungarian, German, Slovakian impeccably. He also wrote in these languages. He had a beautiful handwriting – he wrote with Gothic letters. I think the family's mother-tongue was German. My opinion is that they spoke German more easily than Hungarian. They talked to me in Hungarian, but not to my mother. My mother knew German like a native speaker, and she wrote letters in German. My grandfather always wrote to her in German.

My mother's father tried all kind of things. He had a pawn-shop, then a hotel, then he was a book-keeper. I think he went bankrupt. When I was born he had a private house, and it seems that they sold it, because when I went there in the summer they only had a flat that opened onto a yard. The toilet was inside. There was a wash stand in the kitchen. [This was] in a one-story house; the sun shone into the yard, and there was an oleander in a pail. Grandmother didn't work, she raised her three daughters and kept the house. When I was born they had a servant, and moreover she was

Slovak, or as they used to say, a Tot. Later [in the 1930s] they had no servants. Grandmother wasn't a happy person, she was always nervous. She was afraid of everything, and she always saw the dark side. She couldn't really show her feelings; she probably loved me as a grandchild, but I didn't really feel it. She could cook splendidly, and the house was pristine all the time. I went there for the last time when I was 15 years old, never after that. My grandparents poisoned themselves in the ghetto of Kassa, so they were not deported. My grandfather was over 80 when he killed himself in the ghetto.

My mother had two sisters. Olga was older than my mother by three or four years. They attended university in Budapest ,which was a big deal at that time. Olga studied as a teacher – I don't know what kind of teacher – and she told her parents that she didn't want to occupy a teacher's post because she had fallen in love with a student, and wanted to marry him. The problem was that the person in question was Christian and the son of a jailer. Well, it caused a lot of trouble, but she married him, and he got a job in Resicabanya [today: Resita], close to Temesvar [today: Timisoara, a town in Transylvania, Romania]. There he got a job in an iron factory and they moved there. They had a single daughter, and when she was 4 years old it came to light that she had diabetes. The insulin was invented around that time, and they brought her insulin from Vienna. She had to use insulin for the rest of her life. We became estranged somehow, I don't know anything more about them.

Her sister Isabella, or Bella, was sent to university in Budapest, too. She hated university as well. Bella was a very strange woman. She was married off to a bartender. She wasn't so young any more, though she was very pretty, and she was happy to get married at all. Her husband was a Jew from the country who had a high school education in commerce; he had a bar at the corner of Thokoly Road and Muranyi Street here in Budapest. They had a good financial situation. Bella didn't work as she didn't like to be among people. She went to the cinema alone and read. She couldn't even cook, her mother-in-law cooked while she was alive. They never had any children. They both survived the war. Her husband wasn't taken to forced labor service, but he was a member of the skeleton staff in the army, and they kept his rank of officer, because in the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 he had gained distinctions. I didn't like them because they made us feel acutely that they were in a much better financial situation than we were.

Originally in my father's family there were eight brothers and sisters, seven boys and one girl. She died early on, and one of the boys also died when he was 20 years old; he got tuberculosis. My father's eldest brother was Jozsef Erdos, who was 17 years older than my father. My father was 10 years old when they magyarized their name from Deutsch to Erdos. Only the brothers magyarized their names, their father and my grandfather didn't. Jozsef was a skilled mechanic, and he began as a mechanic in the Rock's engineering works, then he became a car mechanic and opened a car repair shop in Budapest. They were rather wealthy. He died peacefully in the 1930s, while his wife became ill and died during the siege. He had three children. His eldest child, Rozsi, got married in Vienna; her husband was a wine-merchant. The second child, Miklos, worked with his father, then he took over the shop. His wife came here from Denmark. She spoke Hungarian, though perfectly, with an accent. Miklos didn't have to go into the forced labor service, because German and Hungarian soldiers repaired their cars in his shop, so he enjoyed immunity. When the Russians finally took the city, on the first day, Miklos said, "I haven't been out in the street for two month and I'm going to see what's going on!" He walked outside and nobody ever saw him again. The

youngest child was Laszlo. He also worked in the shop. He was a very quiet boy and he died in the forced labor service.

