

# Eva Vari

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## My family history

I only got to know my paternal grandfather very late – my grandmother was already dead, I don't remember her name –, as my parents divorced when I was one, and all relations were broken off. I must have been about twelve when my father appeared in Miskolc and told my mother he would like to take me to Pest [Budapest] in order to meet my grandfather and my still living uncles. My mother vacillated but I said yes. So I met my grandfather and uncles. They lived in Nagymező street, in a walkway block. I would say that their apartment was rather an haute bourgeois apartment. I was slightly amazed when we first went in because the first room was dedicated to my grandmother. There was a glass case with the last things that she had touched: her glasses, the book she was reading, everything that was part of her last days, and the entire wall was covered with pictures of her. My grandfather was a very charming, old man, he seemed very old to me then. Lipot Hochberger was his name. As far as I can remember he was a piano tuner and a religious man. I know so, because I as a young girl wanted to help and take out and wash up a few dishes, and there was a kind of housekeeper who said the next day that we would not say anything to grandfather, but I had done it wrong and washed up the meat and milk dishes together – as I had no idea how to do it – and so I realized it was probably a kosher house. The boys – as far as I knew – were not religious. My father certainly was not, and did not look so either.

There were six boys at my father's. One committed suicide, he was called Jozsi, if I remember right. Then there was Naci, he had two sons Rudi and Erno. I had a much better relationship with Rudi. Naci went with his family to Israel in 1945. Then there was Erno, Dezso, and Uncle Tibi, with whom I kept up. Dezso was my nicest uncle, he was also a leather merchant. Practically all that part of the family were leather merchants. He didn't have a family. He died in Mauthausen. He was with Erno, and all Erno could say about him was that not long before the liberation he got typhus, was taken to hospital, and they never saw each other again.

The Ernós lived in Pest. His wife was Jewish. All told they lived well. He courted his wife-to-be and when her mother was dying she asked him, on her deathbed, not to abandon her, and marry her. And as he was a good man he married her. They had two children, very fine children. And both died: the boy was taken to forced labor camp while the young girl hid from the Germans here in Pest, along with her fiancé. From where they were hiding they heard shouts that the Russians were

coming at the end of the street. And they were very happy to be liberated. Hand in hand they ran towards the Russians. But at the end of the street were Germans, retreating, the soldiers turned round and shot them so they died on liberation day. Erno was deported and came home to find neither of his children. And in 1956 there was the uprising [the 1956 revolution] – he was in the Manne Leather Factory – head of the uncured skin department. He was very popular in the factory and somebody kindly warned him to disappear for a while. But that was the straw that broke the camel's back and he said he didn't want to live in a country like this, and decided to emigrate to Israel where my uncle, Naci, was already living with his family. And he really tried to persuade us to go. My stepfather showed willing, but I didn't want to go at all. By then I was separated from my children's father. And I said that I would not take on three children, and go to a strange land, with a bad marriage behind me. But they really wanted to go and I eventually said okay, thinking that we would not get emigration papers. But God, we got them. Then I said no very decidedly because I was already homesick before I had even left. I said I wouldn't go without my parents. As we could go, but they could not. So my uncle's family left hurt because they took it hard that we didn't want to go. If I remember right the place they lived was called Petach Tikva. My uncle got work in the leather factory, but died fairly early and then there was no further contact with my aunt.

My father, if I am right, was the third son. He was originally a pianist. The whole family was musical, due to my grandfather's link to the piano. They wanted to make a merchant of him but music won. I also think that is why my parents' marriage broke up. They were married for a year, and divorced when I was born. My mother was 18 when she married. And she didn't like this type of Bohemian life, working here and there. Later I believe he became a merchant too, but I won't swear to it. I have very few memories of my father. I met him perhaps once or twice but I can't swear to it. He moved to the Felvidek, to Eperjes where he married a Rabbi's daughter. As far as I know they had two sons. I knew one of them, as he brought him to Pest so I could get to know him. He was a very sweet boy and really clung to me. Then, as far as I know, the entire family was deported and killed in 1944.

