

# Andreja Preger

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I was born in Pecs, Hungary in 1912. At the time my grandfather had a tailor shop there, and all three of his sons probably worked there. In addition to three sons he also had two daughters. I believe that my father, who finished the Commercial Academy, took the initiative to move the store to Zagreb. Right on Jelacicev Square, on the first floor was the "Samuel Preger and Sons" tailor shop. My father was a merchant and his brother, Edo, was the tailor. The business did not last long because World War I soon broke out. My father and uncle had to go to the army, their youngest brother was released from service probably so that someone could remain with the family. We moved to Pecs [Hungary] where we spent all of WWI.

My father regularly went to *shul*, Temple, and most likely did not speak Yiddish, but he did know German which was spoken at home. Children that went to school also spoke Hungarian. We celebrated all the holidays. I remember that my grandfather lit Chanukah candles, Maoz Tzor was sung and we had a Seder. A lamb was bought, we had a small yard where I used to play with the lamb and I wondered what had happened to it. I could not imagine that we had eaten it. My grandfather was almost 70 years older than I and he did not spend a lot of time with me. He did not take me on walks, others did that because he was already sick. I remember that he strictly observed all the holidays. He was a tailor and made suits. He had to be dressed elegantly to attract customers; they had a shop on Kraljevska Street in Pecs.

My grandmother was from the Kelert family, a large family. Her brother had many children and they were all successful merchants. Eugen Kelert, who was my father's cousin, went to Vienna for an apprenticeship. There he became wealthy, had a house and married the daughter of Otto Weininger, the famous philosopher. Later he had to flee the Nazis. He was a representative for "Faber", an international pen factory. He lived in Vienna, London and Montreal and died at the age of 104. His brother Vili was a representative for a textile firm and became the director of an Austrian textile factory in Zagreb. All the Kelerts were very capable merchants. Our family was very close to them. My grandmother was a corpulent housewife. She had a prayer book in which she recorded the births and deaths of all her children and grandchildren. She died at the age of 70, before my grandfather even though he was a bit younger. My grandfather died soon after. Although my grandfather had a very small house, which he most likely bought with his own money, he sold that house while we were still in it and bought a note from state stocks. The entire deal fell apart and we had to move from this house to Zagreb.

I know a little more about my other grandfather because we always went on vacation together to Levice [Slovakia]. He was a very hardworking man. He had a store and a house with a garden that he tended to. He had a tailor shop with textiles. He supported one son in his education to become

an engineer. This son was the first to marry a non-Jewish woman. His other son was a merchant and took care of the store. All five daughters received their dowries and were married in succession. He was very vain and a master tailor. If a client did not like a suit he would remake it at his own expense since he did not want anything that was not perfect to leave his store. He was well liked, he had a lot of employees and tailors who worked for him and he ran the store. During communism, in 1919 [*the Hungarian Soviet Republic which lasted 133 days*], they took his shop and the next day it was returned to him.

My family observed the high holidays. On Rosh Hashanah we went to Temple. On Chanukah we lit candles. Every Friday my mother would light candles. We did not observe Shabbat because the shop was opened. For Pesach we had a Seder not just for our immediate family but also for my father's brother's family. Our two families lived together. The Hagadah was read, dinner was eaten and wine was drunk. I had a bar mitzvah. My father read from the Torah that day and gave a contribution to charity, *shnodern*. The holidays were connected to the family and were celebrated at home.

My father's family and his brother were always together and the two brothers ended up marrying two sisters. Both of our families were always very close and my father and his brother were partners in the shop. We lived together in the same house and socialized together. My younger cousin, my uncle's son, became a rich industrialist. He and his wife's family were in Hashomer Hatzair. We gathered every day around the nest and went on camping trips, *mahane*, together. My father's brother had two children, a son Dura and a daughter Piroska, who is still living and has a house in Dubrovnik. She is also a pianist and finished the Zagreb Music Academy. She was a piano professor. We always played together and shared the same piano. When we divided up the house she got the piano, so that I practiced at her place. Piroska did not give public concerts she was exclusively a professor. My sister was born when I was already 13 years old. The war began, we lost our father and I was her father in his place. At the age of 18 she went to Italy and there she married. In general she was with my mother and aunt.

I started school in the first grade of the Jewish school. I have no idea how many Jews there were in Pecs. It was a mining town with coal miners and a mining movement, one of the mining leaders was a Jew. In 1919 the Independent Republic of Pecs [Hungary] was declared. I remember this because there was no money and marks were used. It was a small town. After 40 years I returned to Pecs [Hungary] to hold a concert with my colleagues and it seemed so small to me. Nonetheless, it was a city that was under the Turks, there is a *hamam*, a Turkish bathroom, almost on the main square. We never went there. I do not know if there was a mikvah and if there was one if anyone from my family used it. The Jewish community there is very old. My good friend Jozsef Scheiber, who was the chief rabbi of Budapest, was from Pecs. He spoke Hebrew and he finished the Rabbinical Seminar. Pecs [Hungary] is the county capital of Baranya where there were many Jews and many Serbs. In general, there were many Jews in Hungary and every place had Jewish merchants.