The next was Sandor Erdos. He remained in western Hungary, where they came from. He had a rolling mill in his home town, and mills in Kapuvar and Hodmezovasarhely as well. His wife, Ilonka Topf, was a post-office employee when Sandor met her. She was an immensely intelligent woman, and that is why he married her. She was the head of the post office, actually. Then of course she left it. The family chronicle says that her husband took her advice in everything. It was she who told her husband what steps to take, and he discussed everything with her: what to buy, what to sell, everything. They lived in Bosarkany and were rather rich. When I was 10 years old, they even had running water, which was a rare thing in villages. Their mill produced a good income for the family, and from this, they enjoyed electric lighting, a radio, a telephone, a green-house with plants, and even a tennis court.

When I was about 12-13 Sandor already had a car with a driver, and his son had one as well, though he drove it himself. There was a lot of showing-off there, and he rubbed shoulders with the gentry and mixed with them. The family chronicle tells that during the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919 the man in charge was Tibor Szamuely, who gathered in all the capitalists and shot them dead. He called Sandor in . It looked like he would be hung or shot. Szamuely asked him who and what he was. Szamuely said, “Are you a Jew?” “Yes, I am,” he replied. Thereupon he spat on him and kicked him out. Sandor and his family used to live in Budapest every winter. They rented a four or six-roomed flat in Vigszinhaz Street. In villages there’s no life in winter, while here they lived their lives, went to the theatre, moved in society. And they also cultivated the family. We were invited for lunch many times – but very charitably and condescendingly. They were not so religious, but were more so than my mother’s branch of the family. If I remember well they lit candles on Friday evenings, and bought a temple season-ticket for the high holidays. During the war the family was hiding in Budapest, and Sandor died a few months before the end of the war. He was very sick and old at that time.

Sandor had four children, three girls and a boy. One of his girls died of tuberculosis when she was 32 years old. It was very common in those times. His son, Istvan was the head of the mill company. He was a very intelligent, educated, witty man of the world, elegant, handsome and, I hae to say, devlish. He took as his wife the daughter of the head of the Jewish community of Eger, who had just come out of the Swiss finishing-school. Those were horribly rich people. He took that girl as his wife, without love, just because she was so wealthy. They had two daughters. Their marriage was terrible. They survived the war as well, because Istvan had a Christian lover, and she saved everybody. She was an immensely decent woman. After the war he divorced and married this woman.

One of Sandor’s daughters married a wine wholesaler in Vienna, and they had a son. Her husband and son died in forced labor service; she ended her life in the Jewish home for the aged in Vienna. His other daughter, Rozsi, lived in Budapest with her husband, who was the president of the Butcher’s Association of Budapest. Rozsi was a rich lady and they lived a high life. She went to the swimming pool; she swam and cultivated sports. They had a house of their own. We went there only when we were invited on birthdays and things like that.

Rozsi had a terrible death. She was shot by the Arrow-Cross in the Maros street hospital [the Hungarian fascists raided this Jewish hospital and killed patients, doctors and nurses alike] together with her 16-year-old daughter in 1944. Her husband had committed suicide a little earlier and she went to this hospital under a false name to be safe there. Their little boy Ivan survived the war.And her husband committed suicide in 1944. Her son survived, became an interpreter, and is still alive today.

Another of my father's brothers was Bela, an engineer at the railway. He ran away in a hurry in 1919 after the collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (it lasted but four months), because the workers had elected him some sort of party steward, and as a Jew he had the feeling that the Horthy government wouldn't be very grateful (a so-called White Terror swept through Hungary after the ill-starred and aborted Hungarian Soviet Republic). He lived in Vienna and ran a housing-estate management office, and undertook the management of many housing-estates. He died there peacefully [in 1936]. He had two sons whom I saw for the last time when I was 10 years old.