My grandfather's name was Ferenc Also. According to the family the entire maternal side was Transylvanian, and apparently my grandfather was adopted by a Transylvanian noble family. His name, Also, was not a Magyarized one but the one he was originally given. He was for forty years a company prison warden, of the highest rank, in a military prison. I don't know when they came to Debrecen -- as they came from Transylvania to Debrecen –, and I believe he did the same in Debrecen. He was very popular and never used a weapon. As far as I know there were Italian prisoners after World War I, and all sorts of nationalities there, and when there was an uprising he went down among them unarmed, and could always make peace. My grandfather had a medal from Franz Joseph, of which he was very proud. He was a religious Jew. For me that meant that he never breakfasted without praying first in tallit and with tefillin. My grandfather observed the holidays. He was I suppose brought up that way, and I heard from my mother that he had always done so, even during military service. So he did not eat breakfast without praying first. We also observed the holidays to the extent that on Yom Kippur we did not sit down to dinner until grandfather came home. He was gassed in 1944, he was deported. Although we had beseeched him, as he had papers [false papers, that is] and because of the way he looked - he didn't look Jewish at all - they could have come up to Pest, and perhaps there would have been a way of hiding them. He was not willing to, he always asked what his life would be worth if he couldn't follow what

happened to us.

My grandmother's maiden name was Zseni Grunstein. She was only religious in as far as she attended synagogue on high holidays. I didn't know any of the grandparents, my mother's parents. I heard that grandmother had some sort of cousin in Marosvasarhely [today Tirgu Mures, Romania]. The maternal family was from there and my mother was from there too. I have no idea when they moved. I know that my mother married when she was 18 – my father was from Pest. So they must have been in Hungary in 1923. They lived in Debrecen. She had three children. My mother, Margit, was born in 1905 and she was the youngest. My uncle was a little older and was called Gyula. While the eldest was my aunt Terez. I believe she was born around 1900.

The family had a good relationship with this branch. My uncle, as far as I can remember, lived in Vienna. He didn't find what he wanted at home so he went to Vienna. He was a window dresser. The first one in Vienna. He imagined that I would live with them for a while, as I wanted to do something that was only possible in Vienna. I wanted to go to a movement school. But history intervened. My uncle married an Austrian woman. Even before the *Anschluss* he thought that it would be better to leave. He wanted to emigrate. If I am right he went to Chile on the last boat. He wanted his wife to go too, but she didn't wish to leave. Later on it turned out that she was a fascist. When the war ended, if I am right, she found my uncle and wanted to go out to him, but he said thank you, but that part of his life was over, and he was living with someone over there. We haven't seen him since he left. Terez lived in Pest for a long time, she had a daughter. When the war ended my stepfather also emerged – they had hidden here and there, and somehow found each other. My father, that is, my stepfather, opened an opticians in Miskolc, and Terez and her family thought it best to move down there. So that when we came back from being deported with my mother they were already living down in Miskolc with my father. Then they moved back to Pest, and then in their last years moved down to Kecskemet and died there. My mother had no profession. But she could do everything, as she was very clever with her hands. We were very poor, so she always made my clothes and everyone was amazed at how elegant I was. Because my mother sewed very well, whatever she touched turned to silk in her hands.

## Growing up

So I was born in Pest in 1924. Then my mother divorced in order to move back to Debrecen, I wasn't even a year old I believe, and we lived together with my maternal grandparents. And as far as I know she met my stepfather there in Debrecen.. To me he was like a father. He was called Laszlo Lowinger and then became Ladanyi. He was born in 1905, was the same age as my mother. I have no idea what he was trained in. My stepfather's father was a watchmaker but whether he learned this trade I cannot say. He tried his hand at anything in order to live.

We had a very good relationship with his parents. They lived in Miskolc. We moved from Debrecen to Miskolc, but I have no idea why. We lived in a very mixed area of Miskolc. On a small plot there were four small bungalows, there was a concierge woman and three residents. The one we lived in, my parents, grandparents and I, was a two-roomed apartment with a kitchen and a WC in the yard. The grandparents and I in one room, and my parents in the other. There were books at home. There was no library, that would have been impossible, but there were good books which I read too. I read a lot. They did employ someone to do a big wash, but otherwise there were no servants.