In 1919, I returned with my parents and uncle to Zagreb. In Zagreb I went to a Jewish elementary school. I finished the first grade of elementary school in Hungarian. In Zagreb I continued my studies in German and Croatian, which my teacher taught me. I went to the Jewish school in the Jewish community at 16 Palmoticev Street in Zagreb. The director was Dr. Hozeja Jakobi, chief

rabbi. It was a school like every other school but we learned Hebrew and the blessings, which I still know today. After finishing elementary school I went to secondary school, the Real Gymnasium, in Zagreb. I remember that there was a Real Gymnasium from the eighth grade.

We Jews socialized more than others. In our class in the Real Gymnasium there were five Jews. I think that I am the only one still living from this group. There was Ivo Kraus, who became the deputy attorney general in Zagreb. His son is the current president of the Zagreb Jewish community. Ivica Hirsl was the communist son of a lawyer; he became a judge on the Supreme Court in Zagreb. Kalos, is from Hungary, his father was the director of a steam mill in Zagreb. They returned to Hungary and died there in an accident. Srecko Stajner, he changed his name to Stanic, was a high functionary in the Statistical Institute. The five of us and all the other Jews in the other gymnasiums attended joint lectures given by Gavro Svarc.

I started to study piano, with my cousin Elza Podvinec, when I was just five years old. I loved to play so there was no need for anyone to force me. In Zagreb I went first to the preparatory, then the lower school and in the end the secondary school of the Zagreb Croatian Music Institute with Prof. Sidonija Gajger. I passed the graduation exams and the test for music teachers. At the age of 13, I was a child prodigy when I performed Liszt's opera, Faust. When we returned to Zagreb, the apartment we had lived in before had been liquidated and we did not have an apartment so we moved into the shop on Jelacicev Square—an apartment without a bathroom. We lived there from 1919-1925. We had a piano, which my cousin Piroška and I shared.

During my secondary school years I joined the Ahdut Hasofim movement, like most other Jewish children. This was a youth society very leftist oriented, led by Salom Frajberger, who studied in Berlin at a college for Jewish sciences, and Cvilo Rotviler. They had a great influence and many people became involved in Zionism and left-wing Zionism. I was also in the society for secondary school students, the literary society, which included the debate club, we held lectures, papers, discussions about literature, Jewish and historical themes, our ideas flowed from here. Before me the president of the club was Pauli Svarc, son of the chief rabbi. I made quite a revolution [*because*] this was a society of men, like the Jewish religion, a religion of males. I say this because women do not have to perform any religious functions, they only have to know what kashrut is. I also brought girls into the movement, like Rut Lederer. Later I was in the youth movement which transformed into Hashomer Hatzair. All of its members were prepared for *Halutzit*, i.e. to move to Israel. This was a well-formed organization whose members were prepared for *Hachshara*, preparation for crafts and agriculture. In addition to Hashomer Hatzair, there was also Tehelet Lavan and Hedut, which were divided according to their political orientations. The Zionist movement covered a wide spectrum: on the left there were the Workers of Zion, in the center the General Zionists and on the right the Revisionists. All the youth were organized in the Federation of Jewish Youth Societies and this Federation organized meetings. There were lectures, discussions but the main activities were songs and dances in Yiddish and Hebrew where the youth came together. On our own we organized camping trips, *machane*. We organized everything by ourselves, in the evenings we lit a camp fire around which we held discussions, and sang and danced. There were theological courses, Hebrew courses. Later (after World War II), during my engagement in the Jewish community, I participated in summer camps, at that time they were organized by the Federation: creating programs, finding the place for the camp, I acted as business manager who took care of the food.

The time came for me to decide what I would do next. I wanted to become an engineer. Therefore, in the third grade of secondary school I decided to take geometric drawing instead of Latin. When it came time for higher studies, I wanted to study in the Leipzig Conservatory but this was a big financial strain and my parents wanted me to study something more practical. I was under the influence of ideology so I wanted to enroll in law studies but I did not know Latin. I failed the entrance exam. However, I found out that in Belgrade one could pass the entrance exam without Latin. In 1931, I spent two semesters in Leipzig and then came to Belgrade. In Belgrade I had friends, the Davico brothers. One was an aircraft engineer, the other Avram, a lawyer who died in Palestine and Lujo Davico a ballet dancer. He introduced me to the entire Jewish community. In September I passed the law school entrance exam.

There was a crisis and my parents were no longer able to finance my studies in Leipzig. I had to help my father and uncle in the tailor shop. I finished the law school in 1936. I began working in a big Czech firm as translator, but we understood that I needed to go further. I translated from German and French. German I learned from my governess and later in school. French I learned privately and English I taught myself. For my doctoral exam I passed three rigorous exams, which were called *rigoroz*. Two I passed easily and the third I failed. Only later did I pass and receive my doctor of law title. I became a law clerk with Dr. Mark Horn, who was our cousin and the president of the Jewish community. I distanced myself a bit from the youth movement because I did not want to go to kibbutz with the others. I became employed by Feliks Sternberg. In the political sense, I collaborated with unions and with the Zionist movement. There were Zionists and assimilationists and I was among the Zionists. I prepared for the bar exam because I had to have five years work experience, including one year in court. I passed it in March 1941.