Then there was Gyula. He never graduated high school but remained at home in Felpec, and ran the family farm. Not alone, of course; he had farm-laborers. He was entirely a man of the land. He cultivated all kind of things: vegetables, wheat, cereals. He had horses and pigs, too. Later his brother called him to manage the mill. Gyula was two meters tall and blond, and had a gigantic mustache. He looked anything but Jewish. He became a real farmer, but he was a nice man. He played the cimbalom (a musical instrument similar to a hammered dulcimer played throughout Hungary) in the evenings, when he had time. He married a girl from a family of country traders. His wife worked around the house, with the animals in the garden, and managed the employees. They had two daughters. One of them, Piroska, got married to a veterinarian in Vep, in Vas county. And everything, including the fact that I got some education, I owe to them. Her husband was an amazingly educated and curious man. He made himself a radio with his own two hands. I adored him and was amazed by him. It was he who put books into my hands, saying "You should read this for this or that reason." He warned me not to be such a committed socialist, because this ideology had its drawbacks as well. They both were killed. Some people said that maybe Piroska would have survived Mengele, because she was healthy (Editor's Note: Dr Josef Mengele is reported to have stood at the railroad siding at Birkenau and divided those who were to be sent immediately to the gas and those who were to work, or be experimented on for medical reasons. Historians agree that Mengele could not have made these decisions on the more than 450,000 Jews who came through Birkenau; apparently others made those decisions as well). But she died because she held the child of the woman next to her, in order to help her because the woman couldn't walk any more; they sent her immediately into the gas.

The other daughter of uncle Gyula, Ilonka, used to work in Kapuvar as a typist in the mill's office. Ilonka's husband was killed in the forced labor service, but she came home from the deportation. She got married again to a drayman, and in 1956 they moved lock, stock and barrel to England; they carried everything with them, even the last coal-shovel, because they had a horse, car and truck. Gyula, the non-Jewish looking Hungarian farmer, along with his wife, was also killed in Auschwitz.

The next one, Janos, became a highly respected lawyer in Gyor, a lawyer and military officer. Uncle Janos and his family were very strict with us. When they invited us to Gyor after Seder, we went to

synagogue on each of the eight days of Pesach. Maybe they were kosher too, but I wouldn't swear to it. I know they had Pesach dishes, though. On such occasions they put away the others and took those ones out. Janos and his wife were burnt in Auschwitz. Their son died in forced labor service, only their daughter survived, but her husband died as well in the forced labor service. When she came home from the deportation she moved to Budapest, got married quickly, and they left for Slovakia, and from there quickly onward to Israel, together with their son.

Then came my father, Lajos. He was the youngest. My father loved his brothers. He kept track of his brothers,' sister-in-laws' and nieces' birthdays. So we met those who lived in Budapest on the holidays, and on birthdays, and they sometimes invited us for dinner. As a matter of fact, all of my father's brothers were richer than we were, and they supported my father very well. We used to receive flour thick and fast from the one who had a mill.

My father graduated high-school, and I think he studied law for two years, but he got bored with it. And after that, when he was 21-years-old, he got into the postal service and became a postal official. He was the deputy chief cashier in the control cash-desk of a large post office. This was a position of trust and great responsibility, because they dealt with very large amounts of money. Kalman Mikszath Jr., son of the great Kalman Mikszath [one of the most important prose-writers of 19th century Hungarian literature] was his classmate, and he got into the postal service with his patronage, which was an unbelievable thing: for a Jew to be a postal officer.

As a worker at the post office, he was a government official with every benefit that entailed. He got a photo identity card, we could travel gratis by train, and we could receive something like twenty parcels a year, gratis. In those times the postal service had a private health-fund with private surgery, and it had a private hospital with very good doctors. And there was another interesting thing. Siofok started to be a health-resort at the time when I was ten years old, so this would have been in 1928. Only in the summer was there life in Siofok, so they decided to place a post office there during the summer, and three or life four reliable post-officers were sent there to manage the office. It included free hotel accommodation, free meals, free beach ticket, plus their salary. There was, I think, something extra beside their salary; so my mother and I went there and stayed there the whole summer. It was not a bad thing. On top of this, my father, as a government official, had some other "little" advantages such as the fact that he was creditable: we used to buy absolutely everything with easy repayments. Daddy would get his salary, pay everything, we wouldn't have any more money, and then everything started again from the beginning. But we got everything on credit and easy repayments, because the postal job was such a good guarantee. Still, we lived simply.