I started school in Miskolc, at the Jewish primary school. From there I went to the Jewish middle school, which I think was one of the most definitive times of my life. Because the teachers there would be far above today's university lecturers. In that school we only learned the best at a high level. A lot of Christian girls also attended the school, as within the school there was a teacher training college which many people attended from all over the country, including Christian girls. So it was not a bigoted school. I was a good student. In those days – at least in my family – everybody spoke German. We studied German outside the school. As far as possible I attended extra lessons. At that time I couldn't read Hebrew at school. I really loved the religious studies teacher, he was called Buchler, if I remember right. He was a lovely old gentleman, everybody thought he was mad. But then I learned to read Hebrew. I did not study music but attended the choir in the school. Gym was my favorite lesson. I went to special gym lessons. There was a young female gym teacher at school who had a private movement school and I went there. This had artistic leanings rather than sporty ones. I loved doing it and so did she, sometimes I went to someone else who coached me for a performance or something, and everybody said that I had great potential. And I loved it and thought it would be a good career and I should pursue it. But no, the Germans intervened.

I was never one to make friends. Of course I had friends who were important in my life, but very few. In my youth when my aunt's family were still in Pest I was often there during the holidays. I remember that my parents did go skiing but there were no big summer vacations. I went to a ball once in my life, when I was about 17-18. I don't know what it was for but it was a big event. My mother accompanied me and I was very much in love which was both lovely and memorable.

I visited the synagogue on high holidays as then my grandmother went. And it was such a meeting place. I didn't like it because it didn't seem to be about what it should be. Religion in itself, neither Judaism nor any other, really appeals to me. Because I feel it is bigoted. But then this is up to the individual, to do as they think right. I remember two synagogues in Miskolc. There was one on Paloc Street, not far from us, my grandfather went there, and there was the Kazinczy synagogue which was the biggest one. Fashionable, elegant clothes were made for high holidays and everybody dressed up and showed off. If I went up to the women's section of the synagogue, then prayer was not the chief activity but conversation and gossip. I didn't really like that.

I heard about Zionism when I was already a big girl. After middle school. As I had a few friends from Kassa, mates, good friends, boys and one of them was a big Zionist. They did foresting and helped a lot of Jews through Hungary while making aliya, so they could get out. I was friends with him but didn't really bother with Zionism.

As my family were not well off, when I finished middle school and wanted to go on to high school there was not enough money, so they enrolled me in a women's trade school where, apart from high quality art history lessons, they also taught everything else, including sewing and tailoring. I believe I was the only Jew in the school. But for a long time I didn't notice it really. It was striking that the Catholics and the Protestants were much greater enemies – I, probably as the only one, fell out of the lists. But I do recall that I always had to work hard for good marks. So I had to prove somehow that I deserved those good marks. Then later on there were signs of anti-Semitism. One of my best girlfriends was a very nice Christian girl, she was the daughter of a judge, we were very close. She was the only one with whom I could go to the theatre and concerts – at a time when very extreme voices were raised –, and she was the only one who came with me willingly.

It lasted three years and we didn't get a school diploma but a school certificate. And I got a trade certificate too, for women's and girls' tailoring. And if you did six months further training you could sit a master's certificate, so I did that too. You had to sit an exam, and the best tailors in the city set the test and saw whether I would pass it or not. I remember I was given a very complicated piece. They let me go home at lunchtime and I was very upset, and told my mother that I couldn't possibly do it. She said of course you can and explained how to. And the tailor who examined me had enough poise to say that it was a great success, although, he said to me, my intention was to fail you. But then after school there was not much else for it because it was around 1942-42. I could not find a situation.

## During the war

When the Germans invaded I recall that I was going home and two really young, handsome German soldiers stopped me on the street – I naturally had a yellow star on – and we talked. And by the end I invited them back home. My mother's eyes dilated somewhat when I appeared at home with two SS. Then the family sat down and we talked. They were two intelligent, very sympathetic, young guys. They told of all the horrors of war and said everything that we should beware of, and that we should believe that they could not help it, that this was the situation. They had been brought in, it was all far removed from them but they had to do it.