War broke out. I was mobilized as a reserve officer. On April 2 I went to Sinj to defend Split from invasion. I was there until April 10. After laying down our arms, after the announcement of the Independent State of Croatia and when the Italian army came marching into Split there were only seven of us officers, without an army and I returned to Zagreb, where I hid myself with a friend. They were looking for members of Hashomer Hatzair, lawyers and law clerks, so that they could deprive the community of its leaders. I managed to bring my sister, who now lives in Budapest, and I sent my parents a pass notarized by the Germans which was sold blank. My parents were in Zagreb and I was in Split. They started on their way in spite of my instructions and were captured in Drnis. My father only then began wearing a yellow star below his lapel. They took them to Knin. My parents looked for a way to get back to Zagreb into a police prison. Friends and distant relatives got them out of prison but they could not come to Split because the partisans had destroyed the tracks. They caught my father and my uncle in the street, captured them and after a month they said there was no longer a need for us to send food because they were gone. It was known that they were sent to the Jasenovac death camp. Later, I found in a notation in a publication that the Preger brothers had been found with money in their socks which was forbidden and they were immediately killed. That is how I lost them. Nevertheless, my mother, aunt and sister came and the four of us lived in Split until liberation. We boarded a small boat, with about 30 other Jews, in September 1943. The partisans controlled all the points with ships and they captured our small boat and loaded us on to island Sutivan on Brac, across Split. There was terrible hunger. When the partisans carried out their assignment the boat was returned. My mother, sister and aunt went to Bari and then to Rome where my sister married a Hungarian Jewish lawyer in 1945. They returned

to Budapest. I returned to the partisans, where I was ordered to go to Jajce where the National Liberation Theatre was, of which I was a member from 1943 until November 1944. We put on plays, had a choir, dance and ballet. We were moved to Drvar, from there we started towards the sea and were moved to Vis, where we had presentations and expanded the choir. After Vis the group went to Bari to perform. There I met my mother, aunt and sister and from there we were taken by plane to the Zemun airport on November 1, 1944.

At the beginning, from November 1944, I worked at Radio Belgrade as a secretary, then as head of the music department and then as chief editor of the music program. I was also a secondary school professor while I was at the radio station. I taught music theory and history. Later, I wrote commentaries, articles and even a book on Chopin. The commission for textbooks ordered that book from me in the 60's however it was not printed until a few years ago. I married Ljiljan Pavlovic and we had a son Jasa in 1947. That marriage did not last. I wanted to go to Israel as a Zionist, but my mother did not want to go and I could not take my son with me. I gave up on that idea, and resigned from my job at the radio.

I was a free artist but I had to compensate for a 15-year break. I devoted myself to playing. From the second round they selected me to be the docent for chamber music at the Music Academy. I was involved with many things, as well as following chamber music where I collaborated with foreign artists. I continued to perfect my playing. While playing with the orchestra we had many performances. I was accepted to the Academy based on my artistic achievements and in 1958 a law was passed stating that all those who worked in higher education must have a diploma. Then I married Gina. I went to Ljubljana where I acquired a diploma as piano professor. They gave me credit for 7 semesters of law studies and I had to take and pass one semester. I taught piano at the university and I founded "Belgrade Piano Trio" along with Aleksander Pavlovic and Viktor Jakobcic. I was offered the position of director of the Belgrade opera but I declined. Firstly, because I am not a voice expert and secondly because of my work with the Belgrade trio. With the trio, I traveled throughout all of Europe and several times to America and the Soviet Union. I also had my teaching obligations and that alone was enough work. Ladoslav Laci Kadelburg, President of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, invited me to help in the Jewish community.

When my musical obligations grew less in the 70's, I became the cultural referent in the Federation of Jewish Communities. I always collaborated with the Jewish community on projects but I was not a member of any body until now. I was elected to the Executive Board and am president of the Cultural Commission. Eugen Verber helped us a lot. Every summer I went to Pirovac and held lectures there. I devoted myself a lot more to that and less to concerts. We worked a lot, making programs for the summer camp, mini-Maccabiah, I participated in meetings of the coordinating board of the women's section, which held a gathering of all the generations once a year, with programming, entertainment and occasions for getting to know one another. And my children (my son Jasa and my daughter Eva from my second marriage) went every year to the summer camp. My son is a member of the community, connected to the community and he sent his children to the Szarvas Camp. My daughter was at the summer camp only once but she knows about all the basic ideas of Judaism. I believe that the summer camps where young Jews from across the country came together were especially good. I am always torn between Jewish public work and music. I never interrupted my collaboration with the Jewish community and I think that it is necessary to learn about Judaism during one's entire life.