My mother was born in 1894. She attended the upper school for girls in Kassa, and she prayed fervently that she could study as well, but they [her parents] told her, "No way, you are beautiful, you must get married." The other two sisters weren't ugly either, but my mother was the most beautiful. They didn't allow her to be educated. She attended the teachers' training school run by the nuns in Kassa. My mother got married to father in 1914 when she was 20 years old, and they moved to Budapest. I think the marriage was an arranged one. During the war, my father was a traveling postman. This is what they called those who came and went by train – and he settled for a long time in Marosvasarhely [today: Tirgu Mures, Romania]. I was almost born there. In the end I was born in Kassa in 1918. There was war and lack of food, so my mother went home to give birth

at her parents' place. Then we became a very strange family, because when my mother was 45 years old she gave birth to another child. I was already 21 years old, and my only sister was born then. When my mother became sick, my sister went to school from my place, and also, to the university for a while, until she went to study in Cuba.

My mother never wanted to teach, she didn't like it, and her family forced upon her the teachers' training school. She was always busy at home. But from time to time she found something to do. For instance, she got through the examination as a tailor, then she sewed over-garments; she also had a few employees. And then she did something else. Sometime at the end of the 1930s it suddenly came into vogue that when the spring came, straw hats were dyed and women wore these. Mother observed this very early on. At first she crocheted it by herself, then she gave the work out to others. But by July it went out of fashion. And then the whole thing ended. About ten years later she was knitting gloves, scarf, panties and everything of mohair. At that time I was also knitting, no, I spun rabbit hair on the spinning wheel.

I observed very soon that my father's family looked awry at my mother because she didn't fit in. They were all conservatives, with an old fashioned Jewish mentality; my mother had progressive mentality; in 1926 she had her hair shingled – which was a terrible deed – and she smoked. No woman dared to do this in my father's family. Her dressing, her behavior… She was fashionable. Besides, she was younger than them. They were envious of her and didn't love her. My mother didn't really come with us on holidays to grandmother's place. But there were occasions when mother did meet the relatives, too. For example, my richest uncle, Sandor, when he rented a flat in Budapest, had to be visited. She went once or twice to my other uncle, these were visits for birthdays or holidays. I went [to pay a visit to our relatives] with my father more often, and I understood that that's how it was.

Growing up

We lived on Klauzal Square in Budapest until I was 16 years old. It was a very strange little, two-room flat. I liked the fact that it was on the top floor. So it was horribly hot in summer with a slate roof above us. And that flat had a strange room, which was the attic, but it was on the same level as our flat. We kept there the lumber and the winter apples. In one room there were the two parental beds, and at the end of them there was the couch, crosswise, where I slept. There were these two wardrobes you can see in my flat now, a little square table, nothing else could fit in. The other room was definitely a dining-room, with dining-room furniture. And this bookcase, which I still have, was also in the dining-room. There was a rather large vestibule, where we used to have lunch in the summer. A very decent sized kitchen opened from there, and from there a decent sized larder. There was a folding-bed, which she opened in the evening. We were on good terms with almost everybody in the house. There were only a few people among the neighbors who were not Jews.

I was two years old when my mother announced publicly that she would engage an honest, hardworking servant, and a girl named Boris applied. Boris served at my parents' for at least 40 years. She came in 1920 and she survived my father. My father was careful with the fact that the lower somebody was in status, the more polite he was with them. If there was a problem between Boris and me, he always took her side. Boris lived in the kitchen. She was almost a family member. She cooked, cleaned and did the shopping; and she quarreled, because she was a shrewish old

maid. My father, when he employed her, reported it to the National Institute of Social Insurance, which wasn't obligatory nor in vogue at that time, so that she got a nice pension. She went back to Csepel during the war, then she came back to us.