I believe it was – I can't remember exactly – around April when the gendarmes came to take us to the ghetto. It was in Arany Janos Street. We could only take what we could carry. My father was not at home, by then he was in forced labor. You could still get newspapers then. And they packed up there and then. They took the concierge lady too, who was also Jewish, but not the other two inhabitants. And the neighbors came over and everybody looked round to see what they could salvage for us, and they took armfuls out of the apartment. We moved into the ghetto. They took me every morning from there to work – those who wanted could do so, and I wanted to --, and I went to work in a nursery garden where soldiers guarded us but they were all right. We had to plant, and other things. They took us under armed guard in the morning and brought us back in the evening. Then, not long afterwards at the end of May, in June 1944 they collected up those in the ghetto and took us to the brick factory. There we were in terrible conditions, all on top of each other. There were gendarmes there and there they packed us into wagons and took us to Auschwitz. They took us in cattle trucks packed together. I was with my grandparents and mother. If I recall we took poppy-seed rolls with us and we had to eke out the food. Well when we got to Birkenau, they took us out and we had to leave everything we had saved, food, everything. And Mengele was there, he selected us and waved us left and right. They sent my grandfather right first. My last image of him is as he turned back and said 'look after your mother'. And then I was there with my mother and grandmother. Then my grandmother was sent to the right and that was the last time I saw her. Then they herded us into a big space – it was June already, the sun shone beautifully, I remember -- and they shaved everyone's head, and shaved us everywhere. And I remember my mother and I exchanged glances, and we started to laugh. In our terror because we looked awful. Then we had to strip naked and they took us to the baths. We didn't know then that it could be the baths or the gas. There were special baths then. And there was no towel, no nothing. We went in single file, there was a big pile of rags called clothes, and you took what came. We entered the Auschwitz camp, the extermination camp, people didn't really go to work from there. That's why I have no tattoo. I was with my mother till the end, everywhere. If she hadn't been there

I wouldn't have returned home. I was very impractical. As I said it was an extermination camp, there were no bunks. There were barracks and about 1000-1200 people were in a barrack, and nothing else, only the bare earth, no blanket, nothing. You could only lie down if the feet of the person in the opposite line were next to your shoulders, and my feet were next to theirs. And if someone wanted to turn over then the whole line had to, as there was not even enough space for that. I spent three and a half months in this great place, from the end of June until about mid-October. Sometimes they came to look at us, because news was that they took the prettier women to brothels. When they came and one saw there would be a selection, then one had to hide, not be seen. And sometimes they took people for work. And I always stood in line with my mother standing at least four or five behind me, so that if they did not choose me, she would sneak out and if they did and not her then she would swap with me. This was my last selection, there were not many in the camp by then. I remember it was the first day of Rosh Hashanah. And they chose us. And my mother said, it's awful here but we've got used to it. Shouldn't we stay here? And I said Mum, they haven't chosen us yet, now they have, so let's go. Not one of those who remained behind came home. And they took us to Bergen-Belsen which was a holiday compared to Auschwitz, because there were tents, straw or something strewn on the floor, and everyone got two blankets. It was very cold by then. Four of five of us laid down a blanket and huddled together and put the remaining blankets over ourselves. In Auschwitz the food was not food, it was like cut field grass cooked up with nothing else. So Bergen-Belsen was more normal. And there was a line up there too, and they took us to Wienerneustadt where there was a huge arms factory. The conditions were more humane there: there were bunk beds and everyone had their own sleeping place. They took us into a huge room – lots of people worked there – and sat everyone down. I was in a completely different part of the room to my mother, where they were making hand grenade heads. And there was a very nice forewoman. And she got to know that my mother spoke German well, and said she wasn't allowed to talk to us but she did. And she said that in the line in front, they are very slow to learn what they have to do. And my mother took the chance and said that her daughter was working here, and she was very good with her hands, why didn't she try her. So they took me on.

At first there was lots of work and then increasingly little. And the management decided to take us out for outdoor work, to weed. And at that time the German supervisor, the very nice SS woman said that she needed three prisoners, because she has a lot of goods which she needed to pack up. An old classmate of mine worked beside me. And she said that she needed my mother, me and that girl. So for a long time that's what we did: there were the grenade heads which had to be packed by 12 into a bakelite box, and then so many of these boxes had to be packed into a wooden crate. And she kept back, I don't know how many crates, and so that was our work, every morning we opened a crate, poured out all the grenade heads and packed them up until the evening. But we were warm and didn't have to freeze outside.