I learned to read, in secret, when I was three and a half years old. I didn't tell anybody. There were all kinds of things at our house. The newspapers and periodicals which weren't taken by customers, came back to the post office, so my father brought home heaps of good reading material. I was upset because I didn't know what to do with all this, so when we went out walking, I used to ask my parents which letter was which, and I started to put the pieces together. My father brought the sensationalist tabloid newspaper called Est [Evening], and I read it from the first letter to the last. When I was four and a half years old, I told them I could read. "All right", they said, not believeing me.

"But it's true, I can read. Shall I prove it to you?" "Show us," they said. "This is Est." I said, to which they replied: "All right, you know that this is Est." "Yes?" I said, and I looked through it and read out: "Lover hacked to pieces with hatchet." My parents looked at each other, "ahem," they said, "aha". Thereupon they hid the Est. Then I read the phonebook. My father felt pity for me and said, "Don't struggle with that, I'll bring you books to read". And he brought me the Greek myths called Olympus by Jozsef Gereb. And I started to read like a madman, and I still read today.

My father brought home everything from the Orvosi Hetilap [Medical Weekly] to the Kerteszek Lapja [Gardeners' Paper]. There was the literary periodical, Mult es Jovo [Past and Future, a Jewish periodical], Egyenloseg [Equality, a Jewish weekly], Nyugat [West, a modern literary periodical that has since taken on near-mythical status]. The morning's paper was the Pesti Naplo, after lunch the Est, and in the afternoon there was the Magyarorszag. He brought that home, too. My mother read everything from horticultural papers to medical ones, but my father didn't. He mostly read the Jewish ones. My father read only in Hungarian – he wasn't a very talented linguist and loved classical things very much, such as Ancient Greek and Latin. He knew Ancient Greek from school. But he read Hungarian and German classics as well. Unfortunately, when it came to light in 1925 that a little tubercular center remained from my mother's pneumonia, he had to sell his hundred volumes of Jokai [one of the most famous Hungarian romantic prose-writers]. My mother read everything, even in German. Dr. Norbert Langer had a rental library on Andrassy Street, we were registered there and we rented books from there. My father also bought books but not as many as he would have liked.

For my father the company of the family was completely enough. My mother had her own circle of friends, from which she kept me out. I don't know where they met each other. She was very independent. My mother had a very strange girlfriend from Kassa, who wasn't a Jew, her name was Gitta Kolacskovszky. She was an ugly little old maid with very unusual and modern opinions. She was very free with her speech. She spoke calmly about topics, which one didn't really speak about then. My father was very angry with her, and he said it was she who encouraged [my mother] to smoke. My father had a very best friend until the end of his life [who was a Jew], with whom I think he was a classmate at school. They attended law school together, then they both went to the Postal Service, but Odon quit soon and went to a wholesale store that belonged to one of his relatives, because it was a better move for him, financially. These two men quarreled all the time but they couldn't live without each other.

I used to spend summer holidays at my maternal grandparent's house in Felpec every year from the age of 7-8 until I was 14-15 years old. My parents brought me there at the beginning of the summer then they brought me back. In Felpec I used to sit mostly in the attic amongst centipedes, in the dust, in terrible heat and, through my father, I read the publications sent there during WWI – Erdekes Ujsag and company, Nyugat – and the books of good Hungarian writers in cheap editions. I was better informed about the cultural and military affairs of WWI as a 7-8-year-old child than about the things around me, because my grandparents didn't buy the current papers. I was also interested in animals. I went out many times in the yard and watched the chickens and hens. I had no friends my age in Felpec. Then once or twice my father remained at home because he didn't have a holiday, and my mother and I went to Kassa to grandmother's house. But it was mostly Felpec. From the age of 10, maybe for one or two years, we spent our whole summer in Siofok.

My uncle Janos, who was a lawyer in Gyor, invited us there as well. My niece, who was two years younger than me was there in Gyor, and she used to have a big circle of friends, so there was always something going on. There was the theatre, there were excursions, and everything. Besides my uncle had a country-house in a village near Gyor. The river Marcal flowed there, and we used to go swimming. There we didn't really have a group of friends, but we didn't get bored. We had a subscription to the periodical for children called Az en ujsagom [My paper] which always had competitions; we always prepared ourselves fanatically for those. So we were rather busy. There was one thing missing: there were no animals.

My uncle Gyula, who ran the farm in Felpec, moved to Kapuvar after his mother's death. They told him to stop digging the ground, as he would get a good job in the family milling business [which was my uncle Sandor's], and asked him to move there. And then I spent my summer holidays in Kapuvar until I was 18 years old. We didn't go abroad with my parents, but when I was 17 years old my uncle Bela, who lived in Vienna, invited me and I spent two weeks there. Well, that was amazing, I was charmed by it.

I attended Jewish primary school since from the age of 8. They taught me everything there. [I went there] because it was close to us, and by the 2nd grade there was no need for anyone to go along with me so I walked to school by myself to Wesselenyi Street. I liked reading and writing; I didn't like mathematics, nor the rest. We had a teacher who taught everything. She was the wife of Kalman Wirth, the head of the [Jewish] high-school for girls. I couldn't stand her. First of all, she was very ugly; secondly, she was prepossessed towards rich children, thirdly, she didn't like me either. I was an energetic child and my handwriting was awful. These were my two bad features. And during classes it happened many times that I was bored to death because I already knew what she was teaching. I did terrible things: I crawled on all fours between the desks and pinched other girls' legs, I poured a saucer of water down her neck in drawing classes. Well, this didn't make me popular. But there were a few among my classmates with whom I was on good terms. Mostly with those with whom we came and went together, because they lived close to us. I'm still on good terms with them.

I wanted to go to high-school. When I finished primary school my parents told me that I was a poor child and that I had to go to the school of commerce in order to start earning a living. I raged and fell into a frenzy, saying that I didn't want to work in an office; I didn't want to be a typist. I loved to study. And I won. I started going to the Jewish high school for girls, which was in Munkacsy Street

at that time. [The building] was quite dilapidated, but we loved being there. I remember that there were fewer classrooms than classes. So one of the classes was always in the synagogue. We liked that a lot, because if we sat down, the desks were at eye level, and then you couldn't see us behind them, and we did what we liked because the teacher couldn't see us.

I felt great at high-school. I felt that I was in the right place. Our headmaster, Jeno Zsoldos, was a great scientist, though very serious and severe. [He noticed me on the very first day] and from that time on he kept his eye on me – Hungarian, orthography, penmanship – I liked these very much. Zsoldos was our mentor, we are indebted to him for everything: for our erudition, and for the fact that we can speak and write Hungarian correctly. He taught Hungarian and Latin. He was a handsome young man when we started, and at his funeral two people from our class were present. In those times the Rakosi regime (Miklos Rakosi was the first Communist leader of Hungary; he is known for his brutal and oppressive regime, the constant shortages of consumer goods, show trials and unaccounted for disappearances) was raging, and God forbid that anybody in a good position should give away that they had attended a denominational school. So there were only two of us at his funeral. Samuel Hajdu was the teacher of religion. We read and translated Hebrew texts, and learned the grammar of biblical Hebrew.

The school-fee was rather high and there were not many who could really attend this school; only the good pupils, who were exempted from school-fees; apart from them only the children of the Jewish elite went to that school. In those days it wasn't so usual to send girls to high-school. As a matter of fact, I am very proud that I attended that school.

When I was in the 3rd grade [a modern school building] was built in Abonyi Street. There was a tennis court, one could do gymnastics and play tennis outdoors too. There was also a physics room, chemistry room and a drawing room. It was comfortable, nice, and modern for its time. I don't know how many of us there were at Munkacsy Street, but in the new building in Abonyi Street, there were almost seven hundred [girls]. We learned to cook, in a kosher way, of course. There was fried chicken and red cabbage and meat soup. I remember that.