Then the day came when they said the English are coming, the Americans are coming and the Russians, and the prisoners must be taken away. So they put us in wagons and we traveled in them for three weeks. This was about March-April 1945. We arrived somewhere, they had barely billeted us, when we had to move on. One day the daily ration was corn ears, poured into our palms and we had to chew on them. And finally we arrived in Teresien, but we did not know where we were, as Teresienstadt was one of the show camps where families stayed together, could receive parcels



and write letters. It was a military camp like a city in itself, with bastioned houses and people lived there. They took us up there and they came up from the town below looking for relations, acquaintances and family. And a young boy came, we spoke and he said that they were forced laborers and that there was a hospital and they work there. I asked him if a Hofberger was not with them by any chance? I still remember that as I asked I felt how stupid to ask such a question in such a place. But he said yes, there is, Rudi, my best friend. I told him I was his cousin, and to let him know. And he went away and an hour later my cousin appeared, and I got the best present of all from him: two toothbrushes. We hadn't seen one for a year. And he brought food up. And one day we got up, there was also a woman from Miskolc, if I recall, with whom I had been very friendly in Auschwitz, and a potter woman from Hajduszoboszlo. Mother, the Miskolc woman, the potter and I woke up in the tent and there was no one. And we went out and the whole camp was empty. What was this? And then we knew the Russians had come in the night.

The Russians took over in Teresien and said that as Teresien belonged to Czechoslovakia naturally they would take the Czechs home first, and those boys who worked in the hospital, and every one could take home two relations too. My cousin came and said that he and another friend, who had nobody, would take both of us and the Miskolc and Hajduszoboszlo women, so we could go home, without waiting, on the special Russian train.

### After the war

Sometime at the end of June, at the beginning of July, we got home. And we arrived in Pest and everyone raced home to see who was left in the family. We went to my uncle's where there were only my two aunts, because my uncle had not turned up yet. Then there was some sort of Jewish charity, which gave papers or money, I can't remember which. But I do remember that I went down the street and met an old Miskolc acquaintance who said he would give me money. I said don't give me money, what for. He knew what I found when I came home. And said that I should take the money because my father had a business in Miskolc so I could pay it back. I said thank you and we went down to Miskolc. Apparently everyday they wrote down who had survived on the synagogue walls, and they knew that we were alive. My father had a rented apartment in those days, and my aunt was there and my cousin, and my father had the business. My father had joined up with another, who had a jewelry shop on the main street. So it became an opticians and jewelers, and it was a big business. His partner had a son who was a trained optician, and he had a little shop and workshop behind it. My parents then decided that they would be in the big shop, me running the small one, and the boy working in the workshop. So I had no problem making a living.

A few days after our return we had to go and buy some clothes. I met my husband when we went shopping. They had a textile shop right in the center of town in the Weinich Court, a big shop with double portals. And a gentleman was standing there. They were still called Weitzenfeld then. The girls were born with that name, if I recall we got the papers in Pest with our Magyarized names. We became Vari.

In my husband's family there were three boys and three girls, and everyone Magyarized differently. He was born in Miskolc in 1906. He became a merchant. His was a well-to-do family. They married off the boys and girls. Pali was very well trained, he helped his parents in the shop, so that when they were no more he would inherit it. His wife and 12 year-old son were deported. They did not return. His parents didn't either, so he was alone.

One of his siblings, who before Pali came home, was a cloth merchant in Pest. He had two children, they moved down to Miskolc, moved into his parents' apartment and were very surprised when Pali turned up. And they said that if Pali was already there, then they should run the business together. Then the third brother, Gyuszi, who was also in cloth in Pest, decided he would come in on it too. And he entered the business, so that when I went into the shop I was like some sort of noble stranger.

When we got married I was twenty and he was forty. But he was very handsome, a fine figure of a man, and very gentle. My parents wanted nothing to do with it. They always said that he was too old. I had as many suitors as stars in the sky. The Jewish boys, who survived, came home with nothing, no families left. I was a striking girl. I could have had another, but I wanted this one, I wanted a calm, balanced life after the deportations. If I remember we got married that December. We had a Jewish wedding, because as his wife's body had not been found we couldn't have a civil one. And then the civil ceremony took place a year later. I would have liked children from the start but for a year I did not get pregnant. When I was pregnant with Zsuzsika I didn't work. The twins were born in 1950. We didn't know there would be twins. They were born at home and when the first came out I would have stood up, but the doctor said 'lie still, another's coming'. My mother helped a lot in bringing them up. I could take on a lot of work as I knew she would be with them.

The girls were not brought up religious, not only because I was not religious but because it was always a principle of mine not to bring children up in two ways. And when they started to go to school then religion was not at issue – which I believe is quite right. Their first encounter with Jewishness was in Miskolc. There was an inner yard where we lived and one of the neighbor's siblings had a little girl who was the same age as mine, they played together. One day Zsuzsika rushed in crying that what's-her-name she said I'm Jewish. Is that why you're crying, I asked. Well, she thought it was a terrible insult. And then I explained that 'you are a Jew, so is your mother and your father, being Jewish is a religion, but this does not concern us, one man is very like another so don't cry, it's not an insult. If they say you are a Jew, then be proud say yes, I am a Jew'. And then I went to see the neighbor and told them to drop the subject, because perhaps they didn't know it, but this type of prejudice against the community entails punishment. And that the child did not make it up herself but heard it at home.

We always had Christmas. There was always a tree up to the ceiling. In my childhood we didn't have one at home. I don't think we could have afforded it. But for Zsuzsika and all the children there was a Christmas tree. Zsuzsika had some things which Gyuri her husband tolerated with difficulty.

After 12 years of marriage we split up on 5 September 1957. After much discussion we agreed that he would give me 1,000 forints a month for the three children. I definitely wanted to move from Miskolc. I didn't like it. It is a typical small town. Here was an estate agent in town and I said if they found an apartment exchange in Pest to let me know. Our apartment was nice and in a good place. And they telephoned and said there is someone who would like to swap apartments urgently for a Miskolc one. A young woman came, she loved the apartment and we signed the papers. I said I would like to see what I'm getting. My father came with me. And we came up and I really didn't like it. The Miskolc one had big French windows and double doors, everything there was small. And my father said: "Now listen, this isn't a bad apartment. You will never have another chance to swap for



free. No matter that your apartment is lovely, the provinces are the provinces and Pest is Pest". I let myself be convinced.

My father died in 1957, very suddenly, in the same year we moved to Pest. My mother stayed with us, she had a widow's pension. And I worked a lot, day and night. When we split up I was working in a plastics cooperative, I was only a group manager at that time. I was also a founding member of the cooperative, I knew it all, we worked a lot for export. The manager of the plant was the wife of a bigwig, she had no idea what she was doing. She had to go to a lot of negotiations with export companies, I always went with her. So I got to know people and was able to find another job. I went to Pilismarot as there was a cooperative there, and I had to organize people, to set up a plant. I went there every afternoon after work. Mother was with the children then. In the end she brought them up. She died in 1977.

Then we were allowed to take on outside workers, and there was a big flood around then and huge plastic sheets were made for the dikes. I took my mother on as an outsider, and on the weekend I made these sheets until dawn. Then there were things that had survived, jewelry, rings, pictures which we sold whenever we could, and so we survived. I started as a group leader and retired as a manager. If I had joined the Party then I might have been the president. But despite everything I managed it and became the president of the cooperative's committee. I was paid well. But I worked a lot, as there was no fixed work time. I was a manager, more than 100 people worked under me. I ran three businesses on a single country site and two in Pest. They well knew that I would fight for everything possible, without extra payment for it.

I was never in the Party. Once in the cooperative, the then party secretary said to me, "Evi, you should ask to join the Party". I said 'that's a great honor but no thanks'. He was very surprised 'Why not?'. I told him that as long as I had to defend my workers against them, I had no need of a little red book. And they realized that I was a Jew and was not willing to enter the Party.