This was a twin building (the boys were on one side, the girls on the other). On every floor there was a door in the same place, which was locked with a key, and we knew that the boys were behind it. But there were dancing lessons in the afternoon, where boys could come. I had classmates who had boyfriends from the parallel class. But I didn't. As for me, when I went to Kapuvar, there was a boy, and our fling lasted from when I was 14 years old until I was 18, but only in the summer. Then when I was 18 years old I got bored of it and wrote him a letter to break it off.

At [one of] my classmate's place, who lived a very social life, there were boys, and there were always brilliant people. Her elder sister was a student of the Academy of Music, and she had a very interesting group of friends. And because we lived close to each other, I was hanging around almost every day. I mixed [in the high-school] with the same people I went to primary school with, but there were others as well. In the high-school there was no separation between wealthy and less wealthy [like in the primary school], but we knew where the lines were drawn. I didn't rub shoulders with the rich kids, they had their own circle. I felt sympathy for them, but they lived far away from us, in Uj-Lipotvaros.

After high-school graduation I wanted to go to the Conservatory, but I could only have been a private student, because I would have altered the allowed percentage of Jewish students. After two years I quit because I realized that I just wasn't talented enough. That was when I got into the traveling choir. Its leader was a musical genius, Sandor Venecianer, from that well-known Italian Jewish family which gave many scientists and artists to the country. He was also a keen leftist and we sang the leftist works for a choir of leftist artists. I was a soloist there. I found a boyfriend in that choir, and he talked to me about socialism, too. I was very keen.

Through this I joined the Nature-Lovers' Tourist Association, which was a leftist organization that had a tourist establishment in Horany. They delivered lectures about Hungarian literature, world literature, everything. There was always someone lecturing on his own specialist subject. There were very good experts. Then we went on trips and sang together. There was a camp every weekend, and whoever had time got on the ferry and went there. It was very good. I was very happy there, and I felt very great, until the beginning of the dark times [the anti-Jewish laws of 1938]. Then we spread all over. Here there were Jews and non-Jews as well, but we never talked about that. Here everybody was a very committed socialist.

I met my first husband, Gyorgy Tibor, at the Conservatory. He had already graduated at that time as a violinist. We got married in secret in 1943, because my parents wouldn't agree, because he didn't make a living; he was in forced labor service. Even his father didn't know, because he wanted his son to be a world-renowned violin soloist, and an early marriage would tie him down immediately to weekdays. But it came to light, and then we rented a room. I gave Latin lessons, and earned a lot; I had about 20 pupils, while my husband was playing the violin in the Orchestra of Budapest. As a Jew he couldn't be a regular member, he could only work on a per diem basis, but he managed it well. He was busy almost every day.

During the war

[In 1944 when Jews were moved to yellow-star houses] Rozsa Street 48 became a Jewish house (I lived with my parents in Rozsa Street 50). We had to move into a terrible flat overlooking the courtyard, and from there I had to go out to the KISOSZ-ground, and from there to the brick factory. Wallenberg came there, and we got a Swedish free pass [so I could get out]. We founded the Swedish protected houses in St. Istvan Park in November 1944. I ran home to get my parents to come there. We even managed to get my husband out of the forced labor service in November 1944. He was in terrible condition, and I told him, "Now you lie down, and don't move even if the walls fall in, because you are very sick." One of our relatives enticed my mother away to the next street telling her that that protected house would be better. My husband and I remained in St. Istvan Park until the end. Of course Arrow-Cross men came into the house, but we got our own Arrow-cCoss man, and he protected us. The janitor was a very clever old man, he said he had an acquaintance, a barber, who had joined the Hungarian Nazis. If everybody gave 20 pengos each day (there were six hundred of us) and we put it all together, then he would move here and wouldn't let us be taken. And that's how it was. Gyorgy moved there. Every evening the 20 pengos were gathered and he drank it away immediately in the midst of great singing. The morning after we could hardly bring him to life to stand outside (and send away the other Arrow-Cross men). Then when the Russians came in the janitor from the house opposite told them that there was an Arrow-Cross man here. Thereupon we surrounded the Arrow-Cross man and said that he was a

false Arrow-Cross man, that we were indebted to him for our lives, and that we wouldn't let anybody touch him. The Arrow-Cross man remained.

My husband Gyorgy Tibor applied for a post in the Opera straight after the war and they admitted him immediately into the orchestra. There was no salary, but everybody got some of the food, which the Opera could acquire. He became concert master in the Operetta Theatre, later in the Radio Orchestra. An acquaintance of ours went back to his own flat, and the flat [in which he had been during the war] remained empty, so we moved in. It was a two-room flat overlooking the courtyard and it was very dark. It had central heating, which of course, didn't work. There was a kitchen and a bathroom. We stayed there until I heard that a flat had become empty in the 6th district, which my heart always drew me back to, and though it was a basement, the sun shone in. From there I moved here in 1952. We got this flat in such a way that the janitor was a tailor and my husband had used him to remodel and repair his clothes. He told him that the owner of this flat had died. This was a triple co-tenancy. Two rooms were ours, with a common kitchen, and a common bathroom, for twenty years. Then we divided off a part of it, and there were two rooms left, and I kept it even after the death of my husband so that my sister would have a place to live when she came home from Cuba. She never lived here for a moment, and then I remained stuck in it.

With my first husband, Gyorgy, our circle of friends consisted of colleagues, musicians. And in 1956 most of our friends left, then we divorced (in 1957), and there didn't really remain any friends who would have stayed with him. In 1960, I think, he left for Germany. I visited him with my second husband.

Post-war

After the war, I got into a completely different group [through my husband] and then I started to be interested in musical scores. My husband brought home to me the music of the latest piece (at that time he already worked at the Operetta Theatre) and I had to write out the parts for each musicians. This is how I started. Then the Office of the Protection of Copyright admitted me; and there I learned to decode all kinds of manuscripts, to work out the composer's writings, to correct the mistakes that cropped up. Later I worked at the music printing house, then at the music publishing-house. It was very good, I liked it very much, and they paid well, too.

I met my second husband, Erno Andai, in the Office of the Protection of Copyright, where he worked in 1957. He was born in 1900 in Budapest. He graduated from all kind of schools, and even studied two years of theology. I was his fourth wife, but I was his first Jewish wife. He had changed his faith, but changed it back for my sake, because I didn't want to get married to a Christian. We paid the religious community tax but we didn't go to synagogue. When the circle of friends of the Jewish high-school was founded, then I contributed every month and we had many meetings. My husband is buried in the Jewish cemetery.

He was hiding during the Holocaust. He slept each night in a different place. His girlfriends were always hiding him. He lived seven years in such a way that he didn't know at midday where would he sleep that night. He also graduated from the College of Dramatic Art, and he was a successful dramatist – they performed thirty of his plays in the National Theatre. But after the liberation they didn't want to take him into the Writers' Association, saying that he served the upper classes. And that was that. He refused to write anything else. Then his friends took him into the Office of the

Protection of Copyright, where he worked until he got his pension. We didn’t really have a social life; I had no time outside of work.

We were glad about the forming of Israel, that the Jews would have a country of their own. We were very happy. The war in 1967 was terrible. My mouth was dry with fear. And when the news of victory came, that was wonderful. I was there in 1983, I spent the whole month of September there, but I didn’t want to stay there because of the climate.

I had a girlfriend called Edit Laufer in the Jewish high-school for girls, we had come there together from primary school. When we were preparing for the final examination she moved to our flat, and we studied day and night, like madmen. We woke up at dawn at half past four, we went out [and studied], sometimes in the fresh air, on the bench, by the statue of Anonymus in the Liget, or sometimes at home in the outside corridor. The interesting thing was that after many years Edit Laufer finally came home for a visit from Israel, and everybody was excited. The meeting was in Gerbaud Coffee house, and we went there but couldn't talk to each other. We looked at each other politely, but we had no common subject to talk about. Too much time had passed. It was so disheartening. We, who had been on such good terms, there were loads of photos of us, sitting amongst the books, mother took photos of